

**Hidden from view? Examining government policy support with sexual and gender
minority entrepreneurs**

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Abstract

Purpose

Our paper offers a critical consideration of how gender, sex and sexuality binaries underpin the neoliberal obsession with entrepreneurial success. While there is an emerging empirical interest in minority and marginalised entrepreneurs, we argue that this has yet to appropriately theorise how gender, sex and sexuality binaries might be implicated.

Design/methodology/approach

Our research adopts a qualitative approach combining secondary and primary data analyses. We offer a reflexive thematic analysis exploring 17 selected UK government policies where business and gender were discussed. This is supported by policy discussions in interviews with 18 sexual and gender minority entrepreneurs.

Findings

Our findings contribute to discussions of diversity within entrepreneurship beyond a straightforward binary view of in/visibility and suggests how the inclusion of sexual and gender minorities has unintended consequences.

Originality

We contribute by identifying how entrepreneurial policies form cis and heteronormative mechanisms reproducing exclusionary narratives despite their inclusionary intention. Our empirical analysis of both government policy and participant data, demonstrates how policies are shaped by a logic of appropriateness that renders sexual and gender minority entrepreneurs invisible. Moreover, our participants comprise entrepreneurs who identify beyond gender, sex and sexuality binaries extending current empirical contributions that focus predominantly on cisgender lesbian and/or gay entrepreneurial experiences.

Introduction

Entrepreneurship scholarship highlights how various social identities, including race, ethnicity, gender, religion, age, ability, and sexuality, are repositories of economic value and mechanisms for social change (Ettl *et al.*, 2021). Consequently engaging in entrepreneurship is posited as emancipatory and economically positive. Thus entrepreneurship is a ‘high profile policy target’ (Smallbone, 2020, p.203). While particular attention has been paid to government policy supporting cis women’s entrepreneurship (Ahl and Marlow, 2021), scholars have yet to fully examine how such policies might reproduce cis and heteronormative norms or unpack the impact on sexual and gender minority (SGM) entrepreneurs (Galloway *et al.*, 2015; Rumens, 2025; Wang, 2024). Addressing this lacuna is a key aim of our paper.

Moreover, it is widely accepted that entrepreneurship is skewed towards masculine ideology (Rumens and Ozturk, 2019; Lewis *et al.*, 2022), with feminist work theorising othered entrepreneurs as exceptions to accepted norms (Ahl and Marlow, 2021; Pritchard *et al.*, 2024). An extensive body of work examines women’s entrepreneurial experiences (Galloway *et al.*, 2015; Lewis *et al.*, 2022) while related investigations have interrogated the value of entrepreneurial policy for women’s ventures (Foss *et al.*, 2019; Bruschi *et al.*, 2019). While this remains of significant importance, we argue for increased attention to entrepreneurs who identify beyond gender, sex and sexuality binaries. Firstly, empirically this remains an understudied marginalised group within the entrepreneurship literature including that considering entrepreneurship policy (Fletcher *et al.*, 2024; Rumens, 2025; Foss *et al.*, 2019; Henry *et al.*, 2017). Secondly, within the small group of studies considering SGM entrepreneurial experience there has been a focus on lesbian and gay run enterprise (Marlow *et al.*, 2018; Wang, 2024). Thirdly, this focus affords the opportunity for conceptual engagement with queer scholarship which is underutilised even in those studies considering SGM entrepreneurship (Rumens, 2025).

Therefore, our research is conceptually informed by queer scholarship (Corlett *et al.*, 2023; Marchia and Sommer, 2019; Sedgwick, 2008) to explore how government policies are implicated in the marginalisation SGM entrepreneurs. We draw on hetero and cis normativity (Warner, 1993) to frame our discussions. Heteronormativity is a set of norms regarding gender and sexuality that privileges and normalises heterosexuality (Warner, 1993; Rumens and Ozturk, 2019; Rumens, 2025). Recent work highlights how heteronormativity operates in

conjunction with cisnormativity in further regulating gender and sex identity by proposing that male and female are the only and mutually exclusive identity options (Yarvosky, 2016; Suárez *et al.*, 2022; Wilson, 2025). These norms stem from binary conceptions of sex (male/female), gender (man/woman), and sexuality (heterosexual/homosexual). These work together to naturalise the idea that there are only two opposite genders, aligned with assigned sex at birth, that are attracted to each other (Guyan, 2022; Watson *et al.*, 2024). As a result, genders and sexualities that do not meet these norms become suppressed or subverted within heteronormative structures (Wilson, 2025; Rostron, 2025). Critical queer scholarship highlights how cis and heteronormativity are reinforced and reproduced through institutional structures and daily social interactions (Corlett *et al.*, 2023). Policymaking and implementation function within this normative system, encoding cisgendered heterosexual norms into regulatory practices (Drydakis, 2015; Henry *et al.*, 2017; Rumens, 2025).

Adopting a qualitative approach combining secondary and primary data, our reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2022) explores 17 policies that included reference to or discussion of business and gender. These policies were selected from a wider content analysis of 59 UK government policies published over a five-year period between 2018 and 2022 (Anon, 2023). Policy documents range from statements, directives, advisories, and guidance, plans and reviews and represent a political ideological articulation of how prevailing values intersect with understandings of marginalised identities (Amstutz *et al.*, 2021; Ahl and Marlow, 2021; Orser, 2022). Following policy data analysis, qualitative interviews with 18 SGM entrepreneurs conducted in 2023 provided a reflexive opportunity for further insight. Our empirical focus is entrepreneurs who self-identify as not conforming to gender and sexuality binary identities and/or bodies. Our participants include trans and non-binary individuals, and those who identify in multifaceted and often fluid ways as part of minority gender, sex and sexuality communities. While our paper uses the shorthand of SGM (Ramsey *et al.*, 2022), we also refer to a variety of terms and acronyms based on their use within the extant literature. Below we provide our theoretical background before outlining our methodological project. Following this we discuss our findings and their implications for theorising marginalised entrepreneurs.

Minority genders, sexes, and sexualities

While lesbian and gay sexualities are well researched across the wider organisational studies literature (Beauregard *et al.*, 2018; Corlett *et al.*, 2023; Wang, 2024), more marginalised gender and sex identities, and the multifarious intersections of these, are a rapidly developing

area of study (Watson *et al.*, 2024; Rostron, 2025). Existing research has exposed the impact of binaries on people who do not align with cis and heteronormative ways of being (Corlett *et al.*, 2023; Priola *et al.*, 2018). This is not without controversy. While the social construction of gender has become widely accepted (Watson *et al.*, 2024), a similar view on sex has become a highly charged topic including within SGM communities (Wang, 2024). For many years scholars have distinguished gender from sex (especially when this is termed biological) in what now seem rather uninformed ways (Alcazar Timon and Paunova, 2025; Yavrosky, 2016). Consequently cisnormativity – the assumption that there are only two mutually exclusive categories of male and female that are immutable and clearly identifiable at birth – is now recognised as a significant regulatory framework that operates in conjunction with heteronormativity (Yavrosky, 2016; Wang, 2024; Wilson, 2025).

Additionally, sexuality or sexual orientation is also definitionally important and is often conflated with gender identities (Hines, 2019; Rumens, 2025). This is partly because composite acronyms (e.g. LGBTQIA+) incorporate sex, gender, and sexuality, while some labels are used in multiple ways (e.g., Queer, Rostron, 2025). Whatever the label, sexuality is a broad term inclusive of sexual and romantic orientation (Alcazar Timon and Paunova, 2025). Butler drew attention to the intersections of gender, sex, and sexuality by positing these comprised a heterosexual matrix (1990, p.151) and while this has been challenged as somewhat simplistic (Marchia and Sommer, 2019), it serves to highlight the varied relations that exist between, within and across these identities. Drawing on this work, Rumens (2025, p.338) reminds us that sexuality should be “understood as a category of knowledge”.

As we unpack further below, the use of acronyms (i.e., LGBTQIA+) does not always enable scholars to consider the intersecting ways minority identities manifest and experience multiple disadvantage (Dy and MacNeil, 2025; Yamamura and Lassalle, 2024). Our study contributes to these developments through examining how entrepreneurial policies reinforce cis and heteronormative mechanisms that govern constructions of entrepreneurial success, thus excluding those who do not conform to gender, sex, or sexuality binaries.

Beyond Binarisms

Given this complexity, resulting in part from common political history, those with SGM identities have often been regarded as a singular community and referred to by various acronyms. This may then be regarded as a homogenous group by policy makers (Guyan, 2022).

This said the use of acronyms by community members sometimes reflects a powerful alignment of interests that push against cis and heteronormativity. (Beauregard *et al.*, 2018). This allows smaller communities to seek shelter under the LGBT (or wider acronym) umbrella. However, writing within the wider organisational studies literature, Beauregard *et al.* (2018, p.865) highlight “there are evidently limits to the extent to which LGB and T interests and sense of community coincide, and the voices of the larger and more vocal group are apt to take precedence”. Moreover, the general labelling of a community risks the reinforcement of binary thinking in which the othering of these identities becomes compounded and homogenised (Wilson, 2025).

Scholars’ use of various acronyms can also be problematic, especially when implying inclusivity that may not be empirically realised (Guyan, 2022); a point we elaborate below with regards to the entrepreneurship literature. Moreover, as Fletcher and Marvell (2023, p.1748) note with reference to trans individuals: “gender identity and expression varies”. Therefore, we need to avoid an implicit assumption that these communities share homogenous experiences (Guyan, 2022).

Implicated across these definitional concerns is an underlying binary perspective that dominates understanding of identities more broadly (Suárez *et al.*, 2022; Watson *et al.*, 2024). Categorical binaries act to both fix acceptable identities but also hierarchically position and normalise one-side of the binary (Wilson, 2025). Thus, Rumens and Ozturk (2019, p.673) draw attention to “heteronormativity [as] a normative regime that reproduces the heterosexual/homosexual binary”; a regulatory system that is reinforced by cisnormativity (Yavorsky, 2016). Scholars suggest that a key contribution of queer theories (e.g., Warner, 1993), methods and approaches is to create “discomfort” (Matthews and Poyner, 2020, p.551) with assumed binaries and provoke the disentangling of our assumptions about associated norms (Wilson, 2025). Thus, as Barnard *et al.* (2023, p.1566) offer, queer theory “makes visible the fluidity of identities that are socially constructed as fixed and binary”.

An implication of researching identities through binary modes of categorisation are the ways in which groups are made visible or become hidden (Priola *et al.*, 2018). The regulation of visibility has long been a concern within queer scholarship (Sedgwick, 2008). Kipnis defines visibility as "a complex system of permission and prohibition, of presence and absence, punctuated alternately by apparitions and hysterical blindness" (1989, p.158). Positions like heterosexual and cisgender are thus ever-present, normalised and privileged (Edenborg 2020;

Yavorsky, 2016). These concerns resonate with Lewis and Simpson's (2012) invisibility vortex which highlights how gender binaries are continually sustained to conceal the feminine and privilege the masculine. This work, however, focuses solely on the cis male/female binary, rather than unpacking more varied ways gender is experienced (Corlett et al., 2023; Galupo, 2017). Therefore, we engage with queering visibility as a means of making this seen/unseen binary uncomfortable within our analysis (Edenborg, 2020). This discomfort further reflects that visibility has long been significant with regards to non-conformity; for example, closeting sexuality, passing as a particular identity, or implications of hypervisibility (Edenborg, 2020; Fletcher *et al.*, 2024). Across all these possibilities being seen/unseen is temporary and insecure, always at risk as individuals continually negotiate the boundaries of (in)visibility (Wilson, 2025). As we explore below, this is a particular concern in entrepreneurship where normative constructions of cis men and women entrepreneurs dominate.

Understandings of minority genders and sexualities in entrepreneurship

It is important to contextualise our focus on SGM entrepreneurs within the wider literature on entrepreneurship and gender (Ahl and Marlow, 2021). Mostly this examines how gender is experienced, managed and regulated through norms which disadvantage those who do not conform to expected femininities or masculinities (Lewis et al., 2022; Galloway *et al.*, 2015). While a full explication is beyond the scope of our work (see, for example, Henry *et al.*, 2016; Marlow and Martinez-Dy, 2018; Richard *et al.*, 2025), these investigations overwhelmingly focus on cis women entrepreneurs considering how their enterprises are disadvantaged from venture creation through growth (Dean *et al.*, 2019). It is thus uncontroversial to suggest that cis women's entrepreneurial struggles have been well-theorised (Dy and MacNeil, 2025). A related literature explores the role of policy as either constraining or liberating women entrepreneurs (Ahl and Marlow, 2021; Berglund *et al.*, 2018). Reviews highlight the focus on women as lacking or in deficit which results in a policy focus on skill development and support (Brusch *et al.*, 2019; Foss *et al.*, 2019; Henry *et al.*, 2017). Here policy is regarded as the most significant component of the entrepreneurial ecosystem (Foss *et al.*, 2019) yet is "framed primarily through the experiences and expectations of men" (Orser, 2022, p.469). Orser (2022) also highlights that policy research has so far overlooked SGM entrepreneurs as a topic of interest.

This reflects that while there exists a substantial literature on lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and queer discrimination at work (Mara *et al.*, 2021), this remains under researched in

entrepreneurship (Kidney *et al.*, 2025; Fletcher *et al.*, 2024; Rumens, 2025). For example, Mara *et al.*'s (2021) review of LGBT workplace discrimination did not include any entrepreneurship publications, suggesting that some forms of employment are researched more than others. While there is a small yet growing body of work exploring SGM entrepreneurs, Rumens (2025) highlights a lack of conceptual engagement in many studies. Moreover, while further attention has also been paid to gay cis men and lesbian cis women entrepreneurial experiences (Rumens and Ozturk, 2019; Essers *et al.*, 2022; Kidney *et al.*, 2025, Wang 2024; Backman *et al.*, 2025) there is significantly less focus on entrepreneurs identifying beyond binary understandings of sex, gender and/or sexuality. Wang (2024, p.4) goes so far as to refer to “gay ordinariness” in entrepreneurship studies and highlights the risk that the white gay man entrepreneur has come to stand for queer entrepreneurship.

Moreover, the terms used to identify marginalised entrepreneurs can be problematic and often results in a lack of nuance in understanding the experiences of SGM entrepreneurs. Labels such as unconventional or underdog risk perpetuating the othering, rather than acceptance of these entrepreneurs (Bakker and McMullen, 2023, Bort and Totterman, 2023). Similarly, research often deploys broad initialisms (i.e., LGBT, LGB) despite only identifying gay or lesbian entrepreneurs (often comprising wholly or majority cisgendered) participant samples (Cavalcanti *et al.*, 2024; Kidney *et al.*, 2025; Yamamura and Lassalle, 2024; Fletcher *et al.*, 2024). This can reinforce entrepreneurial binaries, especially when the study simply compares SGM entrepreneurs to cisgendered and/or heteronormative individuals on a particular characteristic (Anglin *et al.*, 2018; Darden *et al.*, 2022).

Galloway's (2012) qualitative study was an early exploration of LGBT entrepreneurial experience, which highlighted the difficulty gay men experienced in negotiating their entrepreneurial identities. This work was extended by Rumens and Ozturk's (2019) in-depth focus on gay male entrepreneurs, highlighting how establishing normative male entrepreneurial identities reinforce sexual hierarchies and “the white, male norm at the core of entrepreneurship” (p.684). Marlow *et al.*'s (2018, p.131) analysis found “few differences in entrepreneurial activity patterns between homosexuals and heterosexuals”, using the terminology gay for men and lesbian for women. This study used secondary data, which has advantages regarding sample size for difficult to reach populations. However, the use of previously categorised data may constrain the ability to explore more marginalised minority gender and sexuality identities. For example, Backman *et al.* (2025) use records of legal same-

sex partnerships as the means of identifying sexual minority men and women to assess entrepreneurial survival rates, resulting in a narrow perspective on sexuality.

Attempts to research bisexual entrepreneurs alongside lesbian and gay participants have risked drifting to stereotyping or oversimplifying sexuality differences. For example, Germon *et al.* (2020) concluded that “gay and lesbian people” prefer entrepreneurship since this “affords them the opportunity for self-expression” (p.529). Their research used an outdated means of categorising sexuality (based on a scale developed in 1948) which does not align with contemporary understandings. While Essers *et al.*'s (2022) discussion includes the acronym LGBT, their sample is largely comprised of cis gay men and women. The authors usefully acknowledge the complexity of categorising entrepreneurs' gender and sexual orientation identities, though stop short of engaging fully with queer theory in the way Rumens (2025) highlights as critical to avoid a thin examination of minority entrepreneurship.

Sample initialisation appears to be a common issue in research that does not fully engage conceptually with queer theory (Rumens, 2025). For example, Cavalcanti and Ferreira, (2022) position their research as concerning LGBT entrepreneurs but their sample comprises five (presumably cisgendered, although this was not clear) gay men and one lesbian woman. This highlights the need not only for conceptual engagement, but for research that demonstrates meaningful relevance to the communities under exploration (Rumens, 2025; Guyan, 2022). There is undoubtedly a suspicion of academic research by many with SGM identities and researchers must act in ways that engage and support their needs rather than unintentionally reinforce heteronormative binaries that marginalise and exclude (Rumens and Ozturk, 2019; Guyan, 2022).

A common line of enquiry is whether entrepreneurship might be seen as liberation or escape from traditional workplaces (Marlow *et al.*, 2018). Some authors – albeit unwittingly – appear to promote entrepreneurship as offering redemption or stereotype groups as resourceful (Wang, 2024). For example, in defining transitional entrepreneurs Pidduck and Clark (2021, p.1082) suggest entrepreneurship is “a vehicle for positional advancement”. Alternatively, Conti *et al.*, (2022) (using USA secondary data) posit that employment offers more legal protection and thus SGM individuals are less likely to launch their own enterprises. Indeed, Rumens and Ozturk (2019) highlight that for “LGBT+ entrepreneurs... the harsh standards of evaluation applied to them as business owners” (p.674) can also act as a deterrent.

Overall, while entrepreneurship research is increasingly focused on diversity, there remain few studies that with theoretically developed understandings of SGM identities (Rumens, 2025). While promising studies are emerging (Yamamura and Lassalle, 2024; Wang, 2024) we argue for further research that specifically engages with a range of SGM entrepreneurs, their perspectives on policy through a queer theoretical lens (Fletcher *et al.*, 2024; Rumens, 2025; Foss *et al.*, 2019; Henry *et al.*, 2017; Wang, 2024). Having set out our literature review we next explain our methodological approach.

Method

Following our literature review, our research question for this study is: How does government policy reproduce cis and hetero normativity and how do SGM entrepreneurs experience this? Our focus is the UK, which has seen a recent decline in acceptance of SGM and LGBTQIA+ rights (Rumens, 2025; Guyan, 2022). Below we outline our two-stage methodology: first mapping how UK policies frame genders and sexualities; second, collecting and thematically analysing in-depth interview data from SGM entrepreneurs. Institutional ethical approval was granted for this research.

Stage 1: Policy Analysis

As part of a larger project, we adopted a broad sweep approach to policy collection, reflecting that our aim was to produce a map of understandings of SGM diversity. Overall, 59 UK policy documents (totalling over 3000 pages) published over a five-year period between 2018 and 2022 were reviewed via content analysis (Anon, 2023). This timeline reflected the availability of policy documentation at the start of the project, with good digital policy records found back to 2018 across the UK and devolved governments. Subsequently we focused our reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2022) on 17 policies which included reference to, or discussion of, business and gender (see Appendix One). This provided a focused data set for this in-depth phase and enabled us to select a manageable set of information to use in the interviews in Stage 2.

Stage 2: Participant Interviews

After conducting our policy analysis, findings were used to design semi-structured qualitative interviews with 18 SGM entrepreneurs during 2023 (see Table 1). Participants were recruited using snowball sampling techniques over the course of a year. The identities reported in Table

1 are those the participants preferred to share; no identity categorisation has been overlaid thus these variously reference genders, sex, and sexuality.

Table 1. Overview of Participant Identities

Participant Pseudonym	Identities Discussed	Sector
Charlie	Gay, Cis man	Creative arts
Ali	Queer, Cis woman	Charity
Rowan	Queer, Non-binary	Retail
Taylor	Pansexual	Sport/Activity
Blake	Non-binary	Sport/Activity
Fin	Trans man	Creative arts
Kai	Non-binary	Higher Education
Aah	Queer, Non-binary	Charity
Riley	Non-binary, Trans woman	Education
Aspen	Non-binary	Professional services
Lou	Lesbian, Cis woman	Creative arts/social work
Tally	Lesbian, Cis woman	Education
Noah	Trans man, Gay	Retail
Kit	Non-binary	Community events
Wren	Non-binary, Queer	Professional services
Alex	Trans man	Retail
Cam	Non-binary	Finance
Remy	Non-binary, Queer	Charity

All interviews were conducted online, recorded, and professionally transcribed and anonymised, with participants choosing a pseudonym. The first author conducted interviews, these lasted approximately two-hours and discussions were focused on experiences of accessing entrepreneurial support. Extracts from our policy analysis were used to elicit discussion. All interview data was analysed according to the reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2022) process outlined in Table 2.

Table 2. Reflexive Thematic Analysis Process

Reflexive TA Step	Government Policy Data	Participant Data
Data set familiarisation	59 policies were reviewed to identify those within which there was any discussion of gender and sexuality diversity resulting in 17 policies identified for detailed analysis.	Interviews were recorded and professionally transcribed with both authors reviewing and anonymising transcripts.

Coding	Coding was completed through repeated reading of these datasets. Initial coding was conducted in word (policies and transcripts) with first codes and commentary exported to excel. Initial coding of policy focused on identifying the forms of difference that were evident in policy and the ways in which differences were portrayed. Initial coding of interview transcripts captured the impact and experience of policies. Subsequently the code organisation was consolidated, and further rounds of coding undertaken across all data to develop understanding.
Generating initial themes	Once the codes and associated text had been exported into excel, each code was reviewed and revisiting to consolidate and clarify understanding. Additional tags were added to each code to begin the process of grouping and regrouping into themes. This iterative process involved discussion between the authors to revise and refine ideas. It was at this stage, and moving between policy and interview data analysis, that notions of (in)visibility became analytical pertinent and were subsequently developed.
Developing and reviewing themes	An iterative process consisted of reviewing the original coding and tags and organising these data into themes. Further iteration and discussion resulted in drilling down into aspects of (in)visibility across the developing thematic framework for both the policy and interview data.
Refining, defining & naming themes	The three themes presented below solidified through the analytic process and the first author wrote a preliminary description for discussion before the organisation of extracts around key thematic elements continued. The developing ideas of vague visibility, pseudo-visibility and invisibility were consolidated, and sub-thematic structures were confirmed.
Writing up	The narrative account was developed and presented at an academic conference. This allowed feedback and further revision of the analytic account presented here.

Reflexivity

Entangled within this research endeavour are our own identities and our understanding of ourselves frames the interpretations within this article. While we are all white, cis women, our experiences differ at the intersections of education, sexualities, ages, nationality and life events. We particularly recognise that our experiences of gender normativity (being cisgender) impact knowledge production (Rogers and Brown, 2024); this raises epistemological, methodological, and ethical concerns for entrepreneurship research that explores how SGM identities shape entrepreneurial experiences. Our own cisgender identities required much reflection and dialogue, particularly given the challenges of cis researchers conducting research with other gender identities (Galupo, 2017). Using a critical lens to examine our own gender and sexuality norms, and understand the multiplexity of gender identity, was fundamental to an ongoing, iterative process of ethical reflexivity. Thus, we make no claims to know the experiences of our participants or draw interpretations that are not articulated in the accounts provided to us. We

now present our findings offering a review of our themes of visibly vague, pseudo-visibility and invisible.

Findings

We present our analysis of three overarching themes: visibly vague; pseudo-visibility; and invisible, providing extracts from both policy and interview data to evidence our analysis. Reflecting our theoretical stance informed by cis and heteronormativity (Marchia and Sommer, 2019; Warner, 1993) and associated queer perspectives that challenge binarisms, these themes offer a complex assessment of the construction of understandings of SGM entrepreneurship. Consequently we seek to move discussions beyond a binary view on in/visibility and suggest how entrepreneurial policy has unintended consequences.

Theme One: Visibly Vague

SGM visibility within policy is achieved by broad, non-specific discussion and associated general aims. Policy thus offers little detail about either community members' needs or how these might be addressed. We note this criticism are often levelled at policy documents (Orser, 2022), but if policy is to deliver, it is insufficient to be vague on intended audiences or outcomes. The following extracts illustrate this visible vagueness:

Preserve and advance Scotland's reputation as one of the most progressive countries in Europe in terms of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) equality. (Scottish Government, 2018a, p.104)

...provides more opportunities for all ages, genders and abilities, helping to address social and physical exclusion by improving access to employment. (Welsh Government, 2018, p.16)

Inclusion is signalled via calls to address the needs of "everyone" or even "our talented people". How these needs are unpacked varies, with Scottish policy being specific in highlighting LGBTI as an area of focus. Elsewhere, we found little attention to SGM communities while UK-wide policies focused on broader economic agendas. However, we found high level of indeterminacy in these policies, for example:

This roadmap sets out our vision to enable everyone to contribute to the country's economy and balance caring responsibilities with a rewarding career. (HM Government, 2019, p.4)

While recognising care-giving constraints, this “road map” to “enable everyone” to “contribute”, lacks any acknowledgement of individual difference. In short, in attempting to cover everyone, this relates to no one. We found similar indeterminate statements spread throughout these policies. For example:

Establish a campaign to foster entrepreneurship and ambition across society, with particular focus on inclusivity (Scottish Government Enterprise and Skills Strategic Board, 2018, p.10)

It is imperative going forward that we act to redress the impact the pandemic has had on women in the economy, ensuring that women's economic position is improved, that they have equal access to skills and career opportunities that allow them to progress to senior decision-making positions and thrive in the labour market and wider society (Scottish Government. 2019d, p.9)

These extracts illustrate the lack of specificity in attending to issues of “inclusivity”. Offering “support”, “establish a campaign to foster” or “act to redress” may sound positive, but these are broad phrases with a high degree of interpretative flexibility when it comes to assessing the outcomes. This is further illustrated below:

It has been well documented that entrepreneurship is a strong basis for women's economic independence as well as important for growth and employment generation – both locally and nationally ... This Good Practice Guide will support the partners engaged in the Welsh business eco-system to tackle inequality and ensure that the needs of entrepreneurial women in Wales are being fully met. (Business Wales, 2019, p.2)

Ambiguous phrases are commonly used in policy to hint at a general direction without tying actions or budgets to more specific achievements (Orser, 2022). In this case there is also a mismatch between the policy (the Good Practice Guide) and the aspirational outcome of

“tackling inequality”. Overall, including diverse terminology appears virtuous and while it is vague, it might be possible to point to these policy statements as evidence that the needs of SGM individuals are being addressed.

However, in discussing policy, this vagueness was criticised by many participants. Participants were especially critical of the lack of specific representation:

Not at all. No, it’s very vague and it’s very general. I don’t feel like it’s specifically talking about me at all really ... and there’s no mention of LGBTQ people then, not really. (Rowan)

While Rowan highlight policy vagueness and absence of the LGBTQ community, they then focus on the lack of personal connection as this is not “talking about me at all really”.

This is also noted by Cam:

Yes, that’s not me. It’s not very diverse at all, is it, on basically every front. It’s just a load of terms being thrown around. (Cam)

Cam also fails to see themselves reflected in policy, summing up the vagueness as “terms being thrown around”. So while policy might hint at inclusivity, our participants felt that policy does not treat diversity seriously, and that vague references were perceived negatively. Thus, while such policies might be constructed with positive intent, participants regarded such documents as textual performances that failed to reflect the realities their experiences:

What’s really interesting was like reading through it, like my first impression is that it all just sounds a bit bull shitty. Like, it just sounds... just sounds like a lot of words that says very little. (Alex)

From our participants perspective, vague and generic references to diversity do not connect to them personally but are perceived as insincere and “bull shitty”. Moreover, across these policies littered with visibly vague representations we found limited statements acknowledging intersectional understandings of disadvantage or discussions of more marginalised SGM identities. We explore this further in our next theme: pseudo-visibility.

Theme Two: Pseudo-visibility

We suggest that pseudo-visibility within policy occurs when specific groups are named (thus seemingly visible) yet simply appear as one category alongside others, often in lists. This

naming indicates a level of recognition, moving beyond being visibly vague, but this is not developed through meaningful discussion related to community concerns:

...helping to create a nation of dynamic and high achieving entrepreneurs, with a focus on inclusivity (women, rural, minority ethnic groups and others) (Enterprise and Skills Strategic Board, 2018, p.9)

Our ambition is for everyone, regardless of age, background, gender and ethnicity, to be digitally included. (Welsh Government, 2021, p.13)

These extracts are more than visibly vague since specific groups are identified, but a simple listing of multiple categories remains problematic as this lacks depth or specificity. This relates to concerns with initialism; in which acronyms can suggest that individual components have been considered. As demonstrated below, we found multiple incidences where the acronyms or characteristics are listed but not considered in depth:

Projects on issues....such as LGBTQ+, food poverty, homelessness, bullying, gender equality and refugees (HM Government, 2018, p.46)

However, evidence suggests that there is still a lack of diversity across gender, disability, sexuality, age and socioeconomic background in the workforce. (Scottish Government, 2019a, p.7)

These statements suggest these individual groups are considered, even though there may be different issues, needs and concerns related to each. We also note hedging here, lest groups have been forgotten. Thus, we are asked to read for “others” and accept that “such as” might require us to supplement the list. We also observed the use of + or etc as an accepted catch-all (after LGBT) for SGM communities. This alludes to recognition without acknowledging the multifaceted ways different individuals live out their identities. These extracts illustrate in subtle ways how the wording can suggest that groups or issues are related.

Once again participants were overwhelming disappointed and saw no personal connection to policy. As Riley noted, “it’s also, ‘Okay we acknowledge it’. And what’s the rest of that

sentence? There's a lot of like, 'yes it's there, but it's not me'". Moreover, participants identified a lack of nuance and understanding of how individuals experience disadvantage:

...It's just disappointing that's as far as they can go with equality without even thinking of sort of like the different sub-sections because people who are neurodiverse and BAME are going to face very different things from a white neurodiverse person. (Aah)

The disappointment was reflected across participant's responses. Here "that's as far as they can go", reflected the view that policies lacked any detail or reflection of the experiences of SGM entrepreneurs; that this was simply not recognised. Another participant, Charlie, described the use of acronyms as "diversity fruit salad", where fruits are applied to add colour but not substance. Moreover, there were a limited number of policies that attempted to outline how multiple minority identities compound disadvantage. The following extracts illustrate how pseudo-visibility plays out in policy which references intersectionality:

should adopt an intersectional perspective on equalities impacts, as those people who have more than one protected characteristic (for example, minority ethnic women, young care-experienced LGBTQIA+ people, EU 10 nationals on precarious work contracts, or disabled single mothers) (Scottish Government, 2020, p.10)

...promote the economic contribution made by women, the missed productivity by employers and tax revenue by Government and include supporting all elements of the affected population including ethnic minority, disabled and LGBTQ. (Department for Work and Pensions, 2022, p.4)

Many straightforward lists referenced UK Equality Act 2010 protected characteristics. However, other lists may lead readers to regard the identities mentioned as the most likely and/or most worthy forms of intersectionality. These risk stereotyping and excluding other intersectional identities. For example, from the above extract there might be an assumption that all "young LGBTQIA+ care-experienced individuals" face similar issues. However, the challenges that the SGM communities face are far from homogenous yet are never meaningfully unpacked.

Many participants noted the importance of recognising and addressing the impact of intersectional disadvantage in policy. For example, participants shared experiences of entrepreneurial support programmes to highlight how these reinforced cis and heteronormative practices:

I've been put on programmes that are like, oh environmentalists who are women, or like other stuff where they're trying their best to support people who are marginalised by their gender, i.e. it's just women. And the support that's out there often it's just for women. (Aspen)

Aspen provides insight into the impact of binary, gendered entrepreneurial support policies in practice. On the surface, support-focused policy appears to address disadvantage. However, in being just for women this renders other genders invisible, excluding SGM entrepreneurs from accessing support.

We began by noting the critical importance of intersectional disadvantage. Thus, we do not seek to discourage the consideration of this within policy debates but suggest that it is vital that intersectionality is not reduced to a few examples listed for illustrative purposes.

Theme Three: Invisible

Our final theme explores how SGM diversity can disappear in discussions which foreground binary perspectives and focus on differences between men and women in cis and heteronormative ways. While within these policy data there are occasionally a few ambiguous uses of genders, the surrounding text of such extracts signals this plural is being used to summarise the binary. Across our analysis, we found that use of or comparison to historic data (which has traditionally captured only that for cis men and women) further reinforces a binary view of gender by discussing problematic gaps and desired balance. We recognise there are important issues to be considered regarding the relative positions of different groups of men and different groups of women. However, the reduction of difference to a binary not only excludes other identities but homogenises gender experience. Below, we illustrate three forms of binary dominance that lead to the invisibility of SGM identities:

The government's aspiration to see gender balance at all levels across financial services firms. A balanced workforce is good for business – it is good for customers,

for profitability and workplace culture, and is increasingly attractive for investors (HM Treasury, 2022, p.1)

Female role models are vital to inspire more women to unlock their entrepreneurial talents and create a diverse, gender balanced and innovative business ecosystem... Help create an entrepreneurial environment which is beneficial for all entrepreneurs and creates an inclusive and enabling support landscape for entrepreneurial women and men. (Business Wales, 2019, pp.16-19)

The experience of women in Scotland's labour market tells us that disabled women face greater labour market barriers than nondisabled women and greater disadvantage than disabled men. (Scottish Government, 2021, p.14)

These extracts highlight how balance acts as a reinforcement of a gender binary, sometimes (as in the second example) reinforced by reference to "entrepreneurial women and men". This suggests no other entrepreneurial identities exist or indeed are necessary to secure the positive outcomes that are portrayed from achieving the goal of balance. SGM identities become both invisible and ultimately irrelevant. The third extract is somewhat different as it highlights how gender binaries become embedded in discussions of intersectionality, which results in invisibility for SGM identities. Above we highlighted how representations of differences between men/males and female/women are often presented as the gender problem. Through our analysis we noted how these differences – usually referred to as a gap – become a hole into which gender diversity disappears:

ensuring that your business support and advice services consistently meet the needs of your women clients and are well placed to tackle the gender gap in enterprise. (Business Wales, 2019, p.8)

In the UK today women are, on average, more likely to enter the workforce with higher qualifications than men but earn less per hour.... It's clear that we as Government need to act, following through on our commitment to ensure everyone in this country can reach their true potential. (HM Government, 2019, p.3)

...our economic potential as a country cannot be fully realised if we do not draw effectively on the talents of women and share the benefits of success more fairly across the genders. This makes good business sense as well as being a fundamental part of a civilised modern society. (Scottish Government, 2019c, p.10)

These extracts further highlight our concern that it is not simply that SGM identities become invisible in discussing gender gaps, it is that they also become irrelevant to the desired outcomes, for example, being “a civilised modern society”. We suggest that wider and more sophisticated data capture and reporting is needed so that these gaps are not simplified in terms of binary genders, which already hide important differences.

This invisibility was felt by our participants, particularly when identities were “lumped together”. There was an overwhelming sense that across the policies discussed, many paid little to no recognition to trans men, trans women, or non-binary entrepreneurs.

...it's when they lump like women and non-binary people together. It's like you're also excluding the other marginalised genders of like trans men and kind of like those are the conversations that they're not ready to have. And it's just kind of like spell it out, like you've got the time. (Riley)

The extract highlights the level of invisibility of SGM beyond accepted cis and heterosexual norms: “those are conversations they're not ready to have”. Moreover, it emphasises how the use of initialisms and acronyms homogenises the experiences of individuals, thus assuming all diverse entrepreneurs face similar challenges. Further levels of invisibility occurred when our participants experienced multiple minority identities:

I don't know. It's tricky because I feel so distanced from all policy I read, like none of it ever covers me at this point. Like when you fall into so many different sub-sections no kind of policy ever just covers you (Aah)

The implications of invisibility were clearly observed by our participants, all of whom were actively engaging in entrepreneurial activities. However, many were simply not acknowledged in policy data, and this was especially the case for trans and non-binary entrepreneurs. A consequence of the invisibility of SGM is that such policies exclude the very entrepreneurs

they intend to assist, thus implying a cis and heteronormative construction of entrepreneurial support. Despite increasing calls for more inclusive approaches to entrepreneurship (Bakker and McMullen, 2023), we find policies continue to reinforce cis and heteronormative binaries as the predominant means through which entrepreneurship is understood. We now turn to our discussion, where our theoretical implications and potential areas of future research are summarised.

Discussion

Our article analyses how SGM entrepreneurs are constructed within, or are absent from, UK policies. Through our analysis, we avoid binary views on in/visibility to offer a more complex assessment of the construction of understandings of gender, sex and sexuality diversity across government policy. We explicate three themes that highlight this complexity: being visibly vague, pseudo-visible and invisible. Importantly we highlight experiences of a wide range of SGM individual as our participants comprise entrepreneurs who identify across gender, sex, and sexuality binaries. In doing so we aim to push beyond discussions of mainly gay or broadly LGBTQIA+ entrepreneurs which dominate the entrepreneurship literature (Cavalcanti *et al.*, 2024; Kidney *et al.*, 2025; Yamamura and Lassalle, 2024; Fletcher *et al.*, 2024) and extend policy debates which have yet to consider SGM entrepreneurs (Foss *et al.*, 2019)

We utilise cis and heteronormativity (Warner, 1993) to theorise how binary conceptions of sex (male/female), gender (man/woman), and sexuality (heterosexual/homosexual) result in sexual and gender minorities being rendered invisible within discussions of entrepreneurship (Warner, 1993; Bakker and McMullen, 2023; Rumens, 2025). We extend current literatures that reviewed organizational policies through focusing on entrepreneurship (Amstutz *et al.*, 2021; Corlett *et al.*, 2023). Thus, we contribute by identifying how entrepreneurial policies, in their current construction, form cis heteronormative mechanisms that reproduce exclusionary narratives despite their inclusionary intention.

Additionally, our empirical analysis demonstrates that, although they intend to reduce inequalities, policies are shaped by a logic of appropriateness leading to a continuous reproduction of cis heteronormativity (Watson *et al.*, 2024). In what follows we outline our three areas of contribution: the manifestation of cis heteronormativity in policy; challenging the (in)visibility binary; and the implications for policy and scholarship.

The manifestation of cis heteronormativity in government policy

Conceptually, we contribute to literatures examining the role of policies in the maintenance of cis heteronormative structures (Guyan, 2022; Edenborg, 2020; Rumens, 2025). We demonstrate how cis and heteronormativity offer a lens to scrutinise how policy is implicated in the ongoing maintenance of cis heteronormative structures and perpetuates binary thinking about difference. Our research highlights how the policy construction of cis women and cis men positions them as separate and discrete categories, overlooking other forms of gender diversity (Grandy *et al.*, 2020; Ahl and Marlow, 2021). Moreover, we found generic mention of sexual orientation using acronyms with little consideration of diverse experiences or needs. Consequently, the varying experiences that manifest across and within SGM identities were rendered largely invisible (Edenborg, 2020). This was significant in participants' accounts of accessing support: "the support that's out there often it's just for women". This does not reflect the multifaceted ways entrepreneurs may present their selves and suggests "those are the conversations that they're not ready to have", as Riley observed.

Moreover cis heteronormativity becomes evident through an assumed well-meaning approach of identifying and discussing specific groups. For example, lesbian and gay entrepreneurs become defined wholly by their sexuality (Germon *et al.*, 2020; Kidney *et al.*, 2025), while simultaneously other aspects of their subjectivity are rendered invisible and irrelevant to social relations (Edenborg, 2020; Dy and MacNeil, 2025). Such forms of categorising and defining are not used for entrepreneurs who sit within cis and heterosexual norms; we found no policy reference to straight entrepreneurs (Rumens, 2025). The, albeit unintentional, othering of those that do not conform to cisgender or heterosexual norms (Corlett *et al.*, 2023), was identified through our own and participants' observations. Consequently, gender and sexuality diversity becomes less visible, while cis and heteronormativity continues to be privileged (Wang, 2024; Rumens, 2025). Subsequently, the paradoxical impact of making aspects of an identity visible, is that it makes other facets less visible, or even invisible. Thus, as we explore below, this oversimplifies the ways in which identities manifest and are conceptualised.

Challenging the (in)visibility binary

Being seen or unseen has long been significant with regards to non-conformity, sometimes with legal implications (Littler, 2017). Nevertheless, visibility is now mostly understood as a

positive outcome, related to increasing economic, social, and political effects (Pidduck and Clark, 2021). These are, fundamentally, Western-centric notions of global queer communities and of out-and-proud visibility, which assumes the more non-conforming identities are recognised in public spaces, the more normalised and tolerated they become (Priola *et al.*, 2018). Here, we contribute to literatures exploring marginalised entrepreneurs (Essers *et al.*, 2022; Darden *et al.*, 2022; Kidney *et al.*, 2025; Yamamura and Lassalle, 2024; Wang, 2024), highlighting how trans, non-binary and queer entrepreneurs are largely absent from consideration, an absence we suggest is linked to the tendency to homogenise SGM entrepreneurs experiences. Lewis and Simpson (2012), usefully propose an (in)visibility vortex as a means of representing the processes and practices which produce being seen/unseen in organizations. However, the authors draw on a binary gender perspective unpacking power relations between men and women. This has recently been applied to women entrepreneurs (Grandy *et al.*, 2020), but with a similar binary perspective on both gender and (in)visibility. Our analysis highlights the importance of recognising nuanced forms of (in)visibility (including being visibly vague and pseudo-visible), explicating the boundaries between what is seen and unseen in ways that extend these conceptualisations through unpacking issues related to SGM entrepreneurs.

In addition, our findings, particularly in our participants' responses, highlight that being recognised within policy, does not automatically create the conditions of being seen or meaningful representation. This, at present, sits at odds with how marginalised entrepreneurs are constructed within contemporary entrepreneurship scholarship (Germon *et al.*, 2020; Anglin *et al.*, 2018; Darden *et al.*, 2022). Indeed, in some cases, our participants felt less visible as a result of policy statements. Consequently, we find the visibility/invisibility binary which is often used to assess diversity progress within entrepreneurship (Ettl *et al.*, 2021; Bakker and McMullen, 2023), is not a suitable measure of meaningful representation (Edenborg, 2020). As Rowan noted, "I don't feel like... it's talking about me at all really", being visible does not mean you are seen. We now turn to discuss the implications and avenues for progressing research and policy.

Implications for policy and scholarship

Our third and final contribution sets out the implications of in/visibility for our participants. There remains limited empirical work exploring SGM entrepreneurs, particularly those identifying as trans and/or non-binary. We have demonstrated that while scholarship and policy

is making some progress, understandings of SGM communities are often outdated, misapplied, or used as a comparison to normative categories of difference (Guyan, 2022; Rumens, 2025). We evidence how the use of acronyms (i.e., LGBTQIA+), used frequently across both policy and scholarship, obscure the multifaceted realities across the spectrum of gender, sex and sexuality expression. Our data demonstrates the impact of invisibility, and the myriad ways participants understand their selves and identities. Our participants experienced this as a barrier to accessing available, and in some cases, much-needed, entrepreneurial support. Many participants felt that policy neither addressed their needs nor was intended to support them. Indeed, participants with various identities also offered that they did not anticipate feeling welcome or safe in spaces that were underpinned by a binary view on gender. Consequently we highlight the need for both academic and policy progress to recognise the implications of cis and heteronormative assumptions within this arena.

Conclusion

To conclude, we suggest that the queering of entrepreneurial policy, and even queering entrepreneurship more broadly, is essential to ensure that SGM entrepreneurs are considered and supported. In our academic endeavours, marginalised entrepreneurs require more careful consideration, and indeed conceptualisation, through drawing on contemporary theorisations of genders, sexualities, and sexes (Beauregard *et al.*, 2018). We also agree with Rumen's (2025, p.337) observation that heterosexuality in entrepreneurship has to date "evaded scrutiny". Finally, more critical consideration should be afforded to our own identities and how they shape the knowledge produced (Galupo *et al.*, 2017; Rogers and Brown, 2024).

Conceptually, we found cis and heteronormativity valuable but often underused analytical categories (Corlett *et al.*, 2023; Marchia and Sommer, 2019; Rumens, 2025), ones that could force entrepreneurship researchers to question cis and heteronormative assumptions about sex, sexualities, and genders. Although we found acknowledgement of communities, these were largely based on heteronormative assumptions. We note how policies that seek to be more representative, only serve to sustain and reinforce problematic gender and sex binaries. Consequently, such policies serve to regulate and reinforce cis heteronormative assumptions that govern constructions of entrepreneurship and obscure SGM individuals and enterprises.

Endnote

1. Abbreviation for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, and Asexual. The “+” stands for all the other identities not encompassed in the short acronym. This is an umbrella term often used to encompass the entire spectrum of gender and sexual expressions. In our article we use the abbreviation SGM – sexual and gender minority - after Ramsey et al., (2022), as shorthand for gender, sex and sexuality minorities.

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