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Doing, redoing, or undoing gender of women tech founders in Germany

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Abstract

The study focuses on German tech startups, scrutinizing *what visibility women founders consider important*. In this respect, to what extent they perceive “visibility” in a gendered way is particularly striking. Consequently, we ask *what women founders actively do to create a particular gender-(in)dependent visibility*: how do they locate themselves in the three-way interplay of reproducing the dualism of masculinity–femininity (doing gender), restructuring it (redoing gender), or eliminating it (undoing gender)? Via our dataset of 20 qualitative interviews with all-women or mixed-gender founding teams, we divide the results of our inductive analysis into gender-independent and gender-dependent dimensions. While the women founders primarily do not understand “visibility as a startup” as gendered at the organizational level, gendered self-images at the individual level exist. Organizational visibility is shaped by phases, target groups, and instruments. For individual, gender-dependent visibility, we find the three ideal types of the (internal or external) feminist, the pragmatic strategist, and the gender neutrality advocate. We link our empirical findings to the opportunities and challenges of doing, redoing, and undoing gender, showing that women tech founders are actively undoing gender in many areas. Our research provides linkages to current debates in women’s entrepreneurship literature, such as entrepreneurial identity or discourses of hypervisibility. Moreover, we deliver practical implications on how to gear women-specific networks, accelerators, and the like toward the actual needs of women founders.

Keywords Tech startups · Visibility · Doing gender · Undoing gender · Women founders

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Introduction

There has been tremendous momentum for women entrepreneurship in the German startup scene in recent years, with initiatives, networks, and venture capitalists (VCs) specializing in women founders (e.g., Ignore Gravity, 2023; Kapalschinski, 2019; Ruhnke, 2021). Some initiatives explicitly use a gendered “visibility” as a medium, such as Women Entrepreneurs Parours (BAND, Business Angels Deutschland e.V., 2023) or the visibility challenge by Businettes (2023). From a functionalist perspective, “visibility” holds the promise of helping women founders achieve more entrepreneurial success and creating role models for other women (Byrne et al., 2019; Marks, 2021; Meyer et al., 2017). At the same time, the startup scene itself appears to be gradually reacting to this movement with fatigue or even resistance: the proportion of women founders is rising only slowly, standing currently at 21 percent (Bundesverband Deutsche Startups e.V., 2023, p. 7), and many ecosystem actors are calling for a shift from talking to doing (Founders Foundation, 2022; Liebig, 2022).

We pick up on this apparent change of mood and scrutinize what is behind the buzzword “visibility” from the founders’ perspective. Therefore, we first ask *what visibility women founders consider important*, underlining that visibility is not an end but a means to an end and striving to identify the actual “ends” behind it. Second, building on approaches to doing and redoing gender (West & Zimmerman, 1987, 2009) as well as undoing gender (Deutsch, 2007; Hirschauer, 2016; Risman, 2009), we ask *what women founders actively do to create a particular gender-(in)dependent visibility*: how do they locate themselves in the three-way interplay of reproducing the dualism of masculinity–femininity (doing gender), restructuring it (redoing gender), or eliminating it (undoing gender)?

Using a dataset of 20 qualitative interviews with all-female or mixed-gender founding teams from tech sectors (e.g., MedTech, Life Sciences, FinTech, GreenTech), we analyze mainly male-dominated industries as a kind of extreme case (Sperber & Linder, 2022; Treanor, 2022). Thereby, we are contributing to the visibility discourse from the perspective of the women founders’ self-image and show the extent to which gender differences still exist and how these differences have shrunk or have been eliminated in the meantime. Without negating existing gender differences, our empirical data shows that women tech founders are actively undoing gender in many areas. Following the work of Nentwich and Vogt (2021, pp. 11–14), we locate ourselves in reflexive gender studies, according to which (un)doing gender is seen as context dependent, gender differences being sometimes robust, sometimes powerless, or simply nonexistent. It could therefore be that “visibility” for women founders is not primarily gendered, implying that we alternatively or additionally recognize gender-independent visibility.

The structure of our article is as follows. The “[Visibility of women tech founders — curse or blessing?](#)” section summarizes the current state of research on the visibility of women founders, linking it to the discussion on doing, redoing, and undoing gender. The “[Methodology](#)” section outlines our methodology before we present our empirical findings in the “[Empirical findings](#)” section about, first, visibility as a startup and, second, visibility as a female founder. The “[Discussion](#)” section discusses our findings, the “[Limitations and future research](#)” section elaborates on limi-

tations starting points for future research and the “[Conclusion](#)” section concludes by highlighting our research’s scientific added value and practical implications.

Visibility of women tech founders — curse or blessing?

Although recognizing the opportunities that “visibility” can bring—e.g., by providing market or financing access (Parente et al., [2015](#); Singhal & Kapur, [2023](#))—we point out certain associated ambivalences and risks of gendered visibility. In line with our approach via self-images, we focus on hypervisibility and identity, thereby preparing our theoretical discussion of doing, redoing, and undoing gender in women tech founders’ visibility.

One crucial question for women founders is whether they want to be visible in a gender-specific way at all. For example, research on hypervisibility already shows undesirable, often content-unrelated visibility simply because of, for example, gender (Buchanan & Settles, [2019](#); Fernando et al., [2019](#); Settles et al., [2019](#)). The associated “token” problem pressures women to perform, resulting in fear, marginalization, and exclusion, especially in male-dominated work contexts (Lewis & Simpson, [2010](#), pp. 3–5). The current literature on women entrepreneurship approaches these challenges with the concepts of gendered identities and identity work (e.g., Elliott et al., [2021](#); Swail & Marlow, [2018](#)). Thereby, we understand hypervisibility as a consequence of the tension among femininity, legitimacy, and entrepreneurship, with women experiencing the “double bind” of contradiction between their communal gender role and agentic entrepreneurial stereotypes (Byrne et al., [2021](#), p. 158; see also Lewis, [2015](#)). In this respect, several authors demonstrate how individual career identities are gendered and reproduce gender stereotypes (Elliott & Orser, [2018](#); Kubberød et al., [2021](#); Woodwark et al., [2021](#)).

Against this backdrop, visibility can be both a curse and a blessing. We consider hypervisibility as well as gendered identities to be mechanisms of “doing gender” or “redoing gender,” hence being trapped in gender-specific stereotypes, actively using them (doing gender) or redefining them (redoing gender). Attempts to expand the women founders’ visibility discourse with the help of “undoing gender” instead contrast these phenomena. Therefore, we follow West and Zimmerman ([1987](#)) for doing gender and West and Zimmerman ([2009](#)) for redoing gender. For the fluid phenomenon of undoing gender, we draw on the ideas of Deutsch ([2007](#)), Risman ([2009](#)), and Hirschauer ([2016](#)). In the early version of their work, West and Zimmerman ([1987](#), 137ff.) assumed an inseparable connection between social interactions and the reproduction of gender as a marker of social distinction. In doing so, they made a pioneering conceptual contribution by moving the gender debate both from an institutional structural level and from an individual level to an interactive level of action (Martin, [2003](#), p. 352; Nentwich & Vogt, [2021](#), p. 7). In the following years, the research community received this study not only strongly but also controversially, criticizing the assumption that it is impossible to engage in social interaction without reproducing gender (Deutsch, [2007](#); Risman, [2009](#)). In response, the authors developed their approach further. While maintaining that social interaction is not possible without gender-related action, they refined their earlier assumptions by adding “redo-

ing gender”: “For us, this is a shift in accountability: Gender is not undone so much as redone” (West & Zimmerman, 2009, p. 118, emphasis in the original). While “doing gender” refers to the unavoidable *reproduction* of gender norms, “redoing gender” means the explicit *breaking through* of these norms with the possibility of redefining them. Building on this conceptual groundwork, we now pay particular attention to the alternative option of gender becoming secondary or irrelevant in social interactions. Like the two previously presented concepts of doing and redoing gender, “undoing gender” recognizes existing gendered practices and problematizes them. In contrast to this, however, supporters of undoing gender also refer to historically reduced gender differences and argue for a differentiated view of contexts and situations in which gender is actually (still) a primary distinguishing feature in social interactions. (Hirschauer, 2016, pp. 118–121; Risman, 2009, pp. 82–84). By “undoing gender,” we mean those social interactions in which gender is not addressed or relevant—in other words, according to (Hirschauer, 2016, p. 119), interactions of “not doing gender at all.” This perspective allows for a dynamic, historically sensitive analysis of multiple masculinities and femininities without negating their existence per se. Critically, Risman (2009, pp. 82–83), for example, emphasizes that feminist research must also admit when gender no longer plays a prominent role in certain situations. This allows societies, but also research, to focus their attention on the still gendered and problematic contexts.

Table 1 summarizes the previous considerations, whereby we see a central dividing line at the point where gender differences are emphasized (doing, redoing gender) or not emphasized (undoing gender).

Methodology

Our research wants to better understand gendered visibility mechanisms in the German tech startup scene. We chose a qualitative social research methodology, particularly suitable in a field with little or contested scientific expertise (Blatter et al., 2018, p. 168). In doing so, our research approach follows the basic idea of grounded theory according to Strauss and Corbin (1990) which allows for combining an open and data-driven approach with the use of a predetermined paradigm system and axial coding (Howard-Payne, 2016; Sharma et al., 2019).

Table 1 Conceptual framework for the visibility analysis of women founders (own illustration)

Concept	Mechanisms
Doing Gender (in slight reference to West & Zimmerman, 1987)	• Reproduction of existing gender stereotypes
Redoing Gender (in slight reference to West & Zimmerman, 2009)	• Modification/alteration of existing gender stereotypes • Production of new gender stereotypes
Undoing Gender (in slight reference to Deutsch, 2007; Risman, 2009; and Hirschauer, 2016)	• Gender differences being insignificant, other criteria taking precedence • Elimination of gender differences and stereotypes

We decided to use intensive interviews with founders as the empirical data base. Following Charmaz (2006) this form of data collection is ideal in the grounded theory methodology due to its openness and at the same time goal-oriented nature. Following grounded theory's imperative of theoretical sampling, we deliberately selected participants based on their potential to inform and refine the emerging theory. For compiling the sample, we used two parallel, complementary methods. Firstly, we recruited interview partners in cooperation with the IAB/ZEW "Gründungspanel" (Startup Panel), a representative sample that contains statistical information on startups and young companies in Germany. Secondly, according to the snowball sampling process, we reached potential startups via our network (Akremi, 2022, p. 413). In line with the IAB/ZEW Startup Panel, we define startups as innovative if they develop product or process innovations, carry out innovation projects or invest in research and development activities (Berger et al., 2019, p. 8). In addition, we are guided by a broader process understanding and included only founders who have founded their company within the previous seven years. In order to explicitly consider different organic and exponential growth philosophies, we distance ourselves from the selection criterion of "significant employee and/or revenue growth" (Bundesverband Deutsche Startups e.V., 2022, p. 6). Instead, the term "economically active startups", as used in the IAB/ZEW Startup Panel (Egeln et al., 2018, p. 1), seems more appropriate to us. This also allows us to consider entrepreneurs for whom "as big as possible" is not a goal in itself, but rather a consequence of success.

On the basis of the data provided by IAB/ZEW and our own snowball research, we compiled a list of women-founded and women-co-founded startups from Germany, structured according to regions and various technological sectors. While the gender-mixed founding teams can now be found in large numbers and were relatively easy to convince to participate, recruiting purely female-founded tech startups was more difficult. We attribute this to an excessive number of requests to this subgroup, which is still underrepresented in terms of numbers but is currently receiving a great deal of political and social attention. The snowball principle and research on relevant technology prizes from various regional startup ecosystems, however, ultimately allowed us to reach the criterion of theoretical saturation with our sample (Saunders et al., 2018), since we no longer generated any relevant new insights based on our pre-developed guideline questions with the last interviews.

Our final sample size is 20 interviews with women tech founders from either female-led ($n=9$) or gender-mixed ($n=11$) startups. The interviews were conducted between August 2023 and April 2024 and lasted between 35 and 110 min, being realized partly in person and via video call. With permission, all the interviews were recorded and transcribed. The interviewees reported on their startup stories, role models, visibility strategies, leadership, financing channels, and the use or non-use of specific formats for women founders. In this way, we did not influence the interviewees with theoretical assumptions and were able to use the concepts of doing gender, redoing gender, and undoing gender as a possible, but not inevitable, categorization in the subsequent coding process. As part of the coding process, we used the software MAXQDA performing qualitative content analysis according to Kuckartz (Kuckartz, 2014; Rädiker & Kuckartz, 2019). After the inductive categorization of gender-dependent and gender-independent visibility, we deliberated the connectivity

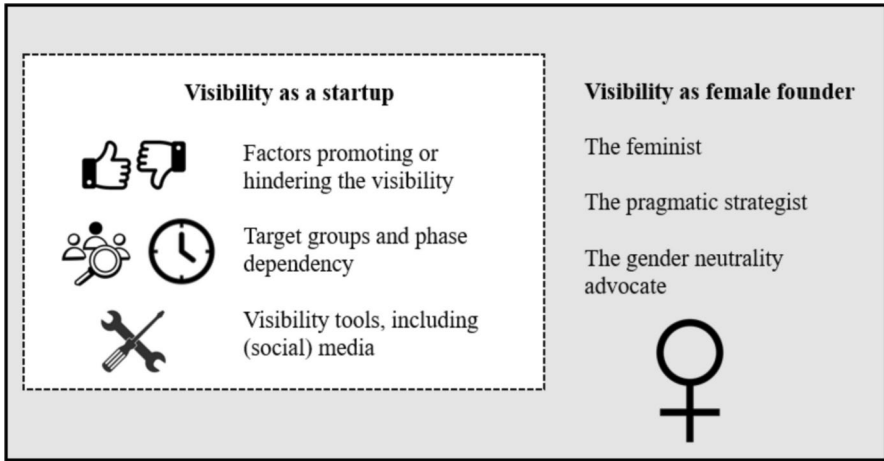


Fig. 1 Women tech founders' elements of visibility (own illustration)

to the concepts of doing, redoing, and undoing gender. Pursuing an empirical-analytical approach and accordingly refraining from immersing ourselves in political, feminist discourses such as Butler's (2004) "undoing gender" or Lorber's (2000) "degendering," we understand the concepts outlined above as a framework. Building on this, we examine the relevance women founders assign to each of them for their self-attributed visibility. We tested and refined our coding framework through pilot coding of a small subset and then applied the developed categories to the entire data set. Throughout the coding process, we coded the interview material independently of one another in a first step. We met regularly to discuss text passages we did not assign in the same way, as well as any emerging issues or anomalies, to reach a consensus (Schreier, 2012).

Where we have worked with direct quotations, we have translated them ourselves from the original language (German) into English. Women founders from all-female teams are abbreviated "FE," while those from mixed-gender teams are abbreviated "MX."

Empirical findings

While the women founders primarily do not understand "visibility as a startup" ([Visibility as a startup — Undoing gender](#)) as gendered at the organizational level, we find different gendered self-images at the individual level ([Visibility as a female founder — Doing, redoing, and undoing gender](#)). The interviewees generally only responded to particularities of their visibility as *women founders* after they were either explicitly asked about it or in the context of describing specific situations in which they perceived their gender as having an impact on their visibility.

Figure 1 provides an overview of how the women founders in our interview sample conceptualize their visibility in a gender-independent and gender-dependent way.

Visibility as a startup — undoing gender

We openly asked the women founders what visibility means to them and what is particularly important to them. The interviewees unanimously followed an undoing-gender approach when answering those questions. As a result, we show the following: first, that tech founders, regardless of their gender, are confronted with fundamental factors favoring or hindering their visibility ([Factors promoting or hindering the visibility of tech startups](#)); second, how the startups' visibility rests on the target group and phase dependency ([Target group and phase dependency of visibility](#)); and third, how startups access the media system and which alternative instruments play a role beyond media visibility ([Media and alternative instruments to achieve visibility](#)).

Factors promoting or hindering the visibility of tech startups

As the main challenge in generating visibility, interviewees described the complexity of tech products, which they had to explain to investors, customers, marketing agencies, and society, each suitable for their logic. This necessity becomes even more difficult since, in the early stages of a startup, there are often no prototypes or models for illustration (Startup 3 FE, [2023c](#), p. 24; Startup 3 MX, [2023c](#), p. 22; Startup 6 MX, [2023f](#), p. 24). Moreover, we often detect the audience's lack of prior knowledge or general skepticism toward new ideas, products, and processes. Thus, the challenge for startups is to create an essential awareness of the contribution and necessity of their product:

"We must rebuild our entire ecosystem from the ground up [...]. We can take pieces of different aspects that we cover, but how we work is absolutely different from the market's model. So we have to open the market properly, which is difficult. But that's a natural problem of disruptive startups [...]. For us, it's not copy-paste." (Startup 2 MX, [2023b](#), p. 27)

Another obstacle is not only that it is challenging to approach traditional mass media because of scarce resources or know-how but also that there is a growing number of professional players on social media whose entire business model is based on visibility, making it more difficult for less specialized actors to achieve relevant social media reach (Startup 3 MX, [2023c](#), p. 19; Startup 4 MX, [2023d](#), p. 32). This challenge is exacerbated in purely technical teams without business knowledge, who often give less priority to marketing (Startup 1 FE, [2023a](#), p. 20). Moreover, new technological or chemical processes present both the opportunity and the challenge of being potentially applicable in a wide range of industries. The startups describe a preconditional classification process in which they sometimes sit on the fence and constantly readjust which sectors are particularly relevant at the moment (Startup 1 FE, [2023a](#), p. 66; Startup 4 FE, [2023d](#), p. 56).

However, the interviewees also named factors that promote visibility, some of which, depending on the business model and complexity of the developed product or process, contradict the points mentioned so far. This already demonstrates the heterogeneity of tech startups per se. As soon as a product is, for instance, more

tangible and closer to everyday life (usually—but not only—in the case of business-to-consumer models), making it visible is much easier (Startup 3 MX, 2023c, 20, 47; Startup 7 MX, 2023g, p. 18; Startup 9 MX, 2023i, p. 32). In principle, startups also consider it helpful to fit in with existing discourses, such as sustainability or artificial intelligence, to legitimize their business idea more strongly (Startup 5 MX, 2023e, p. 24; Startup 8 MX, 2023h, pp. 55–56). At the same time, depending on the “degree of maturity” of the corresponding hype, this also appears to be a danger, for example, in that “sustainable” startups are, in the meantime, under particularly critical observation (Startup 3 MX, 2023c, p. 19).

Target group and phase dependency of visibility

The efforts of tech startups to achieve visibility are embedded in the need to serve different and sometimes conflicting target groups as well as to generate different levels of visibility in various phases.

First and foremost, founders articulate the quest for visibility *within the startup ecosystem itself* to interact with peers and potential investors as well as to obtain feedback and know-how about the startup scene’s infrastructure (Startup 2 FE, 2023b, pp. 28–30; Startup 3 MX, 2023c, pp. 29–31; Startup 6 MX, 2023f, p. 79). Visibility to *investors* is, thereby, almost always crucial. However, deep-tech startups face financing difficulties as their long-term and sometimes uncertain research and development contradict investor logic (Startup 5 MX, 2023e, p. 22). In many cases, the surveyed startups operate in a business-to-business (B2B) market, whereby target group-specific visibility means addressing the decision-makers in the respective company departments. Thereby, industry partnerships with renowned, established companies that signal credibility can facilitate access to these *potential customers* (Startup 6 MX, 2023f, p. 34; Startup 7 MX, 2023g, p. 18). When startups operate in a business-to-consumer (B2C) market, the focus shifts to potential individual customers, with some of the startups surveyed also pursuing an overarching information or awareness-raising approach—for example, on the topics of financial education, health, or sustainability (Startup 3 MX, 2023c, pp. 11–13; Startup 4 FE, 2023d, p. 36). However, it can also be helpful for B2B startups to be visible to a broader public to attract the attention of the targeted companies. This wider public can be unspecific or refer to a specific scientific or specialist community. In both cases, the startups need to position their founders as experts, although it is sometimes difficult to harmonize communication content and style with, for example, the scientific and social media communities (Startup 4 FE, 2023d, p. 30; Startup 7 MX, 2023g, p. 18). Furthermore, some startups target *policymakers* to influence funding opportunities or the regulatory framework for certain products (Startup 5 MX, 2023e, pp. 20–22; Startup 8 MX, 2023h, pp. 22–24). Lastly, given the shortage of skilled workers, visibility to *potential future employees* is essential for startups that depend on rapidly recruiting suitable personnel for their future growth (Startup 2 MX, 2023b, p. 21; Startup 6 FE, 2023f, p. 41; Startup 7 MX, 2023g, p. 14).

In addition to their target group dependency, tech startups share a high degree of phase dependency, meaning that both the importance and opportunities to generate visibility fluctuate depending on the phase the startup is in. These phases, how-

ever, depend on the resources and priorities of the startup, such as the founders' professional backgrounds, business model, existing experiences, and networks. Starting chronologically, the founders often describe their initial visibility strategies, in retrospect, as rather unspecific and broad, thereby mostly locally. Then after preliminary validation and possibly the development of prototypes, they choose more industry-specific formats (Startup 1 FE, 2023a, p. 8; Startup 5 FE, 2023e, p. 30). This classification does not deny the legitimacy of broad formats such as local, non-topic-specific startup competitions but emphasizes that early-stage startups, in particular, can benefit from them. In general, the phase dependency of entrepreneurial visibility is a dynamic up and down, with founders rating certain target group-specific visibility sometimes as more or less critical. Accordingly, we often find logics of "too early" or "too late": for example, without a fully developed product, patent rights, or the appropriate political regulation, it may be too early to approach customers (Startup 4 MX, 2023d, p. 42; Startup 8 MX, 2023h, pp. 18–20; Startup 9 MX, 2023i, 32, 42), or, as already mentioned, it may be too late for more general competitions or accelerators (Startup 5 FE, 2023e, p. 24; Startup 7 MX, 2023g, pp. 22–28). Consequently, startups can also strategically choose invisibility in certain phases, for example, to maintain a know-how advantage over large corporations:

"Of course, we want to use the time now, when we are not so visible, not so big, maybe not yet recognized by these players, that we have a certain lead in development because they have completely different volumes in their development departments." (Startup 3 FE, 2023c, p. 18)

We, therefore, understand entrepreneurial, phase-dependent visibility as a partly strategic choice of the founders, whereby one step follows the other, and not all visibilities are relevant, let alone possible, at all times (Startup 2 MX, 2023b, pp. 46–47; Startup 7 MX, 2023g, p. 14; Startup 9 MX, 2023i, p. 34).

Media and alternative instruments to achieve visibility

Women founders disagree and are often internally divided as to how important they consider public visibility or whether they would be better off focusing their resources on other areas, especially product development (Startup 3 MX, 2023c, p. 37; Startup 4 MX, 2023d, p. 32; Startup 7 MX, 2023g, p. 36). That said in advance, the media work of the surveyed startups is, to varying degrees, conscious and strategic and often follows the principle of trial and error (Startup 2 MX, 2023b, p. 47; Startup 9 MX, 2023i, p. 42). At the same time, classic media coverage often occurs by chance or organically, being mostly fluctuating and dependent on specific events such as the foundation itself, successful financing, or cooperation with well-known companies (Startup 1 FE, 2023a, p. 22; Startup 2 MX, 2023b, p. 47; Startup 3 MX, 2023c, pp. 42–44). Moreover, it is often the media that approach the startups or specific multipliers such as associated research institutions, accelerators, or portfolio investors that help achieve a greater reach via press releases (Startup 10 MX, 2023j, p. 44; Startup 5 MX, 2023e, p. 42; Startup 6 MX, 2023f, p. 54; Startup 8 MX, 2023h, p. 70).

However, the founders' active involvement can promote long-term visibility by keeping a website presence up to date, setting up blogs or newsletters, or becoming active themselves as authors of publications in professional, target group-specific journals (Startup 1 FE, 2023a, p. 22; Startup 10 MX, 2023j, p. 50; Startup 3 MX, 2023c, pp. 39–46; Startup 4 FE, 2023d, pp. 32–34). This results in interactions between mass media coverage and self-published formats as well as between the startup's institutional visibility and its founders' visibility. The founders generate the latter primarily through social media, with LinkedIn playing, by far, the most critical role as it is here that they can publish product- as well as team-related articles, independently of mass media gatekeepers (Startup 3 MX, 2023c, p. 10; Startup 7 MX, 2023g, p. 38). They also use social media to expand their network to become more visible within the startup scene (Startup 8 FE, 2024b, p. 48) and to reach out directly to potential customers (Startup 6 FE, 2023f, p. 85) or investors (Startup 3 MX, 2023c, p. 10). However, not all customers in more conservative industries use LinkedIn yet (Startup 10 MX, 2023j, p. 50). In addition, some founders see the need to post regularly as a challenge that sometimes gets lost in the daily routine of other demands (Startup 8 FE, 2024b, p. 52).

Finally, specific visibility formats are crucial for tech startups. The majority of respondents named trade fairs as an essential format, both in terms of building up networks as a trade fair visitor in the early phase inexpensively and effectively and in terms of acquiring customers as an exhibitor in a later phase (Startup 1 MX, 2023a, p. 68; Startup 4 MX, 2023d, p. 16; Startup 6 MX, 2023f, p. 61). Startup competitions are also crucial for generating visibility, while in the early stages, prize money and initial, general visibility in the startup ecosystem are motivators (Startup 3 MX, 2023c, p. 31; Startup 5 MX, 2023e, p. 26). Later on, participation is often strategically linked to gaining access to relevant customers, accelerators, or investors:

“For us, it was less about the prize money and more about winning the customer. Then in both contests, we had to and were able to prevail against our entire competition.” (Startup 7 MX, 2023g, p. 28)

In summary, many opportunities exist to become visible in the media and beyond. Given numerous competitions, prizes, support programs, and social media work, women founders are consciously weighing up how many resources they can and want to invest here. It is a notable achievement to switch from visibility as an imperative end to target group-specific, phase-dependent visibility and bundle resources here. In practice, our findings on the gender-independent visibility of startups imply a constant reflection on *how* a startup wants to be visible *to which target group* and *when*, always bearing in mind that their role as a startup, particularly in the tech context, is a special one that distinguishes them from other companies.

Visibility as a female founder — doing, redoing, and undoing gender

Our analysis has, so far, shown that women tech founders primarily understand entrepreneurial visibility in a gender-independent way. When asking them specifically about their role as women and searching for subliminal gender-related self-images,

we identify three major, partly overlapping types: the feminist ([The feminist](#)), the pragmatic strategist ([The pragmatic strategist](#)), and the gender neutrality advocate ([The gender neutrality advocate](#)). We first present these three types as ideal types and then discuss identified overlaps and hybrid forms among them ([Overlaps and hybrids](#)).

The feminist

The feminist aims to problematize and reduce gender differences in the startup scene, thus applying an approach of redoing gender. While the external feminist explicitly presents herself as a woman and acts outside her own company, the internal feminist has an impact as a (female) leader within her startup.

The *external ones* (e.g., Startup 1 FE, [2023a](#), pp. 96–98; Startup 4 FE, [2023d](#), p. 84; Startup 5 FE, [2023e](#), p. 56) want to be role models for girls and young women (e.g., students), breaking down gender-related stereotypes and fears and showing that the path into the startup scene is fulfilling:

“It is important to me to convey to young women that everyone has what it takes to learn a technical profession and start a business. [...] To show that women can also be successful in male-dominated areas, so to speak.” (Startup 6 MX, [2023f](#), 46, 84)

In addition, external feminists want to empower women in general (Startup 7 FE, [2024a](#), p. 52) or see themselves as public advocates for topics that are partly associated with women, such as sustainability and impact (Startup 1 FE, [2023a](#), p. 6). They are also advocating for the co-development of a new, more diverse culture with collaborative values and a critical reflection on the extremely performance-oriented work ethic of the startup scene (Startup 4 FE, [2023d](#), p. 24; Startup 7 MX, [2023g](#), p. 76). One interviewee is even campaigning at a political level to improve the framework conditions for women founders in state funding programs (Startup 5 MX, [2023e](#), p. 22). Another founder emphasizes her decision to start as the sole CEO of her startup to set an example for women in leadership:

“I didn’t want another man standing next to me because I didn’t want him to be the only person you ever talked to. I didn’t want the fact that we were both genders to create a hierarchy in people’s minds automatically. [...] Having a clear image of the outside world was important to me. And that we accept the disadvantages that might come with it, also to send a signal [...].” (Startup 10 MX, [2023j](#), p. 22)

We also regard women founders who are intrinsically involved in women’s networks as external feminists; they emphasize a culture of togetherness and mutual support (Startup 4 FE, [2023d](#), pp. 113–115; Startup 4 MX, [2023d](#), p. 66; Startup 7 FE, [2024a](#), p. 80) while, at the same time, distancing themselves from the “mare’s bite” sometimes being attributed to women (Startup 3 MX, [2023c](#), p. 103). Even if women’s

networks are, as a protected space, only partially public, they still take place outside the startup as a company; thus, we consider them external.

The *internal feminist* aims to make an impact by managing the company in a certain way and setting rules that explicitly enable gender-equal or women-supporting access to the startup world. Internal feminists can advocate for themselves as founders (1), for cofounders (2), or for the whole team, including employees (3). As far as we can draw such conclusions from our small sample, internal feminism seems more common among more experienced women founders, as serial founders or biographically shaped by previous work experience and as mothers with care responsibilities.

Representing one's interests (1) is reflected, for example, in a conscious approach to legal and internal regulations within the founding team—e.g., regarding the distribution of company shares and vesting clauses:

“To be honest, I wouldn't have done it if I wasn't the majority owner and leader of the team. Because from my previous experiences, I was more collaborative than I should have been, with the result that I did all the work but didn't get the assignments [laughs].” (Startup 2 MX, 2023b, p. 11; see also Startup 5 MX, 2023e, p. 106)

Moreover, an all-female founding team reported a constant, reflective exchange to avoid stereotypical female “belittling” and to strengthen self-confidence. We also interpret this form of mutual empowerment as internal feminism (Startup 4 FE, 2023d, p. 109). In addition, one of the founders of this startup has care responsibilities, and the founders agreed on the condition of an appropriate salary right from the start. If this funding were not secured, the startup would cease its work, stating, “We do not exploit ourselves” (Startup 4 FE, 2023d, p. 117).

Internal feminism as advocating for younger cofounders (2) is, in our sample, evident in one large founding team. In this case, two more experienced women founders have explicitly excluded vesting rules in their founding agreement, according to which founders would have to return their shares in the event of parental leave or care leave (Startup 8 MX, 2023h, pp. 132–134). Finally, we find empirical indications for internal feminism toward the entire team (3). This is reflected, for example, in provisions for the needs of people with children, in a sensitive, coaching-supported balancing of the respective strengths and weaknesses (Startup 2 MX, 2023b, p. 63; Startup 8 MX, 2023h, pp. 132–134). According to the interviewees, these factors likely make their startups more attractive to potential (female) employees (Startup 4 FE, 2023d, p. 121; Startup 7 MX, 2023g, p. 48).

Overall, redoing gender in the sense of the feminist type means questioning the equation “think entrepreneurial—think male,” with regard to both redefining prevailing thought patterns and breaking with established structural norms.

The pragmatic strategist

The second gender-related visibility type is the pragmatic strategist. She is less motivated by questioning the reproduction of gender norms but, for strategic reasons, uses the advantages and offers available to women founders (e.g., special VCs, funding

programs, visibility options in the media or at events). In short, the pragmatic strategist is visible as a woman and is thus “doing gender” because it benefits her.

Interviewees report, for instance, using the fact that they are one of a few (or the only) women in a particular setting to stand out more to customers or investors and be remembered (Startup 10 MX, 2023j, p. 20; Startup 11 MX, 2023k, p. 52; Startup 4 MX, 2023d, p. 52) or that being an all-female tech team means better placement in the media (Startup 2 FE, 2023b, p. 34). Women founders also put themselves on LinkedIn with a personal profile to create visibility for their startup, although they do not always like the visibility associated with their person:

“LinkedIn, for example, really annoys me. [laughs] It’s all so fake. For me, personally, I don’t feel the need to build that. But it makes strategic sense for me as the founder of [STARTUP] to be visible to the outside world.” (Startup 11 MX, 2023k, p. 52)

Moreover, stricter environmental, social, and governance (ESG) requirements help with financing since investors are increasingly looking for founding teams with women: “That’s why we’re also hoping that an investor might say, ‘Good, I need another team with a woman in it for my portfolio’” (Startup 5 MX, 2023e, p. 38). Mixed-gender teams take a slightly different perspective in consciously deciding to “send forward” a female or male founding member depending on the context and interlocutor (Startup 2 MX, 2023b, p. 87; Startup 7 MX, 2023g, p. 10). Finally, we also see it as a strategic-pragmatic approach when women use so-called female formats primarily for a specific purpose—e.g., for media-effective staging or to make a broader network accessible: “And personally, I’m just very grateful for all the things. I take every ladder I get” (Startup 9 MX, 2023i, p. 68; see also Startup 3 MX, 2023c, p. 96).

The pragmatic strategist adds a new dimension to the traditional notion of doing gender in the sense of an unavoidable reproduction of gender norms by playing with conventional gender stereotypes and actively using them to her advantage.

The gender neutrality advocate

The gender neutrality advocate differs from the feminist and the pragmatic strategist in that she denies gender differences in principle and sees equal rights and opportunities regardless of her gender. She is critical of specific offers for women and emphasizes the ongoing social change toward a gender-neutral society, hence acting in the sense of undoing gender.

Gender neutrality advocates believe that gender no longer plays a role and “that many have also slowly come to understand that it no longer works without women in the economy” (Startup 4 MX, 2023d, p. 52). Accordingly, these women focus on their professional skills and perceive them as recognized by their environment (Startup 1 FE, 2023a, p. 4; Startup 6 MX, 2023f, p. 100; Startup 8 MX, 2023h, pp. 91–92), consequently not seeing any need for exceptional opportunities for women founders (Startup 1 FE, 2023a, p. 84). They, therefore, question the impact of specific formats for women and tend to see them as meaningless and not very practical:

“That’s really not important for us right now, the fact that I’m a woman. I’m also not sure whether it helps. There are currently a lot of female funds and female founder events, and there’s also a lot of hot air. Sorry for that. In the end, there’s a lot of self-marketing but not much that actually helps women founders get money and get ahead.” (Startup 2 MX, 2023b, p. 21)

Consequently, these women do not see particular challenges in founding a startup as gender-specific but rather as content-related (e.g., solo founders with complex financing or as a newcomer in a new environment) (Startup 5 FE, 2023e, p. 77; Startup 9 MX, 2023i, p. 34). In some cases, gender neutrality advocates also communicate that intersectional diversity is more important than the narrow focus on the gender category (Startup 2 MX, 2023b, p. 21), stating the need for a simply harmonious, functioning, and complementary team (Startup 2 FE, 2023b, p. 40). In summary, gender neutrality advocates reject being perceived as “women founders” but wish to be perceived for what they do as entrepreneurs (Startup 4 MX, 2023d, p. 42):

“So at some point, I positioned myself very clearly, saying, ‘I don’t call myself a female founder. If I do that, all male founders must call themselves male founders.’ I’m fine with that. But other than that, I see no reason to create a subsection of success.” (Startup 9 FE, 2024c, p. 16; see also Startup 4 MX, 2023d)

Overlaps and hybrids

The types described above are ideal in our sample, but they do not exist in their pure form. Instead, women founders might transition between these types or embody multiple approaches in different contexts. Hence, these types can rather be understood as self-perceptions and positionings in certain situations, meaning we find mixed forms and sometimes even internal, contradictory conflicts among the individual founders. In the following section we provide an overview on how these categories overlap or shift in practice.

On the whole, the women act according to the different ideal types, partly theme-specific and partly situation-specific. For instance, a feminist attitude as a role model for girls and women can be combined with an emphatically gender-neutral attitude as a manager in one's own company. Similarly, a female founder in a women's network, which is about mutual encouragement and exchange in a protected space, may appear feminist, but in a pitch situation refrain from pointing out inappropriate questions and instead reinterpret them pragmatically and strategically in her favour. These intersections vary greatly from person to person, but we find some common patterns of reasoning.

First, there are overlaps and internal contradictions along the link between gender neutrality and the other identified types. An overlap between gender-neutral and pragmatic-strategic positioning exists, for example, when women founders emphasize that, although they use the advantages of their “exotic” status, they would have been successful without it (Startup 2 FE, 2023b, p. 64; Startup 8 FE, 2024b, p. 119; Startup 8 MX, 2023h, 116) or when women founders point out that, although there are still some prejudices and hurdles, they have no problem dealing with them (Startup 4

MX, 2023d, 54–58; Startup 8 MX, 2023h, p. 122). The transition between the gender-neutral and the pragmatic-strategic types is often easy for women founders and does not involve major (internal) conflicts.

A gender-neutral self-image combined with a feminist positioning, however, results, for example, from the awareness that women role models are fundamentally crucial for the startup scene, though stressing simultaneously the desire not to over-emphasize their role:

“We want to serve as a role model to generate more attention for the topic, but we don’t want to over-politicize it. Because, of course, we are a female team, but above all, we have technical expertise and want to be seen for that.” (Startup 3 FE, 2023c, p. 78; see also Startup 6 MX, 2023f, p. 46; Startup 9 FE, 2024c, p. 44)

Similarly, women founders point out that support among women is vital to them while, at the same time, speaking out against women-only networks (Startup 2 FE, 2023b, p. 68; Startup 4 MX, 2023d, p. 82; Startup 9 MX, 2023i, pp. 54–64). Likewise, internal feminists who promote gender equality in their company emphasize that a more open corporate culture benefits everyone (Startup 2 MX, 2023b, 63, 79; Startup 3 MX, 2023c, p. 65; Startup 4 FE, 2023d, p. 121; Startup 7 MX, 2023g, p. 64; Startup 8 MX, 2023h, p. 32). Hence, we regard this approach not (only) as internal feminism but rather from a more general (gender-neutral) leadership perspective. The overlap between feminist and gender-neutral types is based on the belief that gender-neutrality is the ultimate goal, but that women founders are also dealing with imperfection in real life. This overlap therefore holds a higher potential for internal conflict, as the intended (gender-neutral) positioning does not seem possible or expedient in all situations. The vision of a gender-neutral startup ecosystem clashes with the current status quo. Many women founders would like to advocate for a gender-neutral position but do not (yet) see this as feasible. They acknowledge positive changes over time but point to persistent masculine structures, continuing to ensure that women are perceived and valued differently. Thus, being visible as a woman is a strategy to counter these inequalities (Startup 1 FE, 2023a, p. 96; Startup 1 MX, 2023a, p. 143; Startup 3 MX, 2023c, p. 99; Startup 7 MX, 2023g, p. 70; Startup 8 FE, 2024b, pp. 73–75; Startup 9 FE, 2024c, p. 46). These interviewees would like to see no more special female formats but rather women founders being visible based on their expertise and independent of their gender. They regret their exotic status and, at the same time, see the need to draw attention to structural inequalities or to act as role models and thus point to a “natural mix” (Startup 7 MX, 2023g, p. 70) of genders in the long term:

“We are just founders, and we want to do something and achieve something. I understand that—until we get there—we women may need to make ourselves more visible to show others it is possible. We can be successful. We can build factories and make tons of products. But eventually, I hope that won’t be an issue.” (Startup 1 FE, 2023a, p. 98)

With regard to overlappings between the strategic-pragmatic and feminist perspectives, there is a connection between women founders who view the benefits of greater attention as justified compensation for other structural inequalities—for example, the fact that the investor scene is very male-dominated, which can represent a financing disadvantage for women (Startup 11 MX, 2023k, p. 170; Startup 4 FE, 2023d, p. 115; Startup 5 MX, 2023e, p. 22; Startup 6 MX, 2023f, p. 46; Startup 8 MX, 2023h, pp. 150–152):

“Whenever you get advantages from it, you can use them with a clear conscience because there are a lot of disadvantages that you have to deal with all the time anyway, that you can’t push away. So I think it’s fair that there are more and more advantages now. I don’t feel bad about it or anything. I think that all women are entitled to them and that it’s important that they exist.” (Startup 10 MX, 2023j, p. 76)

Women who overlap in this perspective want to free themselves from the role of victim and take all the necessary steps to create a real gender balance. On the other hand, some fear that such a position could boomerang. This internal conflict is particularly evident when they experience hypervisibility—i.e., when their role as a woman goes along with undesirable external attributions that contradict their self-perception as a founder. These attributions belong to the prevailing stereotype “think entrepreneurial—think male,” indicating traditional female stereotypes and a lack of presumed competence toward women founders, for example, when the founder’s appearance is discussed instead of her expertise (Startup 9 FE, 2024c, p. 22). Against this backdrop, pragmatic strategists weigh up whether such offers are more likely to benefit or harm them and reflect on possible disadvantages:

“Women founders are strongly encouraged because they are female. Of course, we’re happy to accept that because we’d be stupid not to. But on the other hand [...], there have been one or two startup competitions—it’s not often, I’d like to say that upfront—but jokingly like this: ‘Yes, because you have the women’s bonus card.’” (Startup 3 FE, 2023c, p. 76 see also Startup 6 FE, 2023f, pp. 116–119; Startup 9 FE, 2024c, p. 28)

Overall, our empirical material with women tech founders enabled us to identify the three ideal types: “feminists,” “pragmatic strategists,” and “gender neutrality advocates.” At the same time, these types seldom exist in their pure forms but occur in varying proportions within a female founder. We understand this phenomenon as a reaction to the historically shrunken, institutional, and interactional gender differences without achieving a gender-neutral society. Speaking of doing, redoing, and undoing gender, our interviewees regard undoing gender as desirable but hindered by mental and structural obstacles that come with both strategies of using and redefining gender norms—i.e., doing and redoing gender.

Discussion

Using 20 case studies of German tech startups (co)founded by women, our work contributes to understanding “visibility” in an entrepreneurial, gendered context. We show that women founders, at the organizational level, often see themselves as founders regardless of gender ([Visibility as a startup — Undoing gender](#)). Still, different, overlapping gender-specific types of visibility exist at the individual level ([Visibility as a female founder — Doing, redoing, and undoing gender](#)).

Our starting point was our curiosity as to whether women founders themselves reproduce gender stereotypes (doing gender), realign them (redoing gender), or completely dismantle them (undoing gender). We find an irritating but hardly avoidable coexistence of reproduced and realigned gender stereotypes with, at the same time, many forms of gender-independent entrepreneurial visibility. While the passages on organizational visibility, which fill large parts of the interviews, are evidently “undoing gender,” the dividing lines within the gender-specific visibility types are less clear. We tend to classify feminist and pragmatic strategist positionings, in their pure forms, as belonging to a “redoing gender” or “doing gender” approach (West & Zimmerman, 1987, 2009), according to which gender differences are emphasized or maintained through, for example, the use of female formats or the problematization of male–female dualisms. However, internal feminist approaches, which often “quietly” change structures in their company, as well as advocating gender neutrality correspond to an “undoing gender” perspective of Deutsch (2007), Risman (2009), or Hirschauer (2016).

We do not consider any of the three approaches superior but see different opportunities and risks in pursuing each. First, “doing gender,” as a strategic way of playing with gender differences, has the chance to challenge and decrease existing inequalities but, at the same time, reproduces gender stereotypes. Second, “redoing gender,” as a feminist approach, explicitly mentions and counteracts potential traps of “doing gender,” thereby trying to overcome existing gender stereotypes. Nevertheless, it remains within the binary gender logic and, thereby, tends to create new gender stereotypes. Third, “undoing gender” has, from a postfeminist perspective, the potential to make gender stereotypes and differences irrelevant and to focus on other criteria, such as entrepreneurial activities. At the same time, in a non-postfeminist society, we see in “undoing gender” the risk of overlooking existing inequalities and thus, paradoxically, standing in the way of the process toward a more gender-equal society.

Limitations and future research

The primary limitation of this study is the narrow qualitative sample size, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. While the in-depth insights provided by qualitative methods are valuable, the perspectives captured may not fully represent the diversity and complexity within this demographic in Germany. Future research with larger samples could build on these findings and, for example, test them on a quantitative basis. Moreover, although the German context allows us a deep insight into the tech startup scene of a country, the transfer to other cultural contexts requires

the consideration of corresponding political, economic, and social context factors. It should finally be noted that our study did not differentiate between whether the founders ran their business alone or as part of a team (the latter being inevitably the case in mixed teams). In the context of our study, we were not able to identify any differences with respect to the ideal types identified. However, it is quite possible that differences would be found if the questions were asked differently.

Our research is compatible with at least three current debates in the literature on women entrepreneurship. First, *studies on entrepreneurial identity and specific identity work* ask which strategies women founders use to gain legitimacy in an (often male-dominated) environment (Lewis, 2015; Lewis et al., 2022). More specifically, Elliott and Orser (2018) develop the concept of a feminist entrepreneurial identity, whereas Byrne et al. (2019) examine postfeminist identity work. Depending on the strategy (e.g., adaptation or counteracting), doing, redoing, or undoing gender approaches can be incorporated into the women founders' identity work. In addition, we see links to the *gender neutrality approach*, as we have also named one of our inductive visibility types ("gender neutrality advocate"). While P. Lewis already referred to this specific identity work of women founders in 2006, Loew (2023) and Nentwich et al. (2023) make current contributions, analyzing seemingly gender-neutral practices in work contexts. Finally, our work can add value to *discourses of hypervisibility*, according to which women are made visible primarily based on their gender, not, for example, based on their entrepreneurial achievements (Buchanan & Settles, 2019; Johansson et al., 2021; Settles et al., 2019). Here, we see an interesting conceptual synergy between the external perception, when gender is made an issue by others ("to be made a woman"), and the internal perception of some women founders stating that gender does not play a role at all ("undoing gender").

Conclusion

Empirically, while it is more than demanding to grasp something "nonexistent," such as undoing gender (Nentwich & Vogt, 2021, 7ff.), we have accepted this challenge. By further developing the theory on doing, redoing, and undoing gender through inductive categorisation, we have identified in-group differences in the group of women tech founders while, at the same time, contributing to the specifics of tech startups in general as our gender-independent visibility ([Visibility as a startup — Undoing gender](#)) can serve as a starting point for conceptualizing entrepreneurial visibility.

In practice, we provide valuable information on how to gear women-specific networks, accelerators, and the like toward the actual needs of women founders. Quite a few interviewees were critical of the existing formats, for instance, as being superficial or lacking in content. They opted, instead, for concrete support with financing or legal issues. Practice partners should take these suggestions into account when designing corresponding formats. Furthermore, we think that women-only formats always contain a "doing gender" component, according to which gender stereotypes—although addressed and problematized—are reproduced. Moreover, we believe that mixed-gender startups, in particular, have great potential to spread a new, partly gendered "female" corporate culture. In the internal feminism approach, our

interviewees already stressed that a healthy work ethic and reflective processes benefit everyone in the team. Younger male *and* female founders seem to attach importance to these factors (Startup 3 MX, 2023c, p. 65; Startup 7 MX, 2023g, p. 64), so we suggest examining possible generational effects of new leadership approaches in more detail. The dynamic startup structure “built from nothing” can undoubtedly carry out leadership experiments more quickly and flexibly than would be the case in large companies.

As a society, we are caught between problematizing gender differences where they still exist and recognizing the gender equality already achieved in certain situations (Ahl, 2004). However, it seems that many women tech founders are currently much more “doing tech” than “doing gender,” whereby the external attribution sometimes remains with the latter.

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