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Sustainable entrepreneurship, identity and context: A comparison of Norway and South Africa

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Background: To reach a more sustainable future, sustainable entrepreneurship is proposed to play a critical role. To understand why sustainable entrepreneurs engage in a sustainable venture process, we need to understand the individual entrepreneur but also the context in which they operate.

Aim: This research aims to explore what role context plays in forming sustainable entrepreneurs through their identity, by comparing Norwegian and South African sustainable entrepreneurs.

Setting: The study compares sustainable entrepreneurs from Western Norway, Norway, and Stellenbosch, South Africa.

Methods: A qualitative method, following a life story approach, was adopted. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the Norwegian and South African sustainable entrepreneurs, using a combination of face-to-face and online interviews. A three-stage approach was used to analyse the data; firstly individual, secondly by country context, and lastly by comparing cross-country.

Results: The findings revealed that the context where the sustainable entrepreneurs operate greatly influences their identity and how they view entrepreneurship, sustainability, and their missions and goals with their ventures.

Conclusion: Sustainable entrepreneurs' identity is profoundly impacted in the context they live, and different contexts influence their perception and action on sustainability and venture creation, where social aspects of sustainability may be more prominent in an emerging economy and environmental aspects in an advanced economy.

Contribution: The study contributes to the literature by enhancing our understanding of the relationship between context and sustainable entrepreneurship from advanced and emerging economies. The findings provide practical guidance to educators and policy makers on how sustainable entrepreneurship can be incentivised.

Keywords: sustainable entrepreneurship; identity; context; Norway; South Africa; life story approach.

Introduction

Increased global demand for sustainable-driven businesses and organisations has fuelled the growth of sustainability-related entrepreneurship research (Muñoz & Cohen 2018). Sustainable entrepreneurs, make profound choices about their business activities and the associated social, environmental, and economic implications and impacts (Muñoz 2018). This paper focuses on the interplay between individual and contextual factors in sustainable entrepreneurship, such as the entrepreneur's identity, social environment and background. The entrepreneurship literature has long argued that the context in which entrepreneurship occurs is crucial to understanding when, how and why it occurs and who becomes involved (Welter 2011; Welter & Baker 2021).

However, we find sparse studies demonstrating the interplay of individual and context-level factors in the sustainable entrepreneurship literature (Argade, Salignac & Barkemeyer 2021; Jones et al. 2019). Nevertheless, it is assumed that both individual and contextual factors affect sustainable business creation and the entrepreneurial process (Jones et al. 2019; Musona et al. 2021). By exploring the phenomenon of sustainable entrepreneurship in more varied contexts, scholars may increase their understanding of the phenomenon's unique aspects in light of existing theories and the contexts of different countries and places (Perez Nuñez & Musteen 2020).

Therefore, in this study, we investigate what role context plays in forming sustainable entrepreneurs through their identity by comparing Norwegian and South African sustainable entrepreneurs. Furthermore, we examine how sustainable entrepreneurs identify and relate to the concept of sustainability and how context influences the entrepreneurial process and the sustainability agenda of sustainable entrepreneurs. The research uses a life story approach (Asplund & Pérez Prieto 2019) to explore and compare sustainable entrepreneurs in the two countries. Sustainable entrepreneurship in both Norway and South Africa may give new insights into how sustainable entrepreneurship is materialised and interpreted, as these two countries are less represented in existing research on sustainable entrepreneurship. We argue that comparative research is highly relevant to grasp contextualised phenomena (Mills, Van de Bunt & De Bruijn 2006). Comparative research inherently searches for variance which highlights more context and difference to understand specificities and would bring to light unique aspects of phenomena (sustainable entrepreneurship) that would be almost impossible to discover otherwise. Our findings show that context may significantly impact how sustainable entrepreneurs identify themselves and how they choose to engage in sustainable entrepreneurship. Sustainable entrepreneurs in advanced economies may focus more on environmental areas, while sustainable entrepreneurs in emerging economies have an underlying motivation for engaging in social areas. Our research contributes to the literature on sustainable entrepreneurship by enhancing our understanding of how the relationship between identity and context influences sustainable entrepreneurship and how entrepreneurs may engage in sustainable venturing.

The paper is organised as follows: Section 2 outlines the theory. Section 3 outlines the research context and methods used in this study. Section 4 presents and discusses the empirical findings. In the end, limitations of the study are outlined, as well as some theoretical and practical implications of the study.

Theory

Sustainable entrepreneurship and entrepreneurial behaviour

Increased global demand for sustainable-driven businesses and organisations has fuelled the growth of sustainability-related entrepreneurship research (Muñoz & Cohen 2018). Entrepreneurship is regarded as one solution to current and future societal problems (Landström 2020), and sustainable entrepreneurs are seen as 'agents of change, who are committed to seeking a balance between the economic viability, social welfare, and environmental protection' (Terán-Yépez et al. 2020:3).

The sustainable entrepreneur engage in entrepreneurship to serve both self-interest and collective interests (Hoogendoorn, Van der Zwan & Thurik 2017) by introducing environmentally and socially friendly innovations to stakeholders and communities (Dean & McMullen 2007). Furthermore,

stakeholders expect sustainable entrepreneurs to focus on long-term goals, including environmental and social value creation, not just short-term profit (Hockerts & Wüstenhagen 2010). This adds depth and complexity to the entrepreneurship concept, as it opens new avenues and intricacies to what entrepreneurship means, and what goals and achievements entrepreneurs seek.

Sustainable entrepreneurs seek value creation differently than conventional entrepreneurs (Musona et al. 2021). Where entrepreneurs have traditionally focused on economic value creation, sustainable entrepreneurship considers economic value creation a means to an end, rather than the end itself (Cohen & Winn 2007; Dean & McMullen 2007). Schlange (2006) proposes that sustainable entrepreneurs are driven by intentions or willingness to combine and balance their desire to make money with their desire to change the world. Schaltegger and Wagner (2011) continue this discussion by seeing sustainable entrepreneurs combine successful business start-ups with the desire to solve societal and environmental problems. However, most of these studies are conducted in advanced economies and a Western context (US, UK, Canada, Germany and the Netherlands) (Argade et al. 2021; Mellett, Kelliher & Harrington 2018), and are therefore less valid to accurately grasp the nuances and complexities of an emerging economy. Research on sustainable entrepreneurship in South Africa is nascent, but we see an increased interest in sustainable entrepreneurship as a mechanism for addressing complex problems (Kanayo, Agholor & Olamide 2021), such as eradicating poverty, reducing inequality, and creating an environmentally sustainable economy (South African Government 2013). Small and medium enterperises (SMEs) have been proposed as an important catalyst for economic growth (Fredrika & Lillah 2017), and research on both social and green entrepreneurship has explored the different ways they impact South Africa.

Norway is an advanced, small, internationally oriented economy with a well-functioning welfare state. We find less research on sustainable entrepreneurs in the Norwegian context. However, we find some research on related concepts, such as social entrepreneurship (Ingstad & Loga 2016) and green transition (Kyllingstad & Rypestøl 2019).

Entrepreneurship research has demonstrated a strong connection between entrepreneurial identity and its influence on entrepreneurial behaviour (Donnellon, Ollila & Williams Middleton 2014; Fauchart & Gruber 2011). In order to understand sustainable entrepreneurship, entrepreneurial identity is considered a key concept (Henry, Hoogenstrijd & Kirchherr 2022). Entrepreneurs' identities and the implications they have on their ventures' missions and goals have been found to be particularly important for perseverance in challenging business environments (such as sustainable venturing) (Murnieks, Mosakowski & Cardon 2014; York, O'Neil & Sarasvathy 2016). By understanding

how individuals' identity may influence their drive to start a sustainable venture, we can better understand why someone decides to become a sustainable entrepreneur.

Sustainable entrepreneurial identity

Entrepreneurship research considers identity as a dynamic construct with a wide range of conceptual meanings and theoretical roles (Leitch & Harrison 2016). Research in psychology defines identity as a cognitive construct of the self that answers the questions of 'who am I' (Korte 2007), and as an expression of self. Furthermore, identity influences how individuals define and locate themselves within the individual, relational and organisational contexts (Newbery et al. 2018). Identity is a primary source of motivation for human behaviour, and researchers suggest that identity plays an essential role in shaping behaviour and motivating action (York et al. 2016). Entrepreneurs' entrepreneurial behaviour is infused with meaning due to individual identity (Leitch & Harrison 2016). This view correlates well with the concept of personal identity, where identity is defined as the values and beliefs that provide meaning for the individual (Burke & Stets 2009; Gregori, Holzmann & Wdowiak 2021). A personal identity is assumed to start its development during an individual's upbringing and education, and is tethered to social, historical, and cultural impact throughout an individual's life (Drummond 2021).

In entrepreneurship research, entrepreneurial identity is a research stream rooted in other disciplinary traditions (Leitch & Harrison 2016), such as psychology and social anthropology. As such, entrepreneurial identity has been described as a 'multi-dimensional phenomenon' (Mikko Vesala, Peura & McElwee 2007:49), 'the set of behavioural expectations associated with the business owner role' (Shepherd & Haynie 2009:1251), and lastly, Mmbaga et al. (2020:3) propose that identity influences the entrepreneur's thoughts and actions throughout the entrepreneurial journey.

As such, entrepreneurial identity can be seen as different values and meanings entrepreneurs attach to themselves when operating in an entrepreneurial setting. It is dynamic and fluid, shaped by various life episodes and their patterns (Lindgren & Wåhlin 2001). Additionally, it does not comprise an univocal and unchanging self, but multiple sub-identities, which profoundly impact what the entrepreneur aims to achieve and what they think and feel (Leitch & Harrison 2016; Van Knippenberg et al. 2004).

Furthermore, it is suggested that the social identities of the entrepreneur also shape the entrepreneurial venture the entrepreneur chooses to engage in (Cesinger, Vallaster & Müller 2021; Gruber & MacMillan 2017). Identity is developed through life experiences, participation in different social groups, and the context's cultural and historical background. We assume contextual variables will influence the entrepreneurial identity of sustainable entrepreneurs. Sustainable entrepreneurship does not happen in a vacuum, but in interaction between internal and external driving

forces within and around the entrepreneur, such as personal goals, and societal expectations and needs. If we are to understand how these forces interact, we also need to approach sustainable entrepreneurship from an external perspective by understanding the contextual influence on sustainable entrepreneurs.

Contextual influence on sustainable entrepreneurship practices

To increase our understanding of entrepreneurship, we need to consider the context of its occurrence, its causes, and its participants (Welter & Baker 2021). Various literatures have called for a stronger emphasis on the uniqueness of entrepreneurship practices, and how such unique practices unfold in various contextual settings (Bjørnskov & Foss 2013; Welter, Baker & Wirsching 2018). One of these perspectives builds on insight from relational economic geography (Bathelt & Glücker 2003), and argues that economic practice, like entrepreneurship, is not a practice that can be understood in isolation but grows out of complex socially intertwined systems consisting of different actors. It is argued that the success or failure of economic practices, like entrepreneurship, cannot be explained with reference to the internal capabilities or characteristics of individual entrepreneurs alone, as some parts of the traditional entrepreneurship research literature have done (Zahra & Wright 2011). Economic actors, like entrepreneurs, should not be treated as lone individuals operating outside their surroundings. Instead, they operate in a *social system*, and their performance should be explained in relation to other actors, firms, and organisations in their network or 'system' (Bathelt & Glücker 2003). Economic action is *embedded* in social and economic relations structures and thus conceptualised as a context-sensitive behaviour (Granovetter 1985; Hess 2004). These relational systems are marked by a particular form of knowledge production and socio-institutional factors (such as cultural forms or territorial aspects) that develop over time and constrain and enable actors' agency.

A contextual-sensitive approach to entrepreneurship thus acknowledges that all entrepreneurial practices are moored or anchored in various social relation systems marked with a particular institutional set-up that guides practice. This can be places, organisations, industry clusters, culture, or the wider society, but in general, systems with a unique meaning system are differentiated from other systems (Welter et al. 2018). Context is as such an 'important contributor to entrepreneurial identity, as it provides the social cues that influence the individual's sense of belonging and/or differentiation from their social groups' (Donnellon et al. 2014:496). Entrepreneurs are embedded in social relations, and the 'content' of such relations are sources of knowledge, identity, norms and routines that provide actors with possibilities and restrictions. Knowledge production and the institutionalisation of such knowledge within social relations are of key importance to this process. Furthermore, a relational perspective emphasises the enduring character of these structures. Linked to an institutional perspective, socio-institutional contexts may impact interaction and practice,

which in turn structure or 'institutionalise' certain interaction patterns (e.g., Berger & Luckmann 1991). As a result, particular systems of interaction that develop are stable and enduring to a certain degree.

Based on this outline, we have created a theoretical framework; see Figure 1. The framework is inspired and adapted from Yitshaki and Kropp's (2016) work on identity. Our theoretical framework illustrates the relationship between the three concepts of identity, context, and sustainable entrepreneurship: Identity is formed within the individual, moored to the context in which they live and operate. The entrepreneurial identity is born from the person's interests and goals. The entrepreneurial identity shapes the venture, tied to their personal interests and the needs and expectations of the context surrounding them, leading to sustainable entrepreneurship and behaviour.

Research methods and design
Life Story approach to understanding the becoming of sustainable entrepreneurs

This paper adopts the life story approach to understand how entrepreneurs make sense of and account for the experiences and events that happen to them during their lifetimes. The life story approach 'is a narrative approach that analyses the way respondents express their self-identity through references they make to their actions in the past, present and future' (Yitshaki & Kropp 2016:211). By exploring entrepreneurial stories, we can better understand entrepreneurial identity and behaviour (Gartner 2010). A life story approach emphasises that stories emerge in contexts and discourses that are specific to a particular cultural or social setting (Goodson 2013).

As a result, the stories provided by entrepreneurs offer comprehensive information regarding how they form
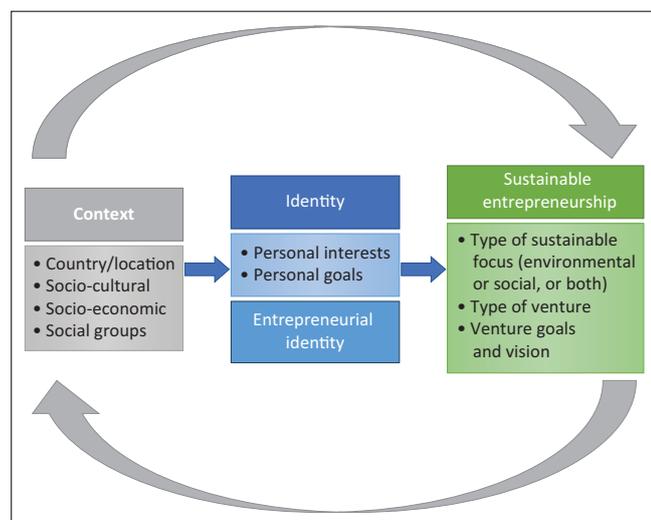
Source: Inspired and adapted from Yitshaki, R. & Kropp, F., 2016, 'Entrepreneurial passions and identities in different contexts: A comparison between high-tech and social entrepreneurs', *Entrepreneurship and Regional Development* 28(3–4), 206–233. https://doi.org/10.1080/08985626.2016.1155743

FIGURE 1: The relationship between context, identity and sustainable entrepreneurship.

interpretations from the past and present, and how they weave together events, thoughts and emotions, allowing how entrepreneurs evolve to be examined (Rae 2005). As part of the stories, respondents must integrate their experiences in a logical and authentic manner that can reflect their entrepreneurial identities (Navis & Glynn 2011).

In order to understand the implicit dimensions of respondents' stories, it is important to give weight to their inferences and interpretations of meanings (Lieblich, Zilber & Tuval-Mashiach 1998). A story is thus seen as a socially situated action in which the respondent constructs borders, positions themself in relation to others, and makes statements about different phenomena and themselves (Asplund & Pérez Prieto 2020). As a result, storytelling becomes both a process of meaning-making and a performative act that allows the respondents to understand both themselves and their environment (Asplund & Pérez Prieto 2019; Mishler 2009). Hence, the life story approach represents 'narrative truth' and how people define themselves guided by specific momentary influences rather than scientific accuracy (Jones, Latham & Betta 2008, Yitshaki & Kropp 2016).

Sampling strategy and interviewing process

A purposeful sampling strategy is used, where the logic of the sampling lies in the selection of information-rich cases (Suri 2011). We selected ten sustainable entrepreneurs from Norway and South Africa, five in each country. The following criteria were used to ensure sufficient homogeneity across samples in the two countries, allowing for comparison: (1) entrepreneurs in knowledge-intensive or technology-based firms, (2) opportunity entrepreneurs, (3) clear sustainability focused venture profile. We also searched for a mix of novice and serial entrepreneurs to increase variation, defined in line with Carbonara, Tran and Santarelli (2020): novice entrepreneurs as first-time entrepreneurs, and their current business was their only start-up; serial entrepreneurs have run several businesses sequentially, and the current venture was a sustainable start-up. To find suitable sustainable entrepreneurship ventures, we conducted a broad search through relevant websites, such as tech incubators, technology clusters, Tech Transfer Offices and Investor Funds in both countries. We also relied on professional networks affiliated with Western Norway University of Applied Sciences (HVL) in Bergen, Norway and Stellenbosch University (SU), in South Africa to identify proper sustainable ventures. The research is conducted within the frame of an Intpart-project promoting collaboration between Norway and South Africa within the domains of higher education, research and innovation (Norwegian Research Council 2023). The project has three Norwegian and two South African partners, including HVL and SU, which allowed for the cross-country sampling. See Table 1, with an overview of the sample and respondents.

TABLE 1: Overview of the sample and respondents.

Entrepreneur	Age	Novice/serial entrepreneur	Industry	Highest level of education
Norwegian sustainable entrepreneurs				
Anders, male	60-70	Novice	Aquaculture	Master's degree
Susanne, female	30-40	Serial	Marine, ocean technology	Master's degree
Bjørn male	60-70	Serial	Marine, ocean technology	Master's degree
Rolf, male	30-40	Novice	Agriculture	Master's degree
Sindre male	30-40	Serial	Plastic waste	Master's degree
South African sustainable entrepreneurs				
Loysio, male	30-40	Novice	Power technology	Master's degree
Jaco, male	20-30	Serial	Biotechnology	Master's degree
Henrick, male	30-40	Novice	Biotechnology	Master's degree
Ruben, male	40-50	Serial	Automobile	Master's degree
Dirk, male	30-40	Novice	IT	Ph.D.

We conducted life story interviews with selected entrepreneurs to understand how they became sustainable entrepreneurs. The themes in the interview guide were based on, identity theory, sustainable entrepreneurship research, and the life story approach. Entrepreneurs were asked to narrate and explain their personal stories and how they relate to the present and the start of their sustainable venture. Follow-up questions were used to clarify and understand narratives and the underlying logic of their identity (Martens, Jennings & Jennings 2007). Each interview took between 90 and 120 min. Data from the life story interviews were supplemented by analyses of relevant websites of the ventures and newspapers or social media. As the authors are all Norwegian, it was necessary to learn about the South African context through research articles, books and reports to be able to interpret the findings. Informed, written consent was received from all participants in this study, and we have received ethical clearance from SIKT, the Norwegian organisation for approval of research data gathering, handling, and reuse in research (ref. nr. 570773).

Research context – Norway and South Africa

Norway and South Africa represent vastly different contextual settings. As mentioned, the cross-country sampling was achieved through participation in the Intpart-project, and as such, represents convenience sampling. Yet, both countries highlight and promote entrepreneurship and sustainability, although with different programmes, systems and resources, anchored in different entrepreneurial ecosystems (Bate 2021) and socio-cultural realities.

On several occasions, Norway has been ranked one of the best country to live in, for example, by the UN Human Development Index (NMoFA 2023). Norway is said to have one of the world's highest levels of income per capita, and the country sees close cooperation between different actors, such as the authorities, employers, employees, and civil society, often called the 'Nordic model' (Norway 2023). Norway has a large public sector, which results in high tax rates that fund large parts of the health and welfare services, including education, and 32.9% of the population have higher education. The general unemployment rate is low (3.6% February 2023). Oil, gas and hydropower have long been the cornerstones of Norwegian economic development. Norway has built its wealth on natural resources, such as fossil fuels, and is now looking for new, sustainable ways of conducting business in most industries. Sustainability is high on the agenda of the Norwegian government, and Norwegians work locally, nationally and internationally to create more sustainable, and especially, environmentally friendly options and solutions.

South Africa is the largest country in Southern African Customs Union[1] (SACU) and the most unequal country globally, ranking first among 164 countries in the World Bank's global poverty database. The country suffers from high unemployment levels and disparity in quality educational opportunities, meaning that a more privileged sector of the South African population would acquire the education to qualify them for employment opportunities. South African society and economy are battling poverty, inequality and high unemployment levels. Although South Africa is one of the leading economies in Africa, it is a developing country with various socioeconomic challenges and rates relatively low on the global innovation index, with a position of 61 compared to Norway on 20 out of 132 countries (Dutta et al. 2021). To increase the number of startups and technology-based ventures, South Africa implements strategies to support the entrepreneurial ecosystem, where universities play an important role (Kruger & Steyn 2020).

Stellenbosch University (SU), founded in 1918, is a prestigious university and consistently features among the top three universities in Africa. In 2022 it housed approximately 32500 students, of whom 32% were postgraduate students. The Technology Transfer Office (TTO) and university incubator of Stellenbosch University have been ranked as the most outstanding in Africa, and as such, Stellenbosch University has become an attractive partner for university-related startup research (Best universities in Africa 2023, 2022).

Data analysis process

A three-stage approach was used to analyse the data. The first stage involved analysing each interview according to the meaningful life events described by the entrepreneurs. The stories of Norwegian and South African sustainable entrepreneurs were analysed separately to understand the references made by the respondents and how each story flowed. We paid particular attention to environmental and social aspects of their lives and interests, their entrepreneurial venture process, context, and how they identified themselves at the different stages of their stories. As a result of our lived experiences, we

1.Botswana, Eswatini, Lesotho, Namibia and South Africa.

need a deeper understanding of the meaningful context within which we live in order to more effectively navigate the world (Lindseth & Norberg 2022).

In the second stage, we analysed the themes in each subgroup (Norwegian and South African). We identified themes relating to entrepreneurs' identity, behaviour, motivations and contextual variables that influenced them throughout their life stories and their reasons for becoming entrepreneurs. In the third stage, we compared the stories in both 'in-group' and 'cross-group' analyses. Considering the prevalent themes in each story, we shifted the analysis from an individual level to a collective level, gaining a better understanding of the rich patterns of connections between context and identity in each of the stories.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from The University of Western Norway, Norwegian Centre for Research Data (No. 570773).

Results

The empirical findings related to three main themes: (1) early life and role models; (2) entrepreneurial action and mission; and (3) context and sustainability. These themes emerged through the life stories and the discussions around their venture goals and creation. Personal narratives supporting each of these themes are cited, illustrating their rich source material.

A global environmental agenda – Norwegian sustainable entrepreneurs

Early life and role models

The Norwegian sustainable entrepreneurs are passionate nature lovers and spend a lot of time in nature. Their interest and appreciation for nature is something they have developed during their lifetime, with increasing importance as they entered adulthood. They live in a very mindful relationship with nature and experience deep connections to nature through the people they surround themselves with, through work, and hobbies.

> 'I'm passionate about being close to and taking care of the sea. And that's sort of what permeates everything. Also, everyday life and friendships and networks and the way I work.' (Susanne, female, serial entrepreneur)

The Norwegian sustainable entrepreneurs are influenced by their places of upbringing and living. They talk about family and early school years as important influencers. They found strong role models in close family or their early school years, which they point out as influencers for taking some of the life choices leading into entrepreneurship. Close family members with entrepreneurial interest and passion are discussed as someone of significant influence on the sustainable entrepreneurs' interest in the topic, but also around being creative and having an open mind.

> 'But I think this originality and creativity is something I have genetically received from my grandfather's side […] he was a pioneer within his field.' (Anders, male, novice entrepreneur)

Schools have been talked about both positively and negatively in terms of influence. For one, it was the starting point of their interest in nature and innovation, and for another, it was the lack of focus on sustainability issues that pushed them into pursuing this topic themselves at an adult age.

> 'So it's a school where you learn to be curious and exploratory from an early age […] create connections between different areas, and from there you may create innovation.' (Susanne, female, serial entrepreneur)

> '[…] the lack of focus in the teachings on sustainability was a challenge in relation to my commitment to the environment.' (Sindre, male, serial entrepreneur)

Entrepreneurial action and a mission for change

Most of the Norwegian sustainable entrepreneurs have a history of working in the industry in which they started their entrepreneurial venture, either through particular interest, education or long tenure in their respective industries. Four out of five exhibit deep attachments to their individual fields and have built their new ventures within the same fields as their master's degree or previous work. They are passionate and especially interested in problematic areas of their industries and see themselves as people who can create change where other actors in their fields are unable or unwilling to. They feel a sense of pride and personal connection to their professional background and industry. Their professional self is also a part of their personal identity, and they merge personal and professional interests into their entrepreneurial goals, which also strongly influences their venture-creation process.

> 'And it was like that, I finally fit in the business world, because then I could say that this is what I created my company for, not to make as much money as possible, but to do the same as I do as an activist, to save the world.' (Sindre, male, serial entrepreneur)

Context and sustainability

The Norwegian sustainable entrepreneurs have a deep passion for the topic of sustainability. They talk about environmental sustainability in great depth and width and how environmental sustainability is the driving force behind the venture.

> 'The basis of what I'm working on is that we're going to make the world a little better. Get to produce more food and reduce environmental problems. It is a fundamental driving force in what I work with.' (Rolf, male, novice entrepreneur)

The Norwegian entrepreneurs mostly mention environmental issues when discussing the sustainability topic. Only two of the five spoke about social aspects of sustainability when broaching their goals or missions for starting their venture.

> 'It was more consequential that I wanted an opportunity for people to explore and learn about and fall in love with the sea […] that you had to be in the industry, that you had to be in an

industrial role or have a trained expertise to be able to experience the planet we live on.' (Susanne, female, serial entrepreneur)

However, their vision is not only on Norwegian issues, but they incorporate a global vision, where their social responsibility embraces people outside of Norway, either by targeting problems in specific countries or through a broader lens.

'We also have a social entrepreneurship project, where we run professional education centres for aquaculture in country X in Africa.' (Anders, male, novice entrepreneur)

In general, the Norwegian sustainable entrepreneurs have both a national and global agenda with their ventures, with a heavy focus on environmental sustainability and how they may impact the industry at a broader scale. They are looking to make both national and international impact with their ventures.

For the common good – South African sustainable entrepreneurs

Early life and role models
Similar to the Norwegians, the South African sustainable entrepreneurs are also avid nature lovers and users. Most of them grew up in families that spent time in nature, hiking, traveling or visiting the South African safari parks. Nature has been a large part of their lives, and they still spend much time in nature.

'I see myself as a nature man. Honestly, I love Africa. I love nature. I love traveling. And I think it's such a blessing being African, having been exposed from a young child to these special animals and… and Africa's large safari parks and all of that. And even the oceans. So, I've always been very conscious of nature.' (Ruben, male, serial entrepreneur)

Higher education has significantly impacted the South Africans, as several of them have found or been inspired through their time at university or in contact with university staff. Like the Norwegians, many also have role models in close family or at university, which have profoundly impacted them during their upbringing and higher education. These role models have been an inspiration and a guide, showing that most things are possible with the right effort and mindset.

'I think that I look up to that quality of them and their maturity when things are going tough. Like that stands out to me. And I want to be able to be as true as they are and as consistent as they are.' (Loysio, male, novice entrepreneur)

Entrepreneurial action and a mission for change
Where the Norwegians find their way into entrepreneurship as change-makers in their industries, three out of the five South Africans find their entrepreneurial venture's origin from academic research. They have strong connections to their university and the academic setting, which provided opportunities to commercialise research.

'So during my degree, we developed a probiotic for […] to promote gut health and alleviate antibiotic usage in the industry. And that's exactly where I started, that I saw the market value,

and that we can commercialise in South Africa and globally.' (Dirk, male, novice entrepreneur)

They base their venture on opportunities in markets that will impact foremost South Africa. Their connection to their home country is integral to their identity. They see themselves as South Africans first and foremost, and they believe they, as South Africans, have the power to make real change for their own country and fellow citizens. The South African identity has become a driving force for venture creation. Compared to their Norwegian counterparts, the South Africans have a clear national identity they feel proud of, and this identity also shines through into their venture creation goals and missions.

'I think being a South African influences my work in the sense that it does direct my attention to the problems in South Africa.' (Loysio, male, novice entrepreneur)

Context and sustainability
Sustainability is an essential part of the South African sustainable entrepreneurs' venture creation and world view. They discuss sustainability, and their focus is on the environment, and how they, as individuals, as a venture, or as a society, influence the environment positively or negatively.

'[…] it becomes a cycle that doesn't have outliers because the minute you start doing the outliers, it doesn't become sustainable.' (Jaco, male, serial entrepreneur)

However, the South African entrepreneurs also see themselves as privileged to be able to invest their time in solving sustainability issues. As mentioned, they have reached a position in life and society where they are not struggling to survive on a day-to-day basis but can establish a formal venture, not just out of necessity but because they see opportunities and are capable of solving problems.

Like the Norwegians, the South Africans also speak about sustainability mainly from an environmental perspective. However, they implicitly raise the social aspect of sustainability when explaining the goals for starting their venture. For them, entrepreneurship emerges as a vehicle to create new job opportunities for their fellow citizen. The social aspect permeates their thoughts and goals of why it is important to work as an entrepreneur and what they wish to achieve with their companies. They see entrepreneurship as a way to tackle environmental (sustainable) challenges, to counter national inequality, and to provide work opportunities.

'So, I think the solution to large economic problems would be job creation, and job creation in South Africa is key to success. Every person that you employ in South Africa supports something like 11 people. If you're employing a group of people that really gives you pride, and that impact is firstly in your community.' (Ruben, male, serial entrepreneur)

Compared to their Norwegian counterparts, the South Africans highlight the national market and what good they can do for South Africa before they look globally. As

mentioned, many local issues need new solutions. They feel in tune with their South African identity, which affects their vision regarding why they do their work and where they direct their work.

> 'I think in South Africa we're well positioned to solve real world problems. We can build apps where you have impacts in healthcare and that type of thing. So that type of opportunities in South Africa where we can really make impact.' (Jaco, male, serial entrepreneur)

In general, the South African sustainable entrepreneurs have both an environmental and social agenda with their ventures, with a primary focus on South Africa and how they, as entrepreneurs, may create change within their communities, regions and country.

Discussion

Our findings expand our knowledge of how sustainable entrepreneurs are influenced by identity and context during their life stories. Despite its importance, the relations between sustainable entrepreneurship, identity and context have not been extensively examined across contexts, particularly comparing advanced and emerging economies (Nayak 2022). The research highlights that sustainable entrepreneurship is context-sensitive and entrepreneurs operating in different contexts attribute various identity indicators and motivations for starting a sustainable venture. Therefore, context may be viewed as an active influencer on entrepreneurs' identity, shaping both the entrepreneur's identity and the reason they chose to start a sustainable venture. Although both Norwegian and South African sustainable entrepreneurs want to be change-makers, their identities and respective contexts' have influenced their opportunity recognition and exploitation regarding sustainability goals and missions (Donnellon et al. 2014).

Norwegian sustainable entrepreneurs have evolved from a need to act and be change-makers, having a desire to improve current practices and solutions in their industries. Moreover, they identify strongly with their professional background and have a global awareness of the challenges they wish to solve. This global awareness can be linked to a tradition in Norway to engage and care about issues in the outside world (Karlsrud & Osland 2018). This stems not necessarily from altruism, but the fact that Norway, a small, open economy, depends heavily on the state of affairs in the outside world (Norman & Orvedal 2010), which may also influence entrepreneurial activities.

South African sustainable entrepreneurs, on the other hand, are driven by a sense of determination to build and improve their society (Nhemachena & Murimbika 2018). They see many deep problems and unresolved issues and feel a high commitment to working with local, regional and national sustainability issues (Ncanywa 2019). Compared to Norwegians, their identity as South Africans is strong and functions as a relevant and fundamental driver in the entrepreneurial opportunity recognition process of the

sustainable venture. Hence, entrepreneurship can act as a substitute for functioning social and environmental governance mechanisms, and governance voids, social inequality, and education and skill development can present opportunities for sustainable entrepreneurship (Argade et al. 2021:3532).

Scholars argue that entrepreneurs need to balance the triple bottom line: that is, economic, social and ecological goals (Terán-Yépez et al. 2020) Yet, our findings show that these three goals seem somewhat blended and cannot easily be separated empirically, as shown in the case with the South African entrepreneurs. Although sometimes implicitly expressed in interviews, the social mission was always critically present and integrated within the economic and environmental goals. In contrast, the Norwegian entrepreneurs had a distinct focus on economic and ecological goals. The social mission, when present, was explicitly stated as part of the venture's mission. These findings explain how different contexts may influence the identity and venture focus of the individuals in each setting, as they may choose to engage in socially beneficial behaviour (Gruber & MacMillan 2017). South Africa has great problems with social challenges and inequality. As part of the South African country and context, the South African sustainable entrepreneurs work to improve the living conditions of their fellow citizens because they know that the state alone cannot take care of all their needs. On the other hand, the Norwegian sustainable entrepreneurs live in a country where the welfare system cares for most social issues (Norway 2023). As such, the social aspects of sustainability are less relevant for the venture.

Our findings contribute to the theoretical development of the relations between identity and context considering sustainable entrepreneurs. Sustainable entrepreneurs operating in different contexts may attribute various identity indicators and motivations for starting a sustainable venture. Therefore, context may be viewed as an active influencer on entrepreneurs' identity, shaping their identity and explaining why they choose to start a sustainable venture (Henry et al. 2022). The sustainable entrepreneurs' interest and drive towards sustainability have been fostered throughout their lives in various ways, from hiking trips with family to social engagement in local churches to their education and later through working life. The literature supports these findings, highlighting that identity is a lifelong construction process taking place within the context of each individual's life (Drummond 2021). The life story approach offers an immersive and deep understanding of sustainable entrepreneurship from the perspective of the individual's lived life (Goodson 2013) through accounts from childhood to adult life and the different events and contextual variables that impact each individual and make them who they are.

Implications, limitations and suggestions for future research

This study has implications for educators and policymakers. Educators may play an increasingly important role in shaping individual interest and understanding of both

entrepreneurship and sustainability (Hermes & Rimanoczy 2018). Early and consecutive teaching of sustainability topics and entrepreneurial skills may help shape future sustainable entrepreneurs. By introducing both topics at an early age, educators may lay a foundation for early engagement in these areas. Practical assignments and engagement of role models may further enhance the positive effect of building interest and skills in sustainable venturing.

The findings of this study suggest that policy makers should consider the socio-cultural context prevalent in a region or country when developing programmes, incentives and regulations for sustainable entrepreneurs (Adams 2019). Understanding the underlying driving forces of sustainable entrepreneurs and playing on their strengths to promote venture goals that embrace both social and environmental impact should be encouraged.

Our study was designed to examine the relationships between identity and context and their influence on sustainable entrepreneurs. As we believe context plays an essential role in shaping sustainable entrepreneurship, we chose to compare entrepreneurial development in two contexts, Norway and South Africa, interviewing ten individuals. Hence, the research has several limitations. Firstly, comparative research (Mills et al. 2006:620) has inherent methodological problems, including selection of cases (unit, level and scale of analysis), construct correspondence, variable versus case orientation, and the fundamental problem of causality. Constructs such as, for example, sustainable entrepreneurship are used in cross-national studies. In a comparative study, the researcher needs to identify if the construct can transcend a particular context or if they are national- or cultural-bound, as explored in our study comparing advanced and emerging economies. One aim of the study was to critically inspect and discuss the relevance of theories and concepts across contexts.

Secondly, the sample is small, which limits the external validity of our findings (Mills et al. 2006), but even though the number of life stories analysed is limited, it has enabled a deeper exploration of the participant's identity and the surrounding contextual variables. However, our research findings are promising and show the importance of comparing and contextualising entrepreneurship phenomena and concepts across cultures.

Conclusion

Our study expands the literature in several ways. Firstly, it compared sustainable entrepreneurial identities in different contexts and identified important differences between entrepreneurs in each context. Secondly, the findings of this study contribute to our understanding of sustainable entrepreneurs and how their identity has several overlapping dimensions: (1) at the individual level and through their life stories and interest in sustainability; (2) at a national level where identities evolve as a function of the given context, its social, historical and cultural dimensions. Lastly, our findings contribute to the literature on sustainable entrepreneurship

in the context of advanced and emerging economies. We see interrelations between the individual's identity and context, their choice to start a sustainable venture, and how entrepreneurship is expected to solve social problems in ventures in emerging countries compared to entrepreneurs from more advanced economies. A well-developed welfare system in Norway may explain why sustainable entrepreneurs can prioritise environmental issues, and hence meeting the expectations of sustainability through a green transition. Conversely, sustainable entrepreneurs in South Africa might also need to integrate social aspects in their ventures, to compensate for the lack of a similar welfare system, to meet societal expectations of social impact in addition to environmental issues. As such, contexts may be crucial in setting the agenda for sustainable entrepreneurs.

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