'Mental mobility' in the digital age: entrepreneurs and the online home-based business

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'Mental mobility' in the digital age:

Entrepreneurs and the online home-based business

Abstract

Home-based online business ventures are an increasingly pervasive, yet under-researched phenomenon. The experiences and mindset of entrepreneurs setting-up and running such enterprises requires better understanding. Using data from a qualitative study of twenty-three online home-based business entrepreneurs, we propose the augmented concept of 'mental mobility' to encapsulate how they approach their business activities. Drawing on Howard P. Becker's early theorizing of mobility, together with Victor Turner's later notion of liminality, we conceptualize 'mental mobility' as the process through which individuals navigate the liminal spaces between the physical and digital spheres of work, and the overlapping home/workplace, enabling them to manipulate and partially reconcile the spatial, temporal and emotional tensions that are present in such work environments. Our research also holds important applications for alternative employment contexts and broader social orderings due to the increasingly pervasive and disruptive influence of technology on experiences of remunerated work.

Introduction

Advances in information technology have meant that, for many, work is an activity rather than a place (Felstead et al., 2002). Consideration of the workplace as spatially static has now become redundant. The home has once again become an important location for work with the decline of home-work spatial demarcations. Previous studies on effects upon the individual of home-based working focused mainly upon employees working for relatively large organizations, and management-staff relations of control, trust, performance-monitoring, and work-life balance (e.g. Brocklehurst, 2001; Felstead and Jewson, 2000; Hill et al., 2003; Shumate and Fulk, 2004; Sturges, 2012; Tietze et al., 2009; Tietze and Musson, 2010). Such studies concentrated on the increasing need to effectively coordinate employees who are decentralized and distributed as well as working practices that have become more virtual (Sorensen, 2004). Others have considered IT professionals and consultants working away from home at client-defined sites and locations (Ahuja et al., 2007). Despite their economic importance and number, relatively little research has been on home-based businesses, which are typically invisible to researchers and even wider society (Mason et al., 2011).

We explore home-based online business entrepreneurs' self-reported experiences, unpacking the complexities inherent in their fluid contexts. These entrepreneurs use technology to enable business growth beyond their home's spatial limitations, whilst remaining located there. Through an empirical, inductive study of daily, 'lived-reality' articulations, we advance theoretical understandings of negotiations between entrepreneurial activities and self-experiences in the dual home-work place. We thereby

explore issues arising from deeper individual self-experiences at the home-work interface, and entrepreneurial attempts to manipulate, reconcile or even overcome the spatial, temporal and emotional tensions manifest in running home-based ventures.

Through our findings, interpretative analysis and theorizing of (im)mobility and liminality, we put forward the empirically-informed concept of 'mental mobility'. We argue that to successfully navigate boundaries between home-spaces, which are physically and socially constrained, and virtual technological-spaces, which are spatially unconstrained, these business owners develop 'mental mobility' to avoid the risks of spatial ambiguity and dissonance. This emerged through our inductive iterative analysis of the collated data and interpretations. We drew inspiration from Becker's early work on mobility and his original coinage of the term. However, we go beyond this and provide unique theorizing, arguing that the 'mental mobility' concept holds much potential and requires careful re-consideration, novel conceptualization and new attempts at theoretical definition in terms of the technological abilities now pervasive in society. We thus contribute to extant understandings of technological mobility and work practices, especially the experiences of autonomous and arguably 'liminal' actors such as entrepreneurs; and to the emerging literature on home-based businesses, particularly in terms of the significance of recent technological changes and ubiquitous, online mobile digital access within the home and other non-traditional work spaces. We respond to calls for greater theoretical development and empirical study of the phenomenon (Loscocco and Smith-Hunter, 2004; Mason et al., 2011; Thompson et al., 2009; Walker and Webster, 2004).

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The paper has four parts. We begin by discussing home-based businesses and the home's changing role in relation to technological impacts on work location. Through considering non-spatial mobility and information technology's increasing role in communications, we unpack and extend Becker's early theorizing on mobility and Turner's notion of liminality, to support our conceptual and empirically-derived arguments. Secondly, we outline our research methods and analytic approach for this study of twenty-three entrepreneurs running home-based online businesses. Thirdly, we present our interpretations through the lens of 'mental mobility' and its importance in home-based workplaces. We conclude with the study's key implications and contributions.

Home-based online business entrepreneurs as liminal actors:

Theorizing technological 'mental mobility'

The interface between work and other life-dimensions has received increased academic attention (Fleming and Spicer, 2004; Nippert-Eng, 1996; Perlow, 1998). Much research focuses on *employees* of external organizations, with limited research explicitly on the *home* as the business location of the self-managing, self-employed, often lone-working, *entrepreneur* (exceptions include Di Domenico, 2008; Di Domenico and Fleming, 2009; Loscocco and Smith-Hunter, 2004; Thompson et al., 2009; Walker et al., 2008). As more autonomous actors, they are not under the direct control of existing organizational structures. This creates a complex ambiguous home-work sphere. Their homes are dynamic contemporaneous enterprise settings of both freedom and autonomy and self-regulation and boundary-management.

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We develop an amalgamated conceptual lens derived from literature on the entrepreneur and concepts of home, mobility, liminality, technology and proximity. Drawing on pertinent literature, we highlight the extant research gap by discussing home-based online entrepreneurs, with innovative theorization of their technological mobility and liminality.

Home-based online business entrepreneurs: Toward nuanced understandings

It is important to appreciate the characteristics of the home-based online business entrepreneur and how their working practices and experiences differ from other online and/or home-based workers. It is important to stress that they are first and foremost *entrepreneurs* – self-employed, autonomous, self-managing actors using their extant resources, their own homes, to establish and operate their online businesses. This key characteristic distinguishes this research from studies on *employees* of larger organizations, such as home-based teleworkers, about whom there is an existing body of literature exploring home-work boundary management (e.g. Felstead et al., 2002; Golden, 2007; Haddon and Brynin, 2005; Mirchandani, 1998; Ruiz and Walling, 2005; Taskin and Edwards, 2007). The present study goes beyond this body of work by addressing an important knowledge gap about very different individuals, *entrepreneurs* working in the *home* as the physical setting of their enterprise. Moreover, studies on teleworking use concepts (e.g. border theory) that are insufficient when exploring the experiences of home-based online entrepreneurs which require theoretical approaches that take issues of the control and autonomy of self-employed entrepreneurs better into account. We thus propose an alternative conceptual lens and theorizing.

It is argued that extant research is unable to pinpoint the 'entrepreneur' with a neat, all-encompassing definition (Jones and Spicer, 2005). The meaning of 'entrepreneur' is slippery, shifting and illusive, fluctuating with context. Jones and Spicer (2005; 2009) regard the 'entrepreneur' as a mythical character, a 'super-hero' or fantasy figure, criticising attempts to attribute such labels based on ambiguous notions often embedded in entrepreneurial discourses of individualism and creativity. Accepting the heterogeneity and inherent complexity of defining the 'entrepreneur', it is useful to understand how they *view themselves* in order to experience their business context. This enables a more nuanced understanding of who they are through taking on board their own definitions of their situations. *Ergo*, we argue that entrepreneurs can be viewed in the classical way (see Cunningham and Lischeron, 1991) as people who *define themselves* as entrepreneurs in that they aim 'to do' entrepreneurship as well as 'to own' their own business. They are not only self-employed, managing when, where and how they work, but regard this as the basis of their ability to recognise opportunities. We take a lead from more critical studies of entrepreneurship (e.g. Jones and Spicer, 2005; 2009) by arguing that individual self-characterisations, views and experiences are inherently important to better understand who the entrepreneurs are and access notions of individual enterprise (Coulson, 2012). By adopting this approach, we compare shared and alternative meanings to support and leverage theoretical contributions.

As well as running primarily home-based enterprises, their online, virtual nature serves to shape entrepreneurial experiences. Fine's (1983) analytic in 'Shared Fantasy', inspired by Goffman's 'frame analysis' (1974), elegantly captures the way people are mentally agile, shifting between frames in artful, knowing, clever ways. The oscillating nature of

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engrossment operates under a 'pretence awareness context' (Glaser & Strauss, 1964) as in role-playing games. Online entrepreneurs, operating virtually, engender 'fantastical' experiences of enterprise (Jones and Spicer 2005; 2009), enacting imaginative online role-playing with mental agility, flexibility and adaptability, translate this into mobility of thought and self-management.

To achieve more nuanced understanding of the online home-based business entrepreneur, we constantly oscillate between the individual and their context. As more autonomous actors, these entrepreneurs are not controlled by existing organizational structures like home-based teleworkers operating remotely online. Their homes are not merely sites for remunerated work but multifaceted settings of home and work that are complex and ambiguous, and where autonomy, self-management and spatiality issues are germane.

The idea of the 'home' is not simply being 'at home' with connotations of stability, refuge, respite, leisure and sanctuary. The 'home', whether a physical dwelling or some broader notion of geographical place, can be multifunctional, mobile in use and perception and 'disturbed' (Dikeç, 2002). Departing from simplistic binaries, we rethink the 'home' as not necessarily static, safe and enclosed, but also mobile, open and strange. This paper's prime concern is the home's inherent ambiguity, and the ways it is subjectively experienced particularly when it functions as an entrepreneurial business.

Theorizing mental mobility for the home-based online business entrepreneur
Leading on from this discussion, the home possesses physical qualities of form and substance, with added experiences, emotions and memories making it personally

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meaningful. Materiality, meaning and practice constitute key facets of place and space (Cresswell, 2007) with added notions of mobility adding complexity (Cresswell, 2006) through opposing or 'undoing' place, or disrupting and reconfiguring its experiences (Relph, 1976; Tuan, 1977). Theorizing the meanings and practices of space, place and mobility must therefore encompass the material, ephemeral and virtual (Urry, 2000).

The concepts of mobility and immobility have received wide academic discussion. In organizational contexts, employee mobility meant models of lifetime employment and internal mobility were replaced by external mobility through switching employers in more 'loosely-coupled' labour markets (Bidwell, 2011), and consequently limited strategic human capital investment (Campbell et al., 2012).

The concept of 'mental mobility' was introduced by Becker (1930; 1931) to explore relationships between social forces and population movements, broadly, including group and individual mobility. Tönnies' (1957) classification of mobility shows how 'movement frequently comes full circle; men return to the point from whence they started' (Becker, 1931: 357). This point is Tönnies' 'primary culture area' or *home*. The classification of mobility is dependent on temporal relationships between mobility and home; travellers return home, migrants do not. The home is mobility's nexus, through which to understand its impact. Becker suggests that mental mobility is a correlate of social change, requiring mental mutability, innovation and flexibility. Conversely, mental immobility acts as a barrier to flexibility. Although Becker acknowledged that a clear definition of mental mobility eluded him, his early contribution highlights that the concept can be best understood by going beyond the spatial into the cognitive dimension.

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Thus, we argue that the concept of 'mental mobility' can help us theorise the contemporary environment where home-work boundaries are blurred as virtual spaces compete with, and overlap, physical spaces. Indeed, despite its absence in contemporary theorizing since Becker's early writings, we argue that a newly augmented concept of 'mental mobility' is germane to home-work contexts in contemporary society due to the pervasiveness of digital technologies in everyday life (Galloway, 2002).

Conceptually, this leads us to consider how home-based online entrepreneurs occupy and manage the dimensions between physical and digital work-spheres. We argue that these entrepreneurs grapple with more than material or practical mobility, but as well require emotional and mental agility and creativity, in order to build their businesses and operate from home. This dynamic mental attitude towards the digital and what is 'out there' (Galloway, 2002) combines with managing their more situated corporeality. Their overlapping cognitive-virtual-physical manoeuvring is ambiguous, complex and fluid, giving rise to tensions. This evokes the notion of the 'liminal' (Turner, 1967; drawn from Van Gennep, 1909), a transitional state denoting 'betwixt and between'. We borrow from Turner this notion of liminality to further unpack and make sense of the ambiguous state, in terms of the physical, temporal and emotional, which is navigated by the home-based online entrepreneur.

In the academic literature, notions of liminality denote ambiguous, in-between, uncertain places and states, such as non-unionized call centers (Ibrahim, 2012), and occupational roles, including temporary employees (Garsten, 1999); consultants and consultancy work (Czarniawska and Mazza, 2003; Sturdy et al, 2006); managers working across different

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organizational boundaries (Ellis and Ybema, 2010); individual workplace identity (Beech, 2011) and organizational learning (Tempest and Starkey, 2004). However, there is limited conceptual critique of liminality when applied to entrepreneurs *per se,* as opposed to employees and contract workers; or technology's role in home-work spaces.

For Turner, true liminality is the midpoint of transition in status sequence between two positions or states. In applying the concept to the entrepreneurs in our analysis, the liminal may be similarly experienced as transitory/temporary, with an eventual return to an exclusively demarcated home or work sphere, as in transition from home-based to external business premises. However, liminality can also reflect long-term, all-subsuming states of operating home-based online businesses. Turner himself deliberates this point when comparing liminality in ritual versus modern social settings. He observes that the latter creates 'a style of life that is *permanently contained within liminality*… Instead of the liminal being a passage, it seemed to be coming to be regarded as a *state*' (1974: 261, author emphasis, not in original). Thus, it is important to highlight that liminal states are not just temporary positions or spaces. Indeed, online spaces, interactions and identities increasingly result in the emergence of long-lasting states of being (Savin-Baden, 2008).

The concept's further dimensions of complexity, duality and paradox are raised by Turner who argues that liminality is 'a realm of pure possibility whence novel configurations of ideas and relations may arise' (1967: 97), simultaneously with contestation and difficulty, and liberation and innovation. Liminality can also lead to 'ambiguity, paradox and confusion' (Turner, 1967: 96 - 97) while providing people with opportunities to be 'neither this nor that and yet both' (1967: 99) and a 'stage of

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reflection' (1967: 105) with promise of more opportunities. On new thresholds, liminality gives a 'certain freedom to juggle with the factors of existence' (1967: 106), a productive strategy enhancing their mental capacity for home-based online entrepreneurs to manage tensions and boundaries (e.g. temporal, spatial and economic) which may restrict their entrepreneurial activities. Our contention is that this allows for 'mental mobility' which can result in entrepreneurial creativity, difference and exceptionalism.

In terms of changes in technology and proximity, advances in mobile and information technology (ICT) have facilitated opportunities for remote and home-based work to grow significantly. This has created the evolution of this liminal zone or 'state-of-being'. Home-based work also gives workers potential resources for increased flexibility and choice (Fogarty et al., 2011). Technology has enabled office workers to venture away from where production is located. Thus, whilst computers have been commonplace in corporate environments for decades, the intersection of various recent technological shifts like email and VOIP (voice over internet protocol) calling have served to diminish the importance of physical work location. This has reduced costs, time and rigidity of international communication. The increasing interconnectedness between systems and the adoption of global communication standards have meant that home-based entrepreneurs can be reasonably sure that their business communications messages will be accessible globally through the use of various core functions which can now be found even on a pocket-sized smartphone. For entrepreneurs, technology thus significantly overcomes basic geographic and spatial restrictions once preventing business growth. With their removal, comes the need for entrepreneurs to negotiate liminal zones, manifested by the ambiguous, often complex, overlapping of temporal, virtual and physical distance.

Having unpacked the concepts of home, mobility, liminality, technology and proximity, and especially non-spatial mobility through technological communications, we now outline our research methods and guiding research question. This leads to conceptual development of 'mental mobility' emerging from our empirical findings, and further discussion of its importance for home-based entrepreneurs.

Methods

Approach and research design

The study involved interviews and site visits with home-based online entrepreneurs. Qualitative, inductive methods were used to gain a situational interpretive understanding of individual entrepreneurs' views and experiences, our analytic focus. Our intention from the outset was to gain insights into home-based entrepreneurs' lived experiences and viewpoints, making use of participant reflexivity and an interpretative lens. Thus, data consisting of first-hand entrepreneurial accounts was vital to address the research question, namely: How do individual entrepreneurs relate their ideas about the self to their experiences and practices of running home-based online businesses?

Data collection

We combined purposive and snowball sampling to reach the research participants. We used pre-existing contacts via professional network sources to initially secure six interviews. These were supplemented through 'snowballing', with the initial participants suggesting further contacts. Additional requests for volunteers were posted on

professional entrepreneurship, small business association and university websites. Seventeen participants, eight male and fifteen female business founders and homeowners, were thus obtained. Key selection/inclusion criteria were that businesses were both home-based and operating online when founded. Of the eight males, seven had set up on their own as entrepreneurs and so were lone self-employed. One male entrepreneur was in business jointly with the two male co-entrepreneurs who all worked separately in their own homes. Of the women, ten had set up on their own, and so were lone self-employed, while two worked with other female entrepreneurs, two in each case. Again each worked from their own homes. Three of the women were in their business as a couple with their husbands/ partners who resided in the same household. However, the female partner in each case identified themselves as the founder and key operator of the business.

The resulting final twenty-three in-depth interviews were of from one to over two hours in length. The approach allowed for sample diversity and saturation, after identification of common themes and patterns within participants' accounts, allowing for more nuanced theoretical extrapolation than with more homogenous sampling approaches. All interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed *verbatim*. Researcher reflective journaling was recorded throughout, facilitating the process of conceptual development, interpretation and exploration of the collated rich data set and emerging ideas from the literature. In keeping with the inductive research design, participants were asked during interviews to describe their experiences of running their home-based businesses, to better understand how they make sense of their situations and routinely performed activities. We encouraged participant reflexivity, along with descriptions of specific acts, actions and experiences of their lived realities. Following Gadamer's (1976) conceptualisation of the

hermeneutic circle, our interpretations are approached through reliance upon an inherently iterative process, whereby meaning and understanding are linked to the 'whole' data of the entrepreneurs' actions and experiences.

The majority of interviews were conducted in the participants' homes which were also their businesses. In all cases, it was observed that their homes were used in mobile and fluid ways in both time and space. Participants utilised various spaces for their businesses, which were not confined solely to a designated 'home-office', but oscillated among different zones, such as 'home-office', kitchen table and garden. While carrying out interviews, the researchers obtained first-hand observations of the spatial overlap and integration of home and work environments, allowing deeper appreciation of participants' understandings and articulations of their everyday experiences. To ensure respect for privacy, participant and business names are anonymised through use of numerical codes (see Table 1), Assigned numerical codes are used alongside data excerpts reported in the findings and cross-referenced to Table 1, which summarises key demographic and other research participant characteristics.

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

Analysis

Findings are based on emergent interpretations grounded in data. Our approach interprets the entrepreneurs' self-expressed opinions, thereby allowing their 'voices' to be heard and compared. Interview data were subject to data reduction and interpretation by means of thematic analysis and cross-case comparison, facilitated by using NVivo, a qualitative

analysis software package for data management, coding and retrieval. In line with established procedures for inductive theory-building research (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011; Miles and Huberman, 1994), the researchers developed, compared and refined their interpretations through constant iterative movement between data, the literature and emerging theoretical ideas (Eisenhardt, 1989). Analysis of individual accounts was undertaken as well as across the full data-set. Thus, the key analytic stages of theme identification and data reduction were undertaken in a fluid, non-linear fashion.

Following repeated interrogation of literature and primary data, text extracts from across the participant range were isolated, and recurrent data patterns grouped into conceptual categories. Thus the data were subject to data reduction and interpretation through thematic coding and both within case and cross-case comparison. For purposes of rigour, transparency and reliability, interview text was subject to repeated readings and analysis to compare and interrogate unfolding interpretations. This was by a continuous process of the researchers comparing and discussing analyses and using a 'master' document via a shared online cloud software storage program. The procedure of 'check coding' was also applied whereby researchers would regularly independently code sections of transcripts and other data 'blind', and then check the comparability of outcomes for reliability and conceptual refinement. This led to developing an emergent interpretative framework devised from combining interview themes, issues raised by participants themselves, with literature, conceptual extrapolations, observations and on-going interpretations.

The paper now elaborates the thematic analysis outcomes, unpacking how mental mobility is manifest in practice. Excerpts are reported from across interviews, reflecting

the spectrum of views. The overarching emergent narrative or 'meta-theme' identified from the data, cutting across all participants' articulations, was the relationship between 'self' and 'home-business' specifically in terms of experiencing (im)mobility. This overarching narrative, and how it was understood and orchestrated, is discussed according to those day-to-day practices, ambiguities, tensions and paradoxes, participants liminally encounter within their lived realities. This structures how we present our findings and discussion, divided into two parts. The first centers on expounding the entrepreneurs' experiences of physical and virtual interactions through liminal states and day-to-day practices. The second develops this through the reported benefits and tensions of their 'mental mobility', experienced as both problematic and edifying.

Findings and discussion: Entrepreneurial 'mental mobility' in online home-based businesses

Interview findings revealed vivid descriptions of entrepreneurs' experiences and subjective relationships with their home-businesses. We intended to discover the nature of the practices, understandings and routines of the entrepreneur to answer our research question: How do individual entrepreneurs relate their ideas about the self to their experiences and practices of running home-based online businesses?

Straddling the physical and virtual through liminal states: Experiencing day-to-day practices of home-based online businesses

Every entrepreneur in the study showed clear drive to develop their venture despite operating from home. The enterprise's technological core created opportunities to

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connect with clients and other businesses beyond the home and mentally 'journey' between physical situatedness at home and virtual self-projections to the outside business-world (Jones and Spicer 2005; 2009). This reflects the flexibility of being able to work from home and run a business without the concomitant costs of setting-up a spatially distinct enterprise or renting alternative premises. A female respondent who had previously with her husband sold their books from a shop, described enthusiastically the advantages for them as a couple of now flexibly working from home, as they had done so for the past six years, by now selling their books online. Contrasting their present flexible working with their previous '9 to 6' existence, she described how the quality of their lives had been improved. She exclaimed:

"Well, that's the joy, really, of doing it this way! I don't have to open the shop at 9:30 in the morning and sit there with two people coming through the door all day with the last person coming through five minutes before I'm going to close and having to answer the same questions all the time. Are your books all alphabetical?… There are moments that I think, ah, isn't it wonderful. It's a lovely day, let's go walk the dog and we'll go out for lunch. And I'll say, okay let's do that, and I'll put books on the internet this evening. There's nothing wrong with that." (Entrepreneur #14)

Entrepreneurs view the benefits of running online companies as particularly advantageous in terms also of the spontaneity of the contacts that they make from around the world. This related to mobile reach. Thus, a male web designer described how he obtained spontaneous orders from around the world *"out of nowhere … because it's*

digital" (Entrepreneur #19). He described this in terms of mobile reach and gave the example of how he had recently done a new design which somebody from New York saw and liked and how *"he contacted me and now he wants a website from New York"* (Entrepreneur #19). Another male, single owner, who specialised in search engine optimisation, described how mobile reach in terms of *"still managing it virtually"* (Entrepreneur #16), worked for him in terms of outsourcing work to three contractors in Pakistan while he was based in the UK.

The entrepreneurs reflected upon this spatial liminality, recognizing its constraints and inherent ambiguity of combining home with business. As one entrepreneur and website designer observed, "*[I work] in my study… It is a space, but at the same time it's not"* (Entrepreneur #22)*.*   We also found that the entrepreneurs made purposeful use of additional places and third spaces that are effectively 'in-between' home and workplace but possessing elements of both, such as coffee-shops, libraries, trains, hotels and other meeting places. Thus a male web designer who *normally does everything online and uses Skype a lot to communicate with clients and business connections described how, for those who are physically able to do so through proximity of location, not only do "we chat on Skype. Sometimes when we have to meet we meet in a café"* (Entrepreneur #19). A female web designer had a favourite hotel where she met clients. She had indeed at first arranged to be interviewed there for the research. She described how she used different locations for face-to-face meetings depending on her own or the client's circumstances. Thus:

"Very often we'd be going to potential clients' offices. I am a member of the Commonwealth Club which is a London club but not like a fuddy-duddy old gentlemen's club. So if the person I'm meeting doesn't have a venue, I will suggest we meet there. It's pretty much like meeting in a hotel or something but just slightly more exclusive" (Entrepreneur #6)

Some of the entrepreneurs felt acutely torn between the competing roles of home and work that they simultaneously occupied. For them, this involved a tension resulting in their lack of physical mobility, often causing them to seek further refuge in the virtual sphere. The perceived intrusion of home competing with business was reflected by their preference to operate predominantly online. When face-to-face meetings were necessary, wherever possible entrepreneurs avoided meeting clients or conducting business meetings at home, as illustrated by the following:

"Corporate-wise we go out to people because for professionalism you wouldn't invite [them] round to the house…we usually go to people's workplaces, its better, and discuss things there, and work with them there." (Entrepreneur #17)

The entrepreneurs described their homes in ways encompassing but also going beyond the spatial. For them it was more than a convenient physical space. The ability to 'hook-up' online was inherently mobile and fluid. As a male web designer described it with his online business: *"…you don't have to be in the same room… You can just do it remotely."* (Entrepreneur #19). A search engine optimization specialist, who travelled frequently, stressed the importance of portability as one of the main advantages for him

of his spatially and temporally flexible working patterns in the following terms: *"I mean, I can go anywhere in the world but I can still manage my office"* and added: *"Like, I can work on weekends, maybe late hours or anything."* (Entrepreneur # 16). Many others described the freedom of their work which allowed them to move spatially, temporally and mentally, almost without restrictions. The feeling of being in charge of their routines, places and spaces is repeatedly emphasized through controlling the fluidity and mobility of their working. This is posited as an advantage over more 'organizationally-rooted' experiences as an employee. A female website designer reflected on how other people tended to misinterpret this lack of a physical organization and hierarchy to mean a lack of purpose or self-control in the following way:

> *"I think what I also find interesting working from home is that a lot of people ...think that you maybe do other things. I think there is a culture of... you need to be controlled. You need someone to control you otherwise you don't work. I don't believe that... I don't understand why if I just go to the kitchen and make myself a cup of coffee, then come back and do work in ten minutes, a job that someone in an office does in one hour"*. (Entrepreneur 4#)

Overall, the home is strongly characterized in liminal terms. Some entrepreneurs exist spatially, temporally and *emotionally* in suspended, liminal states, whereby they operate their businesses from the domestic sphere, but look forward to external commercial premises. They are uncomfortable with the home-work place being neither exclusively a domestic or work sphere, feeling mentally betwixt or in-between the zones of 'home' and 'work'. This creates an intriguing duality and tension whereby entrepreneurs experience

their home-businesses as enabling motion mobility (through online connectivity) whilst simultaneously creating stasis and constraining motions through removing the need to regularly leave home:

"I work, I live in a very, very small geographical area and I sometimes question actually whether that's healthy. And when I don't need to walk [my son] to school and pick him up from school in the next couple of years, then I will have to really look at that …I could go quite a long time without actually leaving these four walls and really is that how I want it to be? It is actually going to be, kind of, agoraphobic" (Entrepreneur #3).

Others were more comfortable with the dual home-work site due to lack of long-term desire to move from the home. Liminality was experienced as a more static rather than temporary state. Despite some tensions, they had fewer uncomfortable liminal experiences. They interpreted their liminal state as managing their preferred spatial-temporal. For them, practising 'mental mobility' was inherently liberating.

Paradoxes of mental mobility: The virtual experienced as problematic and edifying

Whilst technology has equipped the entrepreneurs with the freedom of mobility beyond conventional spatial-temporal constraints, it simultaneously imposes a new state of experiencing self, work and home. The daily practices, ambiguities and tensions of running a home-based online business, experienced as an acutely intense activity, results in the entrepreneurs feeling simultaneously connected (virtually) yet alone (physically). Work becomes highly internalized. Their physical isolation allows freedom of thought

and creativity and the ability to 'disconnect' or 'switch off' from others when desired. The home-based online business thus transcends the conventional boundaries, patterns and expectations of conformity with others that employees normally must negotiate.

We found that the home-based entrepreneurs in our study experience their sense of physical isolation in a paradoxical way. Just as in the work of Xavier De Maistre (1794, 2004), any form of movement or mobility can be seen as innately bound-up with our mindset and mental approach as opposed to specifics of actual 'destinations'. Thus, through adopting thoughts which dynamically embrace excitement and discovery, our 'mental mobility' transcends our particular spatial confines. Akin to De Maistre's solitary mental travels around the close confines of his living-quarters, the modern-day entrepreneur undertakes a daily mental voyage of their own conditioned by similar seclusion. Indeed, many spoke of their autonomy as liberating in the sense of being 'freed' from daily in-person interactions common in the external workplace, which they feel are often unnecessary intrusions upon their productivity, time and mental focus. For instance, entrepreneur #2 remarked that "*it's quite nice not to have that many interactions*". She spoke enthusiastically about her preference for working in a more physically solitary capacity and predominantly online in comparison to her previous job as a teacher. Being able to choose when and with whom to interact online was seen to provide more freedom than would be the case with more physical interactions. She spoke of her experiences of running an online home-based business as meaning she had 'more time to think' by having 'less mental clutter'. However, there was also an acknowledgement that unless interactions were pursued online, such routine physical

solitude can affect the experience of that mental journey and business decision-making. For instance, entrepreneur #7 commented that when sitting at the computer all day *"…you don't have colleagues to bounce things about and say, what do you think, what if we did this and that?"*

Unlike our imprisoned historical figure, they are free to venture beyond the hearth at will, often taking advantage of being online to find alternative 'in-between' spaces such as the 'third spaces' of cafes, libraries or trains. They must also nevertheless routinely return to the work-space of the home. Indeed, some entrepreneurs used metaphors to refer to their homes such as 'central command', 'base' or 'head office'. These descriptions of their working practices serve to underline the relationship between the various physical work-spaces which they occupy, both the home and the more transient 'third places' beyond the home. These are invisibly 'glued together' by their businesses online presence and the ability to operate virtually. In comparison to these alternative 'third spaces', the everyday reality of running a home-business from home is paradoxically experienced as both empowering and more physically restrictive, determined by home-space orderings, constructed through self-conditioning, routine and daily practice, and based predominantly around customer-linked technology:

> *"The other problem is you are alone and you deal with clients, sometimes the emails take all day, just replying to emails and explain[ing] to a client that doesn't understand very much what you're doing and wants to know exactly what you're doing so you have to write everything."* (Entrepreneur # 19)

Thus, the paradox faced by the home-based online business entrepreneur includes the home being experienced as both physically restrictive and yet liberating in its provision of personal autonomy and control over how it is used and navigated as business-cum-residence. Similarly, these entrepreneurs can choose to leave and transcend the home-space to temporarily work in 'satellite', alternative spaces which often mimic home-life (e.g. cafes, libraries etc), allow temporary change of scene from the physical home-encasing. Yet, all the physical 'home' or 'home-away-from-home' work domains remain physically prescriptive, necessitating entrepreneurs to possess an autonomous, self-regulating mental agility through their use of technology as their business *modus operandi*.

This demonstrates how the physical and virtual are constantly being played by home-based online entrepreneurs, with 'paradoxical dancing' to both experience and regulate the corporeal self, whilst remaining at the business helm. These coexisting tensions and innate paradoxes encourage these individuals to be 'mentally mobile'. This supports our theorising, reflecting processes through which they continuously navigate the liminal spaces between physical and digital work-spheres, and the overlapping home/workplace. It is through these contradictory, paradoxical experiences of running home-based online businesses that they feel both 'freed' and 'trapped', creating mental mobility to manipulate spatial, temporal and emotional tensions.

The entrepreneur is also able to connect socially to others via technology which reaches outside the home but this does not completely resolve their physical separateness. For instance, isolation experienced as difficult, a sense of entrapment by the home-business,

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is exemplified by the owner of a successful online media company who craved a routine 'escape' from home-business demands and daily online interactions:

> *"I remember when I was [running the business] in the old house… I think I got quite lonely … it might have been about year four [of running the business]. I got [the dog] then I had to go out for a walk every day … it was forcing me to get out every day."* (Entrepreneur #1)

Whilst some entrepreneurs recognize their experience of isolation and separateness from regular physical contact with work-colleagues, others perceive this as liberating. This was expressed by an entrepreneur, a former teacher, who drew comparisons with teaching and running her online business in terms of the *mental* stress of routine physical interactions. These were unwelcome intrusions, taking up valuable cognitive space. She explicitly preferred greater distance and fewer daily, imposed, physical interactions with others:

> *"So yes, that sort of isolation thing could be really hard but it'd probably really suit some people. When you're teaching, you interact with more than 100 people every day and that in itself can mess with your head. And I used to find [as a teacher] when I went to sleep, it would all be there, all those voices. So it's quite nice not to have that many interactions."* (Entrepreneur #2)

Physical solitude in home-business contexts is inherently contradictory – experienced as frustrating and enjoyable. Emotional and mental agility is constantly in play (Fine, 1983). These entrepreneurs experience mental mobility as imbued with contested forces, both

courted and resisted in a paradoxical way. However, many of our respondents talked about their way of working as being at the beginning of a revolution and a future that will be adopted by most, and even by large corporations. The vision of a male web designer was that: *"Big companies, they will one day, maybe in a hundred years, have a lot of people working from home"* (Entrepreneur #19).

Conclusions

This paper outlines an in-depth inductive research study into entrepreneurs' experiences of running home-based online businesses. Our approach draws upon Becker's (1930; 1931) early theorizing on 'mental mobility' and Turner's (1967; 1969; 1974) analysis of 'liminality'. Based upon our empirical interpretations, we have revised the former's concept of 'mental mobility' and integrated it with the latter's ideas on 'liminality' to bring both concepts into the present context of the online home-based business entrepreneurs who are the focus of our study. We are thus able to draw from the findings of our research more refined theoretical links and developments in relation to both concepts. We do so by interpreting the individual entrepreneur's self-characterisations and descriptions of their entrepreneurial experiences. These helped us understand the nature of their individual situations and how they feel about their enterprises (Coulson, 2012). Furthermore, this approach allows us to interpret both their shared and alternative meanings. This in turn helps us to develop further our own theoretical contributions in relation to these home-based entrepreneurs. We thus contribute to extant literature and evolving and future insights in an area of enterprise which is rapidly increasing due to the impact of technological changes which have been the engine of growth.

In light of our findings, we develop the theoretical concept of 'mental mobility' as involving the process through which individuals navigate the liminal spaces between physical and digital spheres of work, and overlapping home/work-places. It enables us to understand how the home-based entrepreneurs manipulate, and partially reconcile, those spatial, temporal and emotional tensions that are present in their work environments. Indeed, the online entrepreneurs in our study reported experiences that are imbued with their sense of not only residing in various states of 'liminality' (Turner, 1967), but also of making use of their 'mental mobility' (Becker, 1930; 1931) whereby they move among and within these states. In this way, we contribute new theoretical understanding from our study to research on entrepreneurship, technology and emerging forms of non-standard work. Specifically, we show the way in which home-based business entrepreneurs simultaneously 'mentally' balance the physical and virtual, and imaginatively co-locate their living activities with their creative enterprise activities.

It may possibly be asserted that office-based employees working online also manage the physical/digital overlap; and that home-based entrepreneurs, running more traditional 'offline' businesses, also manage potential ambiguities in the home/work interface. However, we argue that entrepreneurs operating home-based online businesses face heightened states of liminality arising from the dual complexity of navigating simultaneously *both* overlapping states of physical and virtual, and home and workplace. This actually helps them to embrace and develop those entrepreneurial opportunities that coexist within the overlapping constraints and challenges that constantly face them both in the home, family and business contexts. Indeed, combined with their home-based

enterprises, their virtual, online work experiences are closely linked to what it means to be an entrepreneur. This reflects Fine's (1983) analytic, which describes how we can all be mentally agile and shift among frames in creative ways. This oscillation allows the online entrepreneurs of our study to operate not only virtually but also experiment virtually with various possibilities. They are open to the unexpected from anywhere in the globe, and are able to engender the 'fantastical' experiences of enterprise referred to by Jones and Spicer (2005; 2009). This allows the entrepreneurs to continuously and imaginatively enact various online role-playing scenarios with mental agility, flexibility and adaptability. The entrepreneurs in our study described how they translated this into a greater mobility of thought, although at the same time they exercised more self-control and self-management than if they were located in more traditional workplace contexts.

The entrepreneurs in our study, all of whom run home-based online businesses, appeared to self-characterize and describe the possession of mobility and free movement as a crucial element that emanated from their experience of liminal states. Movement is not necessarily physical as entrepreneurs are home-based or inhabit other third spaces not exclusive to work domains, such as cafes or libraries. Rather, it is freedom to move iteratively through the facility of their 'mental mobility'. Our findings report feelings of being 'betwixt and between', neither fully occupying one state/place nor another, yet simultaneously residing in both. It imbues this type of autonomous home-based enterprise with an intense, all-encompassing quality, highly reflective of self-conceptions and preferences. As such, these entrepreneurs are themselves liminal actors, possessing mobility and freedom combined with the paradoxical constraints and/or tensions with which they must continuously wrestle, and possibly come to accept.

Further, although our empirical theorizing derives from the home-based business context, the concept of 'mental mobility' is useful for understanding contemporary work practices, not yet apparent when Becker published. The approach holds important implications for other alternative work contexts and social-economic orderings with increasingly pervasive technologies influencing work experiences. We focus, however, on the important arena of home-based business entrepreneurs, their daily experiences and technology use, manifested in 'web working', allowing greater freedom to work from home or other 'liminal' spaces and run businesses flexibly. This is not the sole preserve of entrepreneurs, and the issues explored will resonate in larger organizational settings where employees also work remotely. Yet, self-employed, self-autonomous entrepreneurs face specific, distinguishable opportunities and tensions. These entrepreneurs crave at work autonomy and flexibility, desiring social connectedness through technological means, rather than routine physical social interactions. Paradoxically, the key challenge experienced in orchestrating control over their businesses is the perceived encroaching social isolation. Their feelings of being connected (virtually) and yet isolated (physically) reflect a sense of isolation that is paradoxical in that it was both comforting whilst simultaneously creating a sense of unease.

The entrepreneurs deploy strategies to resolve this tension. Some of these comprise various technological tools and social networking sites. The entrepreneur's approach is summed up in our concept of 'mental mobility'. In essence, they never fully resolve the ambiguities and tensions experienced. However, they navigate, manipulate or resist tensions in mentally fluid and flexible ways, adapting to their own particular

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circumstances, needs and preferences. They manage the complexities arising from their overlapping home-business spheres by navigating through their spatial, temporal and emotional situations. Due to their online businesses, this navigation requires limited physical travel, but includes considerable mental awareness of possibilities, and therefore ingenuity. Their apparent relative physical immobility is thus rendered *emotionally and mentally mobile* through daily virtual practices and communications that enable them to reconcile tensions. An ability to harness and fine-tune such 'mental mobility' lies at the heart of the entrepreneur's capacity to successfully manage the simultaneous opportunities and challenges endemic in autonomous home-based working. The onus is solely placed upon the self to define and navigate through virtual, spatial and temporal experiences, interpretations of different spheres of reality, and new ways of working.

It may be asked whether, as many of the entrepreneurs in our study are the lone self-employed, that this factor of 'loneness' to a large extent may shape their self-definitions and entrepreneurial experiences. This may be an influential factor, especially in terms of the nature and facility of the 'mental mobility' which they continuously employ, whether alone or connected online. The majority of the entrepreneurs in our study are in fact lone self-employed. Only six out of the 23 entrepreneurs interviewed either worked as part of a couple (three respondents) or were one out of three co-entrepreneurial partners/founders (three respondents). Each of the latter worked separately in their own homes connected mainly through the internet. They, as well as the three women interviewed who were a part of co-residing couples, displayed no obvious differences from the majority in our study. However, future research could investigate this further in terms of contrasting the lone self-employed entrepreneur with those who have set up as 'copreneurs'.

Finally, the empirical data explored here is from a UK-based sample of entrepreneurs. We propose that 'mental mobility' can be applied to entrepreneurs running online businesses who work in diverse home-work settings and alternative contexts such as emerging economies and developing countries for instance. Moreover, this concept emerged interpretatively from qualitative findings. Therefore future research can test the concept quantitatively or apply it to large data sets or samples. We argue that this concept of 'mental mobility' theorized in this paper is an exciting, innovative contribution which provides for useful extrapolations for future research in this area.

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Table 1: Summary Table - Characteristics of Research Participants and their Online Businesses

Entrepreneur #	Gender of Participants	Type of Online Home-Based Business	No. of Years Since Business Start-Up at Time of Interview
1	Female	Online community	Eleven years
2	Female	Online sale of consumer items	Four years
3	Female	Online lettings agency	Five years
4	Female	Website design	Four years
5	Female	Online recruitment consultancy	Three years
6	Female	Online professional network	Five years
7	Female	Online translation	Seven years
8	Female	Online marketing consultancy	Two years
9	Female	Online sale or rental of consumer items	One year
10	Female	Online sale of consumer items	Four years
11	Female	Online sale of consumer items	Twelve years
12	Female	Online sale of consumer items	Five years
13	Female	Online script-writing	Nine years
14	Female	Online sale of consumer items	Six years
15	Female	Web design	Seven years
16	Male	Search engine optimization	Three years
17	Male	Online script-writing	Eight years
18	Male	Audio-visual engineering services	Seven years
19	Male	Web design	Twelve years
20	Male	Web hosting	Eight years
21	Male	Online sale of business and consumer items	Three years
22	Male	Web design	Four years
23	Male	Online technical writing	Seven years