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Impairment (in)visibility and stigma: how disabled entrepreneurs gain legitimacy in mainstream and disability markets

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ABSTRACT

Entrepreneurs' use of linguistic practices, such as storytelling, in building legitimacy with customers and others is well documented. Yet, not all entrepreneurs may equally use or benefit from such practices in their legitimacy-building efforts. For those with stigmatized social identities, like disability, embodied properties and practices of *non*-linguistic, more visual kind, may be salient despite being under-explored in the entrepreneurial legitimacy studies. To address this knowledge gap, this article examines how disabled entrepreneurs gain legitimacy with customers and, more specifically, how impairment visibility shapes their capacity to do so. Drawing primarily on in-depth interviews with UK-based entrepreneurs, the article extends Suchman's work by reconceptualizing his legitimacy-building strategies considering impairment visibility. It is argued that impairment visibility can both enable and constrain legitimacy depending on the product offering and the target market. Disabled entrepreneurs are found to adopt four *embodied* legitimacy-building strategies in the marketplace, each with specific implications for their micro-level interactions with customers.

Introduction

How entrepreneurs gain and sustain support for new ventures entering markets is widely researched in entrepreneurship and organization studies (Cornelissen, Holt, and Zundel 2011; Überbacher 2014). All entrepreneurs must build legitimacy with important business stakeholders or audiences, including customers, employees and finance providers, to access resources and markets (Zott and Huy 2007); newcomers are not automatically perceived as entrepreneurs (Aldrich and Fiol 1994; De Clercq and Voronov 2009a, 2009b). Legitimacy is a 'generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs and definitions' (Suchman 1995, 574).

To manage audiences' perceptions, new venture representatives often highlight the positive aspects while concealing the less appealing attributes of their identity (Clarke 2011). Studies show that entrepreneurs employ various linguistic practices, such as storytelling, to construct a favourable identity which, in turn, helps them gain legitimacy with important audiences (Lounsbury and Glynn 2001; Martens, Jennings, and Devereaux Jennings 2007). Yet, not *all* entrepreneurs may equally engage in storytelling (Lee et al. 2019), or benefit from it. Identities are communicated through various embodied properties and *non*-linguistic practices (Archer 2000) as well as linguistic. The former may be particularly salient in researching entrepreneurs with stigmatized social identities, like disability.[1]

This article begins to fill this knowledge gap by examining how disabled entrepreneurs – defined as self-employed or business owners with long-term impairments or health conditions – gain legitimacy with customer audiences and, more specifically, how impairment visibility shapes their capacity to do so. To answer these questions, the article draws on multiple qualitative data sources, primarily interviews with 42 disabled entrepreneurs based in the United Kingdom (UK). Disabled entrepreneurs are thought to be a disadvantaged group (Cooney 2013; De Clercq and Honig 2011), less likely to create a viable organization (Renko, Parker Harris, and Caldwell 2016), possibly because of the stigma associated with disability (Elraz 2018; Goffman 1963; Watson. 2002). Stigma is a personal attribute perceived as 'deeply discrediting' in some circumstances (Goffman 1963, 13). It is not the attribute on its own that causes stigma but its relationship to a particular situation. Disabled people often experience stigma and the associated disadvantages in the workplace, particularly those with visible impairments (Foster and Wass 2013; Robert and Harlan 2006), leading us to consider the effects of impairment and disability on venture creation and legitimacy.

The *visibility* of impairment poses specific challenges in organizational settings (Clair, Beatty, and Maclean 2005; Elraz 2018; Mik-Meyer 2016). While there is an emerging interest in how the 'body', impaired or otherwise, affects entrepreneurial activities (Kašperová and Kitching 2014; Martinez Dy, Marlow, and Martin 2017; Martinez Dy, Martin, and Marlow 2018), the role of embodied properties and *non*-linguistic practices (Archer 2000) of more *visual* kind remains under-explored, despite researchers highlighting how the stereotypes of a white, male (Boje and Smith 2010; Essers and Benschop 2007, 2009), young (Ainsworth and Hardy 2008; Tomlinson and Colgan 2014) and able-bodied (Jammaers and Zanoni 2020; Kašperová and Kitching 2014) entrepreneur exclude the 'other' who does not satisfy the normative assumptions of 'who is' an entrepreneur (Ahl and Marlow 2012).

Utilizing legitimacy, embodiment and stigma in the workplace literature, the article extends Suchman's (1995) work by re-conceptualizing his legitimacy-building strategies in terms of impairment visibility. It is argued that the visibility of impairment can *both* enable *and* constrain entrepreneurs' capacity to acquire legitimacy, depending on the product/service offering and the target market. Disabled entrepreneurs in the UK are found to adopt four *embodied* legitimacy-building strategies in the marketplace: (1) revealing impairment and conforming to a mainstream market; (2) revealing impairment and selecting a niche disability market; (3) revealing impairment and transforming a mainstream market; and (4) passing for 'normal' and conforming to a mainstream market. Each strategy has specific implications for entrepreneurs' micro-level interactions with customers.

The article makes three key contributions to the entrepreneurial legitimacy literature (De Clercq and Voronov 2009a, 2009b; Lounsbury and Glynn 2001; Martens, Jennings, and Devereaux Jennings 2007; Fisher et al. 2017; Überbacher 2014). First, it highlights the role of personal embodied properties and non-linguistic practices in the legitimation process by extending our understanding of how disabled entrepreneurs with visible and invisible impairments acquire legitimacy when confronted with stigma and the normative assumptions of able-bodiedness. Second, it explicates the power of disabled and non-disabled customers in legitimizing, or delegitimising, ventures created by disabled entrepreneurs under specific market conditions, responding to a call to pay more attention to the diversity of audiences in legitimacy studies (Fisher et al. 2017; Überbacher 2014). Third, it offers novel empirical insights into 'tactics' employed by disabled entrepreneurs at the micro-level of interactions with customers to address any challenges, or potential advantages, associated with each embodied legitimacy-building strategy.

Adding to the nascent literature on disabled entrepreneurs (De Clercq and Honig 2011; Jammaers and Zanoni 2020; Jones and Latreille 2011; Kašperová, Kitching, and Blackburn 2018; Kašperová and Kitching 2014; Renko, Parker Harris, and Caldwell 2016), the article illustrates furthermore how a particular impairment or health condition can be *both* a power and a liability in creating and managing a new venture, contingent on market circumstances. There is a dearth of research on how disability shapes entrepreneurs' business relationships. This article offers a more nuanced and contextualized account of the challenges, and possibilities, experienced by disabled entrepreneurs when building legitimacy with customers.

*Dis*embodied audiences and actors? Prior research on legitimacy in entrepreneurship

Legitimacy is a popular concept in researching how entrepreneurs gain and sustain support for new ventures entering markets (Cornelissen, Holt, and Zundel 2011). Studies often focus either on how new ventures and their environments are perceived by important business stakeholders or 'audiences' as legitimation mechanism *or* on the actions of entrepreneurial 'actors' in building legitimacy (Überbacher 2014). Aspiring entrepreneurs' actions must of course be validated by customers and other audiences who have the power to grant or reject support for new ventures entering markets. Überbacher's call to bridge 'audience-centred' and 'actor-centred' views is relevant in examining the specific market conditions that enable or constrain disabled entrepreneurs to gain legitimacy with particular customer audiences.

First, while it has been shown that entrepreneurs often adapt how they present themselves to different audiences (Zott and Huy 2007), limited attention has been paid to the diversity of audiences in the entrepreneurial legitimacy literature with theoretical generalizations often drawn from one audience type, for instance investors (Fisher et al. 2017; Überbacher 2014). Furthermore, the heterogeneity of audiences in terms of social identities, such as disability, and personal embodied properties, like particular impairments, are under-explored in the literature. It is generally assumed that customers are able-bodied as opposed to differently-abled agents, with consequences for our understanding of how disabled customers influence market norms and expectations. Equally, little is known about legitimacy judgements of non-disabled or mainstream customers doing business with disabled entrepreneurs. This article begins to address these knowledge gaps.

Second, studies highlight the actions entrepreneurs take to build legitimacy with customers and others (Überbacher 2014). It has been shown that entrepreneurs employ various linguistic practices, such as narrative storytelling, to construct an entrepreneurial identity with important business stakeholders (Down 2006; Down and Warren 2008; Essers and Benschop 2007, 2009) which, in turn, helps them acquire legitimacy and thus access to resources and markets (Lounsbury and Glynn 2001; Martens, Jennings, and Devereaux Jennings 2007; Navis and Glynn 2011). Entrepreneurs were found to utilize storytelling, metaphors, analogy, rhetoric and arguments to legitimize their activities in the eyes of others (Cornelissen, Holt, and Zundel 2011; Cornelissen, Clarke, and Cienki 2012; Garud, Schildt, and Lant 2014; Golant and Silince 2007; Holt and Macpherson 2010; Landau, Drori, and Terjesen 2014; Werven, Bouwmeester, and Cornelissen 2015, 2019). However, not *all* entrepreneurs may equally utilize or benefit from such linguistic practices (Lee et al. 2019). Communication is crucial for legitimacy but is not limited to discourse (Suchman 1995).

Social identities are communicated through various embodied properties and non-linguistic practices (Archer 2000) *as well as* linguistic. Facial expressiveness, gestures, the use of artefacts, the way one dresses (Clarke 2011), or manages information about pregnancy (Rouse and Kitching 2014), impairment or health condition (Kašperová and Kitching 2014) can influence relationships. The role of such embodied properties and non-linguistic practices in shaping entrepreneurial legitimacy is largely under-studied. Linguistic practices of course are also *embodied* in the sense that one cannot express themselves verbally or in writing without having a body enabling them to do so (Burkitt 1999; Varela, Thompson, and Rosch 1991), yet researchers often focus on the linguistic while neglecting more visual non-linguistic practices. Studies implicitly assume that entrepreneurs are an homogeneous group in terms of their embodied properties, equally capable of building and gaining legitimacy. This under-theorization of embodied properties and non-linguistic practices limits our understanding of how disabled entrepreneurs gain legitimacy with different kinds of customers and, specifically, how impairment visibility shapes their efforts.

Theoretical framework: entrepreneurial legitimacy and the (in)visibility of impairment

Legitimacy is central to creating, sustaining and transforming organizations (Suchman 1995). To create a new venture, aspiring entrepreneurs must meet the expectations associated with entrepreneurial roles; newcomers are not automatically viewed as entrepreneurs (De Clercq and Voronov 2009a, 2009b). A new venture is a new combination of resources undertaken by a person or a group and organized into a novel product offering with an aim to create value (Carland et al. 1984; Schumpeter 1934). While a 'new venture' and an 'entrepreneur' are not synonymous, how audiences perceive entrepreneurs representing new ventures shapes audiences' legitimacy judgements. Entrepreneurial actors accomplish legitimacy for themselves and their ventures when their activities become known, familiar and accepted by important audiences (Aldrich and Fiol 1994; Suchman 1995).

To succeed, entrepreneurs must both 'fit in' with the existing market arrangements and rules and 'stand out' as rule breakers (De Clercq and Voronov 2009a, 2009b); they must successfully balance similarity with, but also difference from, others in the marketplace. Disabled entrepreneurs may have to exert greater effort to accomplish legitimacy (De Clercq and Honig 2011); they may not fit in with the stereotypical image of an able-bodied entrepreneur or may stand out, perhaps unintentionally, for their impairment rather than the product offering. How disabled entrepreneurs manage these demands may vary, given the heterogeneity of audiences and their interests (De Clercq and Voronov 2009b).

Entrepreneurs often adapt how they present themselves to diverse audiences and can benefit from 'structural similarity' with customers and others; for example, a shared experience of business start-up (Zott and Huy 2007). Likewise, 'homophily' or similarity in terms of demographic characteristics or a shared social identity can breed connection (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook 2001) and influence entrepreneurs' capacity to come across as legitimate with particular audiences. Similarity implies shared knowledge; those who associate with similar others may do so for ease of communication or perceived shared attitudes and values (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook 2001). Equally, the shared experience of disability can potentially enable entrepreneurs to establish homophilous ties with disabled audiences, including customers, and facilitate access to resources, markets and knowledge required to succeed in business (Phillips, Tracey, and Karra 2013; Ruef, Aldrich, and Carter 2003).

Given the importance of audiences in the legitimation process, how disabled entrepreneurs position themselves in the marketplace, intentionally or inadvertently, can affect their capacity to acquire legitimacy with different customer audiences. Entrepreneurs can adopt a number of legitimacy-building strategies, with varied consequences for their ability to meet customers' expectations. Suchman (1995) highlights three clusters of strategies that new entrants generally adopt in relation to market environments: (1) 'Conforming' to pre-existing audiences within entrants' current environment; (2) 'Selecting' from multiple environments those audiences most likely to support entrants' current practices, and; (3) 'Manipulating', or transforming, environmental structure by creating new audiences. Although Suchman recognizes the role of non-verbal communication in legitimation, both actors and audiences are assumed to be homogeneously embodied in his seminal paper. There is no exploration of how particular social identities and personal embodied properties influence actors' decisions and capacities to conform to, select or transform markets, nor how diverse audiences shape the process.

Entrepreneurs' legitimacy-building strategies may vary depending on their personal embodied properties, including particular impairments or health conditions, and their position in the marketplace – that is, their product or service offering and the target market. Personal embodied properties can be both powers and liabilities (Archer 2000); they can enable or constrain entrepreneurial activities depending on market circumstances. In some situations, particular impairments can be stigmatizing (Goffman 1963; Watson 2002) and constrain entrepreneurs' legitimacy-building efforts

(De Clercq and Honig 2011) while in other circumstances, such embodied properties can be redefined in positive terms as aspects of social identity that offer unique insights (Slay and Smith 2011) and can therefore potentially enable entrepreneurs to acquire legitimacy. Disabled entrepreneurs selling a mainstream product to a mainstream market may find it difficult to fit in with non-disabled customers' appearance and behavioural expectations associated with stereotypical entrepreneurial roles (Ahl and Marlow 2012; Down and Warren 2008). In contrast, targeting a niche disability market with a disability-related product may enable entrepreneurs to stand out as different from the mainstream and to fit it with disabled customers' expectations. Yet, in other circumstances, a demand for disability-related product within mainstream markets may help disabled entrepreneurs gain legitimacy in the mainstream and avoid stigmatizing attitudes.

Visual practices and artefacts are crucial in the elaboration of legitimacy claims (De Vaujany and Vaast 2016). Some impairments can be visible, invisible or may be visible at certain times only. Hence, impairment visibility can influence whether stigma is 'enacted' in actual experiences of discrimination, or is rather 'felt' as internal shame or fear of enacted stigma (Scambler 2009). The *visibility* of impairment can pose specific challenges in organizational settings; people with invisible conditions, for instance chronic illness, face a dilemma of whether to reveal or conceal their condition from employers to avoid potentially negative reactions (Clair, Beatty, and Maclean 2005) while those with visible impairments may have to continuously manage stigmatizing attitudes in the workplace (Robert and Harlan 2006). Disabled entrepreneurs may experience similar challenges when interacting with customers and may have to constantly control information about their appearance and behaviour in social encounters (Goffman 1963).

Impairment visibility may influence entrepreneurs' initial decision to conform to, select or transform markets as it potentially shapes their capacity, or willingness, to fit in with the expectations of particular customers. Those selling a disability-related product to a selected disability market may seek to reveal impairment *intentionally* to establish homophilous ties with disabled customers and thus to come across as a legitimate 'disabled entrepreneur'. In contrast, those selling a mainstream product to a mainstream market may try to conceal impairment in order to conform and avoid the negative effects of stigma on business. Yet, in other circumstances, entrepreneurs seeking to transform mainstream markets may need to adopt a different approach in managing impairment visibility and relationships with customers.

Finally, the potential influence of impairment visibility may not be considered or recognized as important by entrepreneurs initially when creating a new venture. Many entrepreneurs operate digital businesses (Martinez, Marlow, and Martin 2017) with minimal face-to-face interaction, enabling them to hide from the gaze of customer audiences. Some disabled entrepreneurs may be able to conceal visible impairments, to a degree, while those with invisible or hidden impairments may pass for 'normal' (Goffman 1963; Clair, Beatty, and Maclean 2005) and thus avoid disability disclosure. However, impairment visibility cannot be controlled in all circumstances and can have implications for disabled entrepreneurs' capacity to gain legitimate with particular customers. Entrepreneurs may have to exert additional effort at the micro-level of their interactions with customers to gain legitimacy by employing a range of embodied *non*-linguistic *as well as* linguistic practices.

Methodology

The study is set within the UK context where working-age disabled people are significantly more likely than non-disabled people to be economically inactive and unemployed (Powell 2020). Entrepreneurship offers an important route into work; UK-based disabled people with work-limiting disabilities are more likely to be self-employed than non-disabled people, often because of control self-employment offers over tasks, hours and locations of work (Jones and Latreille 2011). Nevertheless, the disadvantages disabled people experience in employment can persist in self-employment. Jones and Latreille (2011) suggest that consumer discrimination may explain why

nonwork-limited disabled people are less likely to be in self-employment than non-disabled people. Hence, exploring the strategies that entrepreneurs with visible or invisible impairments or health conditions employ to gain legitimacy with customers is pertinent.

Researching legitimacy as an interplay of customer audiences and entrepreneurial actors involves more than entrepreneurs' narrative accounts. While this study utilizes primarily entrepreneur interviews, additional data sources and methods were drawn upon, including customer interviews, observation notes and a desk-based review of visual material from entrepreneurs' business websites and professional online profiles, to 'crystallize' or validate findings (Marks and O'Mahoney 2014). Such triangulation of data sources and methods is an important strategy in qualitative research; it can strengthen validity and develop a more comprehensive understanding of phenomena (Carter et al. 2014).

Data collection

The article draws on qualitative data from a larger study of UK-based disabled entrepreneurs (Kašperová 2018). A sample of 42 entrepreneurs was selected using a purposeful, theoretical sampling approach (Coyne 1997), based on the following criteria: (i) self-identified as disabled and/or having a long-term impairment or health condition that limits day-to-day activities; and (ii) self-employed or owner manager of a micro enterprise or a small business. The participants varied by personal and business characteristics, including impairment type and visibility, product offering and target market (Table 1).

The entrepreneur sample was built using three methods. First, several gatekeeper organizations were approached to assist, including disability networks and mainstream business associations. The aim was to reach entrepreneurs who self-identified as disabled, and those with impairments who do not necessarily see themselves as such but may have experienced disability effects on their business. The gatekeepers, identified through an online search and contacted via email or a telephone call, had forwarded an invitation email to their members or added a news item about the study to their online platforms. Second, some self-identified disabled entrepreneurs were approached directly where their profiles were public on gatekeepers' websites. And third, entrepreneurs were recruited through snowball sampling (Neergaard 2007) or referrals from other participants.

The aim was to reach entrepreneurs with various impairment or health condition types, including physical and sensory impairments, mental health conditions and learning difficulties, to examine how different embodied properties and their visibility shape business relationships. The sample comprised entrepreneurs with highly visible and invisible or less visible impairments. Impairment visibility was judged by visual markers, such as posture instability, or the use of artefacts, for example a wheelchair. Most participants (N = 33) were self-employed or business owners for more than three years while a minority (N = 9) could be described as start-ups at the time of the interview. Just under half (N = 20) employed others.

Semi-structured interviews with entrepreneurs were conducted face-to-face (N = 38) and over the telephone (N = 4). Each interview, lasting on average 90 minutes, was audio-recorded, with the respondent's permission, and the recordings were transcribed verbatim and anonymized. The semi-structured format where a set of open-ended questions is formulated in advance (Bryman and Bell 2011) facilitated a data collection process that is explicitly theory-driven (Smith and Elger 2014). This meant that the key concepts, including stigma and legitimacy, were addressed explicitly while allowing interviewees to elaborate on the emerging themes. For instance, participants were asked about the potential effects of disability on their business practices and relationships. Where the practices of revealing or concealing impairment were highlighted, the researcher invited participants to elaborate further or give examples.

Additional data was collected to strengthen validity of this approach through data source and method triangulation (Carter et al. 2014). This included semi-structured interviews with non-disabled and disabled customers of selected entrepreneurs to gain multiple perspectives, responding to a call

Table 1. Personal and business characteristics of participant entrepreneurs.

Characteristics	N	%
Impairment type		
Long-term condition causing physical impairment	25	60
Physical impairment	5	12
Sensory impairment	5	12
Other long-term condition	3	7
Mental health condition	2	5
Cognitive impairment	1	2
Learning difficulty	1	2
Impairment visibility		
Visible	30	71
Invisible/less visible	12	29
Sex		
Male	25	60
Female	17	40
Ethnicity		
White British	38	91
Asian British	2	5
Black/African/Caribbean/Black British	1	2
Mixed/multiple ethnic groups	1	2
Age		
18–30	3	7
31–40	12	29
41–50	8	19
51–60	14	33
61+	5	12
Product/service		
Service only	29	69
Product only	6	14
Combination	7	17
Mainstream only[a]	21	50
Disability-related only[b]	18	43
Combination	3	7
Market		
Mainstream only[c]	32	76
Disability only[d]	5	12
Combination	5	12

[a]A 'mainstream product/service' refers to a product/service in general (for example, marketing).

[b]A 'disability-related product/service' refers to a product/service related to a particular impairment or health condition (for example, rehabilitation) and disability (for example, diversity training).

[c]A 'disability market' refers to a meeting of people for selling and buying products where the buyers are disabled customers.

[d]A 'mainstream market' refers to a meeting of people for selling and buying products where the buyers are non-disabled customers.

for integrating viewpoints from both audiences and entrepreneurial actors (Überbacher 2014). Access to customer data can be limited in legitimacy research because of the sensitivity of the subject, and more so when exploring disability. While participant entrepreneurs often self-identified as disabled, not all have disclosed disability to customers. Four entrepreneurs agreed to facilitate further interviews with some of their customers who were aware of disability. This approach may have resulted in the exclusion of unsatisfied customers, however, the interviewed customers (N = 7) provided important additional insights to understand the conditions for acquiring legitimacy from the viewpoint of disabled and non-disabled customers.

All interviews were supported by a topic guide comprising open-ended questions tailored for entrepreneurs and customers. The topics covered in the entrepreneur interviews included challenges faced in starting and running a business, the nature of impairment or health condition, the effects of disability on business practices and relationships, and how entrepreneurs addressed any challenges. The customer interview guide included questions on the products/services purchased and their importance to customer, and on the examples of situations when the entrepreneur exceeded, or did not meet, their expectations. Pseudonyms were used to protect participants' identity.

The entrepreneur and customer interview data were further triangulated utilizing observation notes and a desk-based review of online material, including images, videos and text, obtained from entrepreneurs' business websites and professional profiles. The visible markers of difference, for example entrepreneurs' use of assistive technologies, can shape audiences' perceptions and should not be overlooked. Notes of approximately 1–2 pages were taken after each entrepreneur interview to record reflections on the interview and observations of entrepreneurs' embodied properties and practices; for example, bodily movement and the use of artefacts. This visual data helped elucidate the potential disability effects in business. Videos and images are increasingly used in organization research, alongside written words (Bell and Davison 2013). The review of entrepreneurs' business websites and professional profiles provided additional insights into how these entrepreneurs present themselves in the digital environment, and whether and how they disclose disability online. Most participants had a business website (N = 31) or a LinkedIn profile (N = 37) at the time of the interview. This data was examined in relation to the identified legitimacy strategies to validate the underlying assumptions of each strategy.

Data analysis

The data analysis involved several steps, employing retroductive and abductive forms of inference (Danermark et al. 2002). First, retroduction is about asking what makes phenomena, such as legitimacy acquisition, possible (Danermark et al. 2002; Sayer 1992). Überbacher's (2014) call to theoretically link entrepreneurial actors and audiences to fully explain new venture legitimacy motivated the analysis of conditions under which it is possible for entrepreneurs with particular impairments to acquire legitimacy with particular customers. The interview transcripts were re-read to identify emerging themes, for example the importance of impairment visibility, and to interpret them considering existing theories. The transcripts were organized, coded and analysed using NVivo 11. The analysis started with a set of organizational and theoretical codes (Maxwell 2012) supplemented by new codes emergent from the data. These new codes informed the subsequent reformulation of existing theory (Fletcher 2016), identifying the strategies adopted by entrepreneurs under specific market conditions.

The visual material from entrepreneurs' websites substantiated the identified market conditions and the importance of impairment visibility. Screenshots of business websites and LinkedIn profiles were taken after each interview and reviewed to identify whether and how participant entrepreneurs disclose disability online and how they position themselves in the marketplace. This was important as many participants reported to operate an online business with minimal face-to-face customer interaction, making their online presence the main information source for potential customers.

Second, abduction is about moving from concrete, observable events – for example, negative customer reactions – to general structures underlying such events (Danermark et al. 2002) – for example, the dominant stereotype of an able-bodied entrepreneur. This was done by interpreting and re-contextualizing observed phenomena within a theoretical framework and subsequently interpreting them in a new way. Suchman's (1995) legitimacy strategies were re-conceptualized considering impairment visibility as an emerging theme from the data analysis.

A new typology of strategies was generated through an iterative process of moving back and forth between theory and data. This helped unearth how consideration of impairment visibility together with product offering and target market extend our understanding of the conforming, selecting and manipulating legitimacy strategies (Suchman 1995). The data exposed some demi-regularities – that is, tendencies observed in trends and patterns (Danermark et al. 2002; Fletcher 2016); for example, the observation that impairment visibility may be beneficial for legitimacy in mainstream markets under particular circumstances. Finally, the analysis uncovered various 'tactics' employed by entrepreneurs at the micro-level of interactions with customers to address any challenges, or potential advantages, associated with each strategy.

Findings: disabled entrepreneurs' *embodied* legitimacy-building strategies and tactics

Participant entrepreneurs were found to create and manage new ventures under four market conditions: (1) selling a mainstream product to a mainstream consumer market (for example, web hosting); (2) selling a disability-related product to a disability market (for example, wheelchair clothing); (3) selling a disability-related product to a mainstream market (for example, accessibility consultancy); and (4) selling a mainstream product to a disability market (for example, business consultancy). Such market positioning can be interpreted in terms of Suchman's (1995) legitimacy-building strategies of market conformance (1), selection (2, 4) and transformation (3). Accordingly, operating in niche disability markets is a selection strategy. However, participant entrepreneurs' capacity to fit in with customers' expectations, and thus their experience of conforming to, selecting or transforming markets, was importantly influenced by the visibility of their impairment or health condition.

Taking impairment visibility into account, the entrepreneurs were found to adopt four *embodied* legitimacy-building strategies in relation to the market environment: (i) Revealing impairment and conforming to a mainstream market; (ii) Revealing impairment and selecting a niche disability market; (iii) Revealing impairment and transforming a mainstream market; and (iv) Passing for 'normal' and conforming to a mainstream market (Table 2).

Entrepreneurs may not consider the legitimizing or potentially delegitimising effects of a particular strategy when creating a new venture, however, each strategy influences entrepreneurs' relations with customers and can have specific implications – for instance, success or failure to close a business deal. Impairment visibility shapes but of course does not determine entrepreneurs' decision to offer certain products, to operate in certain markets, and the outcomes of these decisions. To address any challenges or to make most of potential advantages associated with each strategy, participant entrepreneurs employed various legitimacy-building 'tactics' at the micro-level of their interactions with customers. Some entrepreneurs adopted more than one strategy or shifted over time to a different strategy (Table 3) – a finding elaborated at the end of this section.

Revealing impairment and conforming to a mainstream market

The 'revealing-conforming' strategy is characteristic of entrepreneurs with visible or revealing impairments who conform to pre-existing audiences – that is, they sell a mainstream product to a mainstream market (for example, web design). Some impairments can be revealing through various non-linguistic practices, including bodily movement and posture (for instance, limping), gestures and facial expressions (for instance, the lack of eye contact) and through artefacts used to perform tasks (for instance, a mobility scooter). Impairment visibility can impact on entrepreneurs' capacity to fit in with mainstream customers' appearance and behavioural expectations associated with stereotypical entrepreneurial roles (Down and Warren 2008). Disability may not be a defining

Table 2. Embodied legitimacy-building strategies and their key features.

Strategy	Impairment visibility	Product offering	Target market
Revealing-conforming	Visible	Mainstream	Mainstream
Revealing-selecting	Visible	Disability-related	Disability-niche
Revealing-transforming	Visible	Disability-related	Mainstream
Passing-conforming	Invisible/less visible	Mainstream	Mainstream

feature of entrepreneurs' sense of self, but it *does* shape their relationships. Connie – a freelance website developer, blind since birth – describes the challenges of building legitimacy with main-stream customers.

> My biggest challenge is being taken seriously. . . . I don't want people to think 'Oh that blind woman, what is her name?' I want people to think 'Oh yeah that web developer who is really good, oh yes she is blind'. I don't want blindness to be the big defining aspect of my identity that people remember, and it usually is. So, I would like people to think of me as that kind of slightly off-beat, quite confident, competent person. And I think often at the end of my working relationship with people that *is* what they *do* think, but it takes a lot of hard work to get to that.

Customers' pre-existing perceptions of disability influence their judgements of individual compe-tence, requiring significant effort from entrepreneurs like Connie to dispel negative assumptions about disability. Similarly, John – founder of an internet services company who has Chronic Fatigue Syndrome – describes negative reactions from mainstream customers to his health condition and ethnicity, suggesting that additional challenges can be experienced by entrepreneurs at the inter-section of disability, ethnicity and possibly other stigmatized social identities, particularly where these are visible.

> People have always got this perception, especially if you're disabled, if you're Black, that you can't be behind a particular [business]. I've got *so* many instances when I've met people and they can't believe I actually own the business. . . . There is one chap that I met about three years ago, I've been talking to him for a while and he said 'Listen, I'm going to come down.' I actually picked him up from the station and as we drove off the road, he said 'So is it just you though?' 'Yeah!' So, it was almost like, he was so surprised that I actually set the business up myself and it was a successful business.

Given these challenges, the revealing-conforming strategy adopters often intentionally *conceal* their impairment, where concealment is possible to a degree, in their micro-level interactions with customers. A cluster of concealment tactics was identified. For instance, Leonard – founder of an outdoors activity business, born with Spina Bifida – explains how he sometimes *deliberately hides* his mobility impairment in anticipation of negative customer judgements.

> I can remember situations where I consciously avoided revealing my disability. If somebody turned up who I haven't met before, they would be showed into my office and I'd say 'Just take a seat'. We'd have the meeting and then 'Well, nice to meet you. My secretary will show you out.' Whereas perhaps somebody else would say 'Oh, I'll walk you to the door' sort of thing. It was that sort of 'I don't know whether I'm going to be judged for my disability, but I'm going to avoid the opportunity by not revealing that I've got it in the first place.'

These entrepreneurs can be acutely aware of mainstream customer expectations, particularly when offering products that appear to contrast starkly with the stereotypical association of disability and work incapacity (Spicker 2003). Another concealment tactic employed by Leonard is to *delegate customer-facing tasks to able-bodied employees* as a way of situating himself physically away from the gaze of customers who may question his capability.

> My disability probably had an effect on that [legitimacy]. If you were turning up for an aggressive sort of fun day out in the open countryside, somebody who finds it a struggle to walk more than a few yards in that environment would probably not come across as being the right person to be saying 'Right guys, we're off to do this.'

Table 3. Participant entrepreneurs by embodied legitimacy-building strategy.

Strategy	Pseudonym	Product/service offering	Impairment/health condition	Impairment/health condition visibility	Disability disclosure online
Revealing-conforming (entrepreneurs with visible impairments selling a mainstream product/service to a mainstream market)	Neil	Wood components	Multiple Sclerosis	Wheelchair user	N/A
	Fred*	Public relations	Stroke, physical impairment	Mobility scooter user	Yes
	George	Sustainable product design	Multiple Sclerosis	Posture instability, walking cane user	No
	Philip	Research consultancy	Parkinson's Disease	Posture instability, neck collar user	No
	Dean*	Property development	Paraplegia	Wheelchair user	Yes
	Connie	Website development	Blindness	Lack of eye contact, guide dog owner	No
	Leonard	Outdoor leisure activities	Spina Bifida	Mobility scooter user	No
	John	Web hosting	Chronic Fatigue Syndrome	Posture instability, walking cane user	No
	Wesley*	Marketing consultancy	Lower limb amputee	Wheelchair user	Yes
	Clara	Digital and print design	Muscular Dystrophy	Mobility scooter user	No
	Michael*	Business consultancy	Multiple Sclerosis	Wheelchair user	Yes
	Victoria*	Innovation consultancy	Visual impairment	Lack of eye contact	No

(Continued)

Table 3. (Continued).

Strategy	Pseudonym	Product/service offering	Impairment/health condition	Impairment/health condition visibility	Disability disclosure online
Revealing-selecting (entrepreneurs with visible impairments selling a mainstream or disability-related product/service to a disability market)					
	Pauline	Disability community services	Spina Bifida	Wheelchair user	No
	Colin	Training for disabled people	Stroke, physical impairment	Speech impediment, posture instability	No
	Akaash	Disability leadership	Multiple Epiphyseal Dysplasia	Posture instability, mobility difficulties	Yes
	Fred*	Public relations	Stroke, physical impairment	Mobility scooter user	Yes
	Alan	Disability business consultancy	Multiple Sclerosis	Posture instability, mobility difficulties	N/A
	Peter	Manufacture of mobility aids	Quadriparesis	Wheelchair user	Yes
	Ben*	Mobility aids retail	Friedreich's Ataxia	Wheelchair user	Yes
	Michael*	Wheelchair accessories	Multiple Sclerosis	Wheelchair user	Yes
	Lewys*	Mobility aids production	Limb-Girdle Muscular Dystrophy	Wheelchair user	Yes
	Garry*	Disability fitness training	Lower limb amputee†	Lower limb prosthesis	Yes
	Dean*	Wheelchair clothing retail	Spinal Cord Injury/ Paraplegia	Wheelchair user	Yes
	Victoria*	Innovation consultancy	Visual impairment	Lack of eye contact	No

(Continued)

Table 3. (Continued).

Strategy	Pseudonym	Product/service offering	Impairment/health condition	Impairment/health condition visibility	Disability disclosure online
Revealing-transforming *(entrepreneurs with visible impairments selling a disability-related product/service to a mainstream market)*					
	Matthew	Disability risk management	Dyslexia†	Wheelchair user	Yes
	Wesley*	Accessibility consultancy	Lower limb amputee	Wheelchair user	Yes
	Samuel	Disability writer and educator	Spina Bifida	Wheelchair user	No
	James	Disability inspirational speaker	Upper limb impairment	Upper limb deformity	Yes
	Lewys*	Mobility aids production	Limb Girdle Muscular Dystrophy	Wheelchair user	Yes
	Sarah	Disability recruitment service	Progressive neurological condition†	Neck collar user, mobility difficulties	Yes
	David	Disability artist	Progressive neurological condition	Wheelchair user	Yes
	Anne	Equality consultancy	Blindness†	Wheelchair user	Yes
	Rachel	Accessibility consultancy	Rheumatoid Arthritis	Posture instability, mobility difficulties	Yes
	Tamara	Rehabilitation services	Visual impairment	Lack of eye contact	Yes
	Linda	Disability awareness training	Blindness	Lack of eye contact	Yes
	Ben*	Disability inspirational speaker	Friedreich's Ataxia	Wheelchair user	Yes
	Garry*	Disability fitness training	Lower limb amputee†	Lower limb prosthesis	Yes
	Lena	Disability awareness training	Friedreich's Ataxia	Wheelchair user	Yes

(*Continued*)

Table 3. (Continued).

Strategy	Pseudonym	Product/service offering	Impairment/health condition	Impairment/health condition visibility	Disability disclosure online
Passing-conforming (*entrepreneurs with invisible/less visible impairments selling a mainstream product/service to a mainstream market*)	Dominic	Product design	Amnesia	Invisible	N/A
	Harry	Gardening	Fibromyalgia†	Invisible	N/A
	Beverly	Knitting patterns design	Monoarthritis†	Invisible	No
	Tom	Landscape management	Asperger Syndrome	Invisible	No
	Dara	Academic research services	Ehlers Danlos Syndrome	Invisible	No
	Richard	Organic toiletries	Osteoarthritis	Invisible	No
	Sophie	Dog walking	Emetophobia	Invisible	No
	Gaby	Counselling	Exertion Migraine	Invisible	No
	Irene	HR consultancy	Bipolar II Disorder	Invisible	No
	Gill	Hand-made crafts	Asperger Syndrome	Invisible	No
	Fiona	Social enterprise consultancy	Chronic Fatigue Syndrome	Invisible	Yes
	Oliver	Salt production	Upper limb paralysis	Less visible	N/A

*Cases where more than one legitimacy-building strategy was adopted.
†Cases with multiple impairments and health conditions where the most severe condition, or the one disclosed to the researcher, is reported.
N/A or not applicable refers to cases without a business website or a professional online profile.

Negative customer reactions to a revealing or visible impairment are not always anticipated by entrepreneurs; some may recognize such reactions only later and adjust their behaviour accordingly. John's past experience of losing orders following a meeting with a client prompted him to adapt how he interacts with potential clients and to adjust his target clientele. *Running a faceless business* – a business with minimal or no face-to-face customer interaction – has been a key tactic employed by John to control the visibility of his condition and the potentially stigmatizing customer attitudes.

> Because of the nature of my business, as I said it's faceless, [and because] I've had two clients where we had a meeting and they cancelled [the order], I've kind of learned to tailor what sort of businesses to go for and to pitch to.

However, running a faceless business has its own challenges since building rapport face-to-face is often expected by potential customers. John has overcome this expectation, to a degree, by employing another distinctive tactic of *reframing the absence as a unique selling point*, suggesting that the advantages of running a faceless business may outweigh any potential disadvantages of not being able to build rapport face-to-face.

> If someone wants to set a meeting, I tend to say 'No'. . . . [A potential customer] called me and said 'Can you come down to present your proposal?', and I said 'No'. . . . I said to them, 'The reason I can't come down . . . ', I didn't say I was disabled, I said, 'The reason I can't come down is because we keep our costs very very low and so that's the reason why we're so competitive'. And they gave us a contract.

The visibility of impairment has a significant influence on customers' legitimacy judgements. Entrepreneurs who adopt the revealing-conforming strategy must often work hard to gain legitimacy with mainstream customers who might question entrepreneurs' competence. Although entrepreneurs cannot always know how a particular customer will respond to a revealing impairment, they often anticipate stigmatizing attitudes based on previous experience of 'enacted stigma' (Scambler 2009). Concealment of impairment can therefore enable some entrepreneurs and their ventures to fit in with mainstream customers' normative expectations. Indeed, as Table 3 illustrates, entrepreneurs adopting the revealing-conforming strategy tend to avoid disability disclosure online, except for those who utilize multiple strategies. The visibility of impairment can of course generate variable effects in mainstream markets depending on circumstances; some entrepreneurs may be more skilled in managing customer expectations face-to-face while different customers may react differently.

Revealing impairment and selecting a niche disability market

Entrepreneurs adopting the 'revealing-selecting' strategy are characterized by having a revealing or visible impairment while targeting a specific customer audience – that is, they sell a mainstream or disability-related product to disabled customers exclusively. Selecting a niche audience, for instance wheelchair users, can help disabled entrepreneurs acquire legitimacy; for example, by meeting a specific need in the marketplace that may otherwise be neglected by mainstream competitors. The lived experience of disability can be easily understood as specialist knowledge, providing a source of legitimacy. Participant entrepreneurs have commercialized their disability identity and expertise to offer bespoke products to disabled customers. For instance, Lewys – producer of mobility aids – explains how his experience of being a wheelchair user with Muscular Dystrophy has helped him demonstrate knowledge and gain legitimacy.

> I think that counts for a lot, the fact that I'm disabled myself, that's a positive in terms of sales for the disabled. . . . When people talk about difficulties they have, like travelling for instance, boarding an aircraft in particular, I can say 'Well, yeah I had that problem and that's one of the reasons I designed the [mobility aid] for myself.'

The lived experience and knowledge of disability has further enabled these entrepreneurs to build rapport with disabled customers more easily. Dean had set up a wheelchair clothing business when he realized there was a gap in the market for such clothing. His experience of being a wheelchair user with Paraplegia has helped him acquire legitimacy with a niche group of wheelchair users, as substantiated by one of his customers.

> I've actually bought a pair [of trousers] . . . I looked at the quality and because [Dean] himself had a disability; one, as a wheelchair user, as am I, we've got a rapport straight away. And that to me, if you've got somebody selling specialised equipment who is a user of the aforementioned equipment and has an insight into disability, it gives a lot more confidence as a potential customer.

The shared experience of disability breeds connection and helps entrepreneurs establish homo-philous ties and trust with disabled customers, adding to our understanding of the variety of identities that shape homophilous tie formation in the context of entrepreneurship (Phillips, Tracey, and Karra 2013). Participant entrepreneurs could utilize emotion-focused tactics like *empathizing with customers* as a powerful means of gaining legitimacy, as explained by Akaash – founder of a disability leadership business who has mobility difficulties.

> If a person has a disability and they see someone who is suffering, I think the level of empathy and how much a person can relate to the other person is much more than a person who hasn't suffered that same level of extreme pain. So, there's a bond that develops . . . Then there's that trust moment that develops.

Homophilous ties are important in the case of disabled customers seeking mainstream *as well as* disability-related products. Victoria's experience of disability – as founder of an innovation consul-tancy – is her unique selling point, as one of her disabled customers explains.

> Victoria and her business partner specialise in helping disabled people, and Victoria is also partially sighted, so she understands difficulties that disabled people have. . . . I did look at a few other companies [mainstream competitors] but once I've spoken to Victoria and her partner, they came straight to meet me, no questions, and I trusted them straight away. They were very open, very upfront.

To gain legitimacy, entrepreneurs must also demonstrate the utility of their product. Those offering disability-related innovations often *reveal* their impairment *intentionally* using various visual tools to communicate disability identity and product benefits to potential customers. Both Lewys and Peter – producer of mobility aids who is quadriplegic – showcase images and videos of themselves using their products on business websites and social media to demonstrate the value of their inventions while, simultaneously, positioning themselves as 'disabled entrepreneurs'. These online tools help them target niche disability markets internationally.

The visibility of impairment tends to have a positive influence on these entrepreneurs' interaction with disabled customers; most disclose disability online (Table 3) to appeal to potential customers. Additionally, impairment visibility facilitates face-to-face encounters with customers, as noted by Peter: 'When we do shows, it's very much easier for me to get somebody interested in our products than it is for an able-bodied staff member'. This of course depends on the situation. Disabled people are a diverse group in terms of impairment type, severity and other characteristics (Boyd 2012), with variable experiences of disability. Nonetheless, by selecting a niche disability market, participant entrepreneurs have taken advantage of their lived experience of disability, enabling them to stand out as different in the marketplace (De Clercq and Voronov 2009a, 2009b) and gain legitimacy with disabled customers.

Revealing impairment and transforming a mainstream market

Entrepreneurs adopting the 'revealing-transforming' strategy are those characterized by a revealing or visible impairment who seek to transform existing markets by creating new customer audiences – that is, they sell a novel disability-related product to new mainstream markets. Like the revealing-selecting group, these entrepreneurs take advantage of their lived experience of disability to create

ventures with innovative ideas for disability-related products, such as accessibility consultancy. Their target market, however, are mainstream customers, particularly other businesses and organizations striving to change their practices to meet the needs of *their* disabled customers or service users. Impairment visibility in this case generally enables entrepreneurs to gain legitimacy with mainstream customers, in contrast to those adopting the revealing-conforming strategy.

The revealing-transforming strategy adopters often target mainstream markets to further a particular social mission. For instance, they offer services that challenge negative attitudes towards disability and potentially transform established organizational norms that disadvantage disabled people. Their services tend to be innovative and responsive to the wider structural and cultural influences; for example, the legal framework regulating equal treatment of minority groups. Rachel – a freelance accessibility consultant who has severe Arthritis – explains why she is approached by mainstream business customers, suggesting that individual actors within organizations play a key role in granting legitimacy, particularly if they themselves have some experience of disability.

> My clients, there's lots of reasons they come to me. One is, they've had a complaint by someone who's quoted the Equality Act to them, and another's that they themselves have a disability or their children have a disability, that's quite common. Or they know someone with a disability, so they have this kind of interest in life, you know, this kind of awakening that 'Oh, disabled people exist. This happens. It can happen to anyone.'

The 'seeing' of disability is a vital pre-condition that supports legitimation among mainstream customers, highlighting the importance of making disability *visible* in efforts to transform disabling social structures and practices. While some disabled entrepreneurs may conceal impairment because of the perceived or actual discrimination in the marketplace, without 'seeing' impairment, mainstream customers will arguably lack awareness and understanding of disability and will reproduce disabling social structures and practices with *their* disabled customers.

The anti-discrimination laws placing equality duties on organizations have been an important stimulus for the growth of disability-related products in the UK, creating possibilities for disabled entrepreneurs to fill gaps in the market by offering various previously underserved disability, diversity and accessibility services. Tamara's personal experience of inadequate support as someone with a visual impairment prompted her to create an agency supplying rehabilitation professionals to social service providers. The business has gained legitimacy simply by addressing a national shortage of specialist rehabilitation workers, as one of her customers notes.

> [The service is] extremely important. We work with lower incidence disabilities and to get the specialist trained workers who know what they do is very important for the individuals. The workers are very few out there and they are in demand. They [the service users] are vulnerable and they need that specialist service to fill in. I think they [the business] provide a truly invaluable service. It would be totally chaotic not to have that specialist input. And we know there's a gap in the market for such provision.

Entrepreneurs adopting the revealing-transforming strategy often attempt to challenge mainstream market environments; for instance, by advocating the business case for employing a diverse workforce. Like the revealing-selecting group, these entrepreneurs tend to *reveal* their impairment *intentionally* to be perceived as experts in their field and legitimate in the eyes of mainstream customers (Table 3). Their knowledge of disability again becomes a unique selling point; it appeals to customers who recognize the benefits of diversity to their organization. However, unlike the revealing-conforming group, these entrepreneurs are more able to avoid negative customer reactions. Sarah – owner of a business specializing in recruitment for disabled candidates and inclusive employers – explains how she acquires legitimacy with employer customers despite not meeting some of their expectations. Sarah has a neurological condition that affects her mobility.

> I suppose that I'm lucky in that the work I do is disability-related, so it isn't so odd to find the owner of the business being disabled. It's something perhaps they [customers] might have expected. Whereas if I was running, say, the business I used to run, the training business, people would expect you to pop on the train and get down to London for a meeting without any, you know, repercussions.

Despite customer flexibility, Sarah recognizes the lack of face-to-face interaction as a constraint in building rapport with customers. Yet, entrepreneurs who *do* interact face-to-face experience particular challenges, especially those with visual impairments. For instance, Anne – owner of an equalities consultancy – finds that potential customers often do not realize she is the owner when accompanied to meetings by her husband who 'looks like the person who would be the business owner'. Similarly, Linda – owner of a disability awareness consultancy – highlights the difficulties of business networking when 'people will not come up and talk to you if you're obviously a disabled person'. Customers' knowledge of disability and of appropriate communication 'etiquette' is often limited, affecting their confidence when interacting with disabled entrepreneurs. *Taking control to communicate* is a tactic employed by some entrepreneurs to overcome such difficulties, as explained by Rachel.

> They [customers] never say to me 'Rachel, right, so we've got a meeting in another building. I don't really understand or know about your disability, is that Ok for you?' They never, ever want to talk about it [disability]. . . . And when I don't get any kind of response, or awareness, or any questioning about it at all, I just get to the point where I think 'God, this is ridiculous, are you pretending that you can't see?' [disability] . . . They're all scared, they don't know what language to use, how to be polite about disability. . . . So, they're just paralysed. So, I just bring it up now.

Linda resorts to a rather unconventional method to initiate communication with potential customers: 'I have to walk into a room and keep walking until I hit someone. Then I might try and talk to them. And that's literally how I have to do my networking. Can you imagine that?'

Despite these challenges, disability can generate multiple advantages for entrepreneurs adopting the revealing-transforming strategy, and wider social benefits. First, it serves as a source of innovative ideas for products/services that transform established markets by responding to previously unmet needs. Second, it can help entrepreneurs acquire legitimacy with *both* disabled and mainstream customers who recognize the benefits of diversity and seek to change their practices. Third, it challenges what Kašperová and Kitching (2014) identified as the assumed able-bodiedness in entrepreneurship, shaping mainstream customers' expectations and readiness to be flexible when doing business with disabled entrepreneurs. And finally, it has the potential to transform the normative expectations of non-disability that construe people with impairments as somewhat lacking and expected to conform to 'being normal' whilst the social context is seen as unproblematic (Williams and Mavin 2012).

Passing for 'normal' and conforming to a mainstream market

This final section elaborates on the 'passing-conforming' strategy, characteristic of entrepreneurs with invisible or less visible impairments who pass for 'normal' (Goffman 1963) while conforming to pre-existing audiences – that is, they sell a mainstream product to a mainstream market. Passing or avoiding disability disclosure (Table 3) helps these entrepreneurs to 'fit in' more easily with mainstream customers' expectations when selling a mainstream product. However, invisible conditions can be visible in some circumstances (Clair, Beatty, and Maclean 2005) and can potentially constrain legitimacy acquisition, if not carefully managed. The consequences of stigma in the workplace, including discrimination and job loss, have been well documented (Byron and Roscigno 2014; Clair, Beatty, and Maclean 2005; Robert and Harlan 2006). It is perhaps unsurprising that disabled entrepreneurs with invisible conditions avoid disability disclosure in their encounters with customers. Sophie – a self-employed dog walker with Emetophobia – explains how she passes with customers to avoid any concerns.

> I've not told any of my customers what's wrong with me because I still think there's a bit of stigma to mental health, and I don't want them to think I'm unreliable. I want them to know that every day I will turn up and I don't want to give them any doubts. . . . I've never been confident about my illness. I've always been ashamed of it. And I think that's why I won't tell customers. I see it as a massive, massive weakness on my behalf.

Whether the potential consequences of stigma on these entrepreneurs' capacity to gain and maintain legitimacy are 'enacted' or merely 'felt' (Scambler 2009) requires further investigation. This quotation sheds light on the underlying reasons for strategy selection. Sophie not only recognizes the stigma associated with mental health, she has internalized this stigma and the 'devalued social status' often experienced by stigmatized group members (Campbell and Deacon 2006), fuelled by the dominant image of the 'ideal (non-disabled) worker' that excludes and disadvantages workers with impairments (Foster and Wass 2013).

Although participant entrepreneurs operate in mainstream markets, the severity and partial visibility of their condition can influence how they position themselves in the mainstream. The passing-conforming strategy adopters often operate in industries believed to better accommodate, or even embrace, their difference. Sophie's decision to become a dog walker was strategic; it allows her to work in an environment where she avoids prolonged contact with people, helping her to fit work around her condition. Equally, Gill – owner of a crafts business who has Asperger Syndrome – describes how being 'different' is almost expected by customers within the creative industries, rather than questioned.

> Hopefully [I come across] professional and like I know what I'm talking about. . . . I think it's kind of a weird one because there is almost that expectation that you're going to be a little bit strange and you're going to be a little bit kind of arty. There's not the same kind of pressures, I don't think, as there would necessarily be in other businesses to always be professional and business-like.

Like most passing-conforming strategy adopters, Gill does not disclose disability on her business website (Table 3), however, she has been more open about it with her regular customers. Gill finds that customers who follow her work closely and appreciate her being upfront about Asperger's can be more flexible when things go wrong; for instance, when there is a delivery delay. Hence, disability disclosure can enable entrepreneurs maintain legitimacy. Customers unaware of impairment might question entrepreneurs' actions without fully appreciating the underlying reasons for any unfulfilled expectations.

> I do get quite a lot of people not really understanding because for a fairly decent amount of time I'm able to present [myself] like there's nothing wrong with me. So, invisible disabilities are very tricky to understand because if I'm having a really bad day I won't go out and I won't see people, so people are only seeing me on the good days.

Entrepreneurs often pass for personal as well as business reasons; for example, a belief that disability should not matter, or a dislike of sympathy customers might hold towards them. Those with conditions that are visible at times perform a range of normative tactics, such as *bodily alterations* or *mimicking of 'normal' behaviour* like the eye contact, to fit in with mainstream customers' expectations. For instance, Tom – owner of a landscaping business who has Asperger Syndrome – describes how taking medication helps him interact more effectively.

> If I feel more positive, more confident, that will come across with the customers; that makes the customers more likely to say 'yes' when I've given a quote. It allows me to talk my way out of a situation, if there's a problem, more. Perhaps see further along because I can have more of an idea of how people might react to me. It [medication] makes me more socially aware.

Similarly, Beverly – a knitting patterns designer who has Monoarthritis – explains why she avoids the use of mobility aids when meeting customers face-to-face: 'I need a [walking] stick, but I try not to use it when I'm teaching because I don't want sympathy.' This suggests that entrepreneurs can sometimes choose to minimize, or enhance, impairment visibility through a strategic use of artefacts to fit in with the normative expectations of different kinds of customers.

Unlike Beverly who rejects customer sympathy and is more able to avoid it because her condition is relatively invisible, entrepreneurs with highly visible impairments may instead decide to *exploit customer sympathy* for business benefit. Garry – owner of a fitness training company who is a lower limb amputee with hearing impairment – notes that having 'the right attitude' is vital for business relationships.

> I don't mind showing my leg off because it's kind of a selling point … They [customers] might have some sympathy for me, or they might warm towards me, or it might make them trust me a bit more. … I'm very conscious of what I'm like and I make it work for the business.

Managing how entrepreneurs feel about customers' reactions to a visible impairment and controlling their emotional expressiveness in face-to-face encounters, as a form of 'emotional labour' (Hochschild 1983), may be crucial for gaining legitimacy. Additionally, impairment visibility can influence whether customers show sympathy and perhaps grant legitimacy on that basis. Garry observed for instance that customers are less understanding of his hearing impairment (invisible) but more sympathetic of his mobility impairment (highly visible).

This section has illustrated how and why entrepreneurs with invisible impairments and health conditions pass for 'normal' to acquire legitimacy with mainstream customers. Passing often requires careful management and market positioning since the effects of invisible impairments can sometimes be visible (Clair, Beatty, and Maclean 2005) and impact on entrepreneurs' relations with customers previously unaware of impairment. Although the passing-conforming strategy adopters employ various normative tactics to 'fit in', they sometimes disclose disability, particularly when a longer-term relationship and legitimacy has already been established.

Adopting multiple strategies and strategy shifting

Participant entrepreneurs with visible impairments sometimes adopted more than one strategy, potentially increasing their chances of gaining legitimacy and succeeding in business by operating in wider markets, offering a wider range of products, or both. In adopting such a hybrid approach, these entrepreneurs are also more open about disability and most disclose disability online (Table 3).

The absence of two additional strategies – 'passing-selecting' and 'passing-transforming' – suggests that the passing-conforming strategy adopters tend to gain legitimacy with mainstream customers more easily than the revealing-conforming group without having to branch out into wider markets or business activities to succeed. These entrepreneurs may not self-identify strongly as disabled which, in turn, shapes their entrepreneurial motivations and market positioning. Additionally, their legitimacy as a 'disabled entrepreneur' may be questioned in the absence of a more visible condition, as implied by Fiona – co-owner of a consultancy firm who has Chronic Fatigue Syndrome. She notes that the lack of visible clues about disability has been a disadvantage in securing financial support for her business: 'We weren't treated positively because we weren't perceived as poorly people and therefore worthy of support'.

Finally, entrepreneurs may shift over time from one strategy to another if the initial strategy is not fruitful in gaining legitimacy or generating an acceptable level of income. Strategy shifting due to failure to accomplish legitimacy was not identified here and calls for further research, however, one entrepreneur had shifted from the revealing-selecting to the revealing-transforming strategy to increase business revenue.

Discussion and future research

This article set out to examine how disabled entrepreneurs in the UK gain legitimacy with customers and, more specifically, how impairment or health condition visibility shapes their capacity to do so. It has been argued that the visibility of impairment can *both* enable *and* constrain entrepreneurs' capacity to gain legitimacy, depending on the product/service offering and the target market. Re-conceptualizing Suchman's (1995) work on legitimacy in terms of impairment visibility, participant entrepreneurs were found to adopt four *embodied* legitimacy-building strategies in the marketplace, each with specific implications for their micro-level interactions with customers.

Theoretically, this paper considered a largely neglected influence of personal embodied properties and *non*-linguistic practices (Archer 2000) in the legitimation process. It sought to extend Suchman's (1995) conceptualization of legitimacy-building strategies to explain how impairment visibility can enable or constrain market conformance, selection and manipulation under specific conditions. Suchman recognized the importance of non-verbal communication for legitimacy, however, personal embodiment of actors seeking legitimacy and audiences with power to grant it remained unexplored in his seminal paper. The present analysis illustrates how the visible aspects of personal embodiment influence entrepreneurs' capacity to conform to, select or manipulate particular markets, with three specific contributions to the entrepreneurial legitimacy literature.

First, while the literature shows that entrepreneurs use various linguistic practices, such as storytelling, to gain legitimacy (Cornelissen, Holt, and Zundel 2011; Cornelissen, Clarke, and Cienki 2012; Garud, Schildt, and Lant 2014; Golant and Sillince 2007; Holt and Macpherson 2010; Landau, Drori, and Terjesen 2014; Werven, Bouwmeester, and Cornelissen 2015, 2019), the importance of embodied properties and *non*-linguistic practices (Archer 2000) of more *visual* kind remained under-theorized. Concurring with Lee and colleagues (2019), not *all* entrepreneurs may equally engage in, or benefit from, such linguistic practices in their efforts to gain legitimacy and resources. Those with stigmatized social identities must often exert greater effort beyond storytelling. The article illustrates how and why impairment visibility can generate particular challenges, or possibilities, for disabled entrepreneurs depending on market circumstances. Considering impairment visibility in relation to product/service offering and target market helps explain the conditions under which entrepreneurs with particular impairments acquire legitimacy with particular customers.

Second, the article therefore responds to a call to pay more attention to the diversity of audiences (Fisher et al. 2017) by explicating the power of disabled and mainstream customers to legitimize or delegitimise ventures created by disabled entrepreneurs. The visibility of impairment shapes entrepreneurs' capacity to 'fit in' with customers' expectations or to 'stand out' as different (De Clercq and Voronov 2009a, 2009b) and therefore their ability to conform to, select or manipulate markets (Suchman 1995). Individual customers as embodied agents with particular social identities judge impairment visibility in different ways; for instance, as a visual clue signalling a shared experience of disability. Impairment visibility can therefore be a powerful mechanism for establishing homophilous ties and trust with disabled customers, but it can also generate uncertainties among mainstream customers. Building on Phillips and colleagues' (2013) findings that entrepreneurs utilize 'narrative identity work' to strategically establish strong homophilous ties with stakeholders, this study highlights more visual *non*-linguistic practices, such as the use of images or videos, in achieving strategic homophily as a form of 'embodied identity work' (Rydzik and Ellis-Vowles 2019).

While the focus here was on the legitimizing or delegitimising influence of impairment, the visibility of *all* embodied properties, including age, sex or race, may generate similar results. With some exceptions (Martinez, Marlow, and Martin 2017; Martinez, Martin, and Marlow 2018; Rouse and Kitching 2014), limited attention has been paid to entrepreneurs' or customers' embodiment. All entrepreneurs are uniquely embodied and their embodiment conveys particular meanings to different audiences. Parallels can be drawn here with studies illustrating that ethnic minority entrepreneurs tend to operate along similar lines in ethnic and non-ethnic markets (Fallon and Brown 2004), that 'visible-minority entrepreneurs' face greater challenges than 'non-visible minority entrepreneurs' in accessing resources (Teixeira, Lo, and Truelove 2007), and that such disadvantages are often reproduced in online as well as offline environments (Martinez, Marlow, and Martin 2017). This article additionally contributes to our understanding of the intersectional nature of social exclusion from entrepreneurial contexts (Essers and Benschop 2007, 2009) by highlighting the centrality of embodiment in any analysis of intersectionality (Adamson and Johansson 2016). The visible markers of difference and various social identities entrepreneurs embody influence customers' judgements of competence and business viability. However, the disadvantages or privileges associated with particular social identities may or may not be actualized, depending on entrepreneur's position in the marketplace and how they manage customers' expectations and reactions.

The visual dimension of meaning making is often taken for granted despite having significant influence on social interactions (Thébaud 2015). This article shows that the normative expectations against which entrepreneurs' bodies are judged, particularly the stereotypical entrepreneurial roles (Ahl and Marlow 2012; Down and Warren 2008), the assumed able-bodiedness (Kašperová and Kitching 2014), the stigma associated with disability (Goffman 1963) and ableism (Williams and Mavin 2012) can have negative consequences for disabled entrepreneurs' legitimacy-building efforts in mainstream markets. Such disabling mechanisms may not always be actualized; entrepreneurs selling disability-related products are more able to avoid stigmatizing attitudes while challenging the dominant assumptions about disability *and* entrepreneurship. Indeed, disability can be a unique form of symbolic capital that generates advantages for aspiring disabled entrepreneurs (De Clercq and Honig 2011; Vershinina and Rodgers 2020).

Third, this article offers novel empirical insights into 'tactics' employed by disabled entrepreneurs at the micro-level of interactions with customers to address any challenges, or possibilities, associated with each embodied legitimacy-building strategy. Disability as a form of symbolic capital enables entrepreneurs to position themselves as experts in the field able to *empathize* with customers who share their experience of disability. Some entrepreneurs intentionally *reveal* their impairment to communicate that expertise and empathy. For others, perceptions of stigmatizing customer attitudes or anticipated discrimination can motivate deployment of various *concealment* and *normative* tactics to meet mainstream customers' expectations. Encouragingly, there is evidence of flexibility in customers' dealings with disabled entrepreneurs who perhaps do not meet some of their expectations. Yet, customer fear or limited understanding and confidence around disability can pose specific communication challenges, suggesting that more work is needed to disrupt disabling practices in mainstream markets. Some entrepreneurs take pro-active measures to manage such difficulties in their interactions with customers. Finally, while empathy can help entrepreneurs gain legitimacy with disabled customers, mainstream customer *sympathy*, or rather acceptance of sympathy, can also be a powerful means of acquiring legitimacy.

The article additionally contributes to the nascent literature on disability in entrepreneurship (e.g. Jammaers and Zanoni 2020; Jones and Latreille 2011) by illustrating how a particular impairment or health condition can be *both* a power *and* a liability in creating and managing a new venture subject to market circumstances. This provides a more nuanced and contextualized explanation of the challenges, and possibilities, experienced by disabled entrepreneurs. For instance, addressing Jones and Latreille's (2011) concern about customer discrimination, it is shown that entrepreneurs with both invisible and visible impairments who sell mainstream products to mainstream markets experience stigma associated with disability that is 'felt' as well as 'enacted' (Scambler 2009) in the actual negative reactions from customers. Responding to a call for research into 'when and how disability can become a ground for gaining legitimacy, rather than a liability' (Jammaers and Zanoni 2020), this article illustrates that disability can generate advantages particularly for entrepreneurs who sell disability-related products to niche disability or mainstream markets.

The rest of the article outlines two avenues for future research. First, what is the relationship between the identified legitimacy-building strategies and business performance? The ethnic minority entrepreneurship literature highlights the importance of 'break-out' from niche ethnic markets for firm survival and growth (Ram and Hillin 1994). Does this apply in potentially more profitable disability markets? Adopting the revealing-selecting strategy may impact favourably on performance, considering the spending power of disabled customers (Coogan 2016) and the potential of digital entrepreneurship to expand into global markets. Moreover, is 'break-out' from niche disability markets a viable option for entrepreneurs who experience mainstream customer discrimination? Parallels can be drawn here with studies questioning whether it is advantageous for ethnic minority entrepreneurs to work within, or on the outside of, the ethnic economy (e.g. Ram and Jones 2008), although the visibility of ethnicity and its impact on entrepreneurs' capacity to 'break-out' or to gain legitimacy in wider markets is largely under-theorized. Most of the participant entrepreneurs

operate in mainstream markets (Table 2) but our understanding of how this choice affects their business performance is limited. Furthermore, how do the identified strategies, and their performance outcomes, vary across national contexts?

Second, while this article focused on entrepreneurs' relations with customers, future research could explore how disabled entrepreneurs build legitimacy with employees, finance providers and others. It is well established that ethnic minority and women entrepreneurs face challenges in accessing finance (Smallbone et al. 2003; Marlow and Patton 2005). Is this true of disabled people, especially those with mental health conditions or learning difficulties? Do disabled entrepreneurs face similar challenges as ethnic minority entrepreneurs in accessing suitable business support from mainstream providers (Ram and Smallbone 2003)?

Note

1. Following the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health, disability can be defined as 'the umbrella term for impairments, activity limitations and participation restrictions, referring to the negative aspects of the interaction between an individual (with a health condition) and that individual´s contextual factors (environmental and personal factors)'. Impairments are 'problems in body function or alterations in body structure' (WHO / WB 2011).

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