



Entrepreneurship and liminality: the case of self-storage based businesses

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Introduction

The recent economic recession has given rise to a sharp increase in self-employment and business start-ups in many developed economies, as those displaced sought to leverage their skills or to pursue new opportunities. For example, in the UK, 40% of the 780,000 people that found work in the year March 2013 – April 2014 did so by starting their own business (Simpson, 2014). This rapid growth in business start-ups has led to an increase in the number of entrepreneurs seeking suitable locations to operate their businesses. Many start their businesses at home or in associated premises such as garages and garden-offices, which provides an opportunity for them to test their business idea, whilst maintaining low start up and operating costs (Mason *et al.*, 2011; Daniel *et al.*, 2014). Being home-based does not preclude retailing or providing services, as many home-based businesses make use of the internet to promote and sell their products and services (Anwar and Daniel, 2014). However, particularly for businesses that need to hold significant volumes of stock, homes in the UK are often too small to comfortably operate a business. Whilst some entrepreneurs may move directly into their own commercial premises, others seek to find alternative business locations, which often represent a transitional or temporary epoch.

An under-explored example of a transitional entrepreneurial location is self-storage facilities. Self-storage is typically aimed at retail customers and provides flexible storage for items that they cannot store in their homes (Yearsley, 2014). Storage premises are often large purpose built or converted warehouses at the edge of towns or cities. Hence they can feel remote and isolated from town and community centres. The facilities are divided into multiple small storage units, usually by means of prefabricated solid walls and doors, arranged along narrow corridors. The interiors are stark, with no heating, decoration or natural light. Hence, whilst clean and safe, the facilities feel impersonal and temporary. Despite the lack of welcoming or creative ambience of such facilities, a growing number of entrepreneurs are moving their business into self-storage, often spending hours each day operating a significant part of their business from their storage unit, leading to the use of the term, self-storage based business (Harding, 2011; Prescott, 2013).

We adopt the lens of liminality (Van Gennep, 1960; Turner, 1982) in order to undertake an exploration of how entrepreneurial businesses are making use of self-storage facilities. We combine use of this lens with extant entrepreneurial studies, in order to theorise the impact and affordances of these liminal spaces for the entrepreneurs involved.

In the following section we introduce ideas associated with liminality by reviewing extant literature in the management and entrepreneurial domains. We highlight four key themes of liminality drawn from this literature which we use as an analytical framework. In order to broaden the relevance of our study, we draw on the forgoing review to suggest various forms of locational liminality, which we illustrate with contemporary non-traditional entrepreneurial spaces (summarised in Table 1). We use these types of locational liminality to discuss the multiple liminalities offered by self-storage facilities. We describe the method used for our empirical study and present the findings organised according to the four key themes. Whilst we focus on the specific instance of self-storage based businesses, our study reflects and is

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3 relevant to the wider growth in the provision and use of transitional locations by
4 entrepreneurial businesses. In the discussion section of the paper, we broaden out our
5 consideration of the use of transitional spaces for entrepreneurial businesses from the
6 specific case of self-storage, to other transitional spaces and places.
7

8 9 10 **Literature Review: Liminality and Management**

11
12 The liminal is considered as a transitional state, often described colloquially as ‘being neither
13 here nor there’ or ‘betwixt and between’ (Garsten, 1999; Kupers, 2011). Stemming from
14 anthropology, seminal authors such as Van Gennep (1960) used the term to consider the
15 transitions achieved by rituals and ceremonies, where subjects pass from a pre-ceremonial to
16 a new state, by passing through the liminal. Such transitions may occur in a single location,
17 or involve, or even require, the removal to a separate transitional location (Turner, 1982).
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19
20 Liminality has proved a popular and insightful theoretical lens to explore transitional or
21 outside-the-mainstream behaviours, roles, activities and locations in a number of
22 management domains. In marketing it has been used to consider consumption behaviours by
23 consumers in transitional states (Cody *et al.*, 2010; Smith-Maguire, 2010; Buchanan-Oliver
24 and Cruz, 2011; Hackley *et al.*, 2012) for example, pregnancy and early-motherhood
25 (Landzelius, 2001; Phillips and Broderick, 2014; Ladge *et al.*, 2012). Another stream of
26 studies has associated liminality with certain work arrangements, professions and roles such
27 as contractual workers (Tempest and Starkey, 2004), management consultants (Czarniawska
28 and Mazza, 2003; Sturdy *et al.*, 2006) and temporary staff (Garsten, 1999). Other studies
29 have applied the lens of liminality to activities as diverse as recruitment (Tansley and Tietze,
30 2013), information systems implementation (Wagner *et al.*, 2012) preparation of annual
31 reports (Davison, 2011) and workplace romance (Clegg *et al.*, 2015).
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35 Whilst the majority of the activities considered in these studies take place in the regular
36 workplace, others have considered activities in locations separate from the workplace, for
37 example, corporate entertaining (Sturdy *et al.*, 2006), the corporate away-day (Arya, 2011),
38 management education (Hawkins and Edwards, 2015; Kempster *et al.*, 2014) and strategy
39 development workshops (Johnson *et al.*, 2010). Such situations sit between or combine
40 purely business activities, with their associated norms and practices, and social activities,
41 where a different set of norms and practices are typically enacted. Other studies have
42 considered the locations and spaces that can be considered liminal. Kociatkiewicz and
43 Kostera (2011) discuss locations they describe as ‘non-places’ due to their transitional
44 nature, places such as airport lounges, hotel receptions and shopping centres. They suggest
45 that such transitional spaces are increasingly common in our contemporary societies but are
46 often passed through quickly, overlooked and viewed as of little consequence. However, as
47 these authors conclude, such transitional places are vital for, enable, and even force the
48 transition from one state to another.
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51 52 **Liminality and Entrepreneurship**

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54 Entrepreneurship itself is often viewed as a transition or stage distinct from other areas of
55 business (e.g. Shane and Venkataraman, 2000; Low, 2001). Recognising ‘entre’ refers to an
56 in between, Steyaert (2005) argues that, rather than being viewed as a delimited field,
57 entrepreneurship should be viewed as a border-zone. Echoing notions of creativity inherent
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3 in liminality, he views this border-zone as ‘a fertile middle space....a heterotopic space for
4 varied thinking’ (p.7).
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7 Despite the parallels between entrepreneurship and liminality, only a relatively limited
8 number of entrepreneurial studies have drawn substantially on the notion of liminality. Some
9 studies use the term as a descriptor rather than a full analytical or theoretical framing. For
10 example, Anderson (2005) draws upon liminality to describe what he sees as the creative
11 performance of entrepreneurship. He casts entrepreneurs as ‘living in that half-way house of
12 becoming’ (p.597) in that they are not established but must gain the trust and involvement of
13 potential stakeholders by creating a vision of their future business. This suggests notions of
14 entrepreneurial impression management (Nagy *et al.*, 2012; Überbacher, 2014). However,
15 such visions can also be performative (Austin, 1962) as they can ‘allow entrepreneurs to
16 proceed where others might be paralysed by uncertainty’ (p.597). Being in a state of
17 becoming is echoed in the exploration of trajectory shifts created by institutional
18 entrepreneurs (Henfridsson and Yoo, 2014). Trajectory shifts are characterised ‘as liminal
19 periods of time when entrepreneurs recognize limits in the present and pursue a new possible
20 future’ (p.948).
21

22
23 Whilst not employing the term liminality directly, Steyaert and Katz (2004) address closely
24 related topics by urging researchers to recognise that ‘entrepreneurship takes place in
25 multiple sites and spaces’ (p.180). They encourage entrepreneurship academics to go beyond
26 their interest in oft researched places such as Silicon Valley, and recognise that
27 ‘entrepreneurship is a matter of everyday activities’ (p.180). These themes are illustrated in
28 the same special issue by studies of entrepreneurship in depleted communities (Johnstone and
29 Lionais, 2004) and ‘mundane entrepreneurship’ (Rehn and Taalas, 2004). More recent
30 examples of everyday entrepreneurship include studies of mumpreneurs, where their
31 entrepreneurial spaces include the school gate (Ekinsmyth, 2011; Duberley and Carrigan,
32 2013). Similarly Williams (2007), although not drawing directly on liminality, addresses
33 marginalisation when he studies entrepreneurs in the informal economy, defined as activities
34 that are legal but not declared for tax. Prior studies have suggested that such entrepreneurs
35 are excluded from mainstream opportunities. In contrast, Williams finds that for some this is
36 a passage to formal entrepreneurship, linking the freedom from bureaucracy and lower costs
37 of the informal economy to experimentation and creativity that enables entry to the formal
38 economy.
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42 A more limited number of studies employ liminality more substantially, either as an
43 analytical framework or as a basis of theorising. Di Domenico *et al.* (2014) adopt the latter
44 approach in order to generate the notion of ‘mental mobility’ to conceptualise how
45 entrepreneurs operating online businesses at home, ‘navigate the liminal spaces between
46 physical and digital work-spheres, and the overlapping home/workplace’ (p.276). As an
47 example of the former, Gulbrandsen (2012) uses liminality as an analytical differentiator in
48 his study of entrepreneurial scientists, individuals who are based at Universities but actively
49 file patents or form spin-out firms. They view themselves as neither belonging to the
50 academic nor the entrepreneurial worlds and hence are classified as liminal and experience a
51 number of the aspects of liminality explored in this study. For example, they ‘fear conflicts
52 of commitment’ (p.10). Also these scientists are described as appearing less loyal to their
53 institutions than other academics, but this provides the increased flexibility and creativity that
54 allows them to pursue commercial opportunities. Echoing Czarniawska and Mazza’s (2003)
55 depiction of a bar as liminal, Hobbs *et al.* (2000) use liminality to analyse the expanding
56 night time economy in many post-industrial cities. In addition to viewing the night being a
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3 'time and space that is riddled with ambiguity' (p.710), they note that such economies are
4 often based in locations that would be viewed previously as 'unsocial or atypical' (p.702).
5 However, despite the liminal nature, which they say is an important part of the allure of such
6 locations, these atypical locations provide significant entrepreneurial opportunities.
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9 10 **Liminality: Key Themes**

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12 The following sub-sections discuss four key themes identified in extant liminal studies. We
13 also briefly relate the themes to the entrepreneurial domain more broadly in order to
14 emphasise further the synergies between liminality and entrepreneurship. The four themes
15 were subsequently used to frame empirical data collection and analysis.
16

17 ***A Transitional Phase***

18
19 Extant studies have identified a series of stages that describe the pre-liminal, liminal, post-
20 liminal states: separation, marginalization, reincorporation or reassimilation (Van Gennep,
21 1960; Sturdy *et al.*, 2006). During the separation phase the subjects become separated from
22 their previous state or environment. Use of the term 'marginalisation' for this phase
23 reinforces that the subject is operating outside the norm, and may be treated with caution by
24 those not involved in the transition (Kupers, 2011). Finally, after transition, the subject
25 returns to what may be considered a more conventional location or activity. The stages may
26 be very short and even coalesce, or they may go on for extended periods (Czarniawska and
27 Mazza, 2003).
28

29
30 Entrepreneurship has been referred to both as a distinctive phase (Shane and Venkataraman,
31 2000) and as an in between field (Steyaert, 2005). Literature within this canon, explicitly or
32 implicitly, often assumes that entrepreneurs and their firms move through this phase,
33 sometimes identifying periods within it. For example, periods are often referred to with
34 respect to progressive financial status, such as pre-revenue or first round venture capital (e.g.
35 Middelhoff *et al.*, 2014) or via metaphors of development and growth (e.g. Thorpe *et al.*,
36 2006; Boccardelli and Magnusson, 2006; Newbert and Tornikoski, 2013).
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38 ***Enhanced Creativity***

39
40 Lying outside the mainstream, the liminal state has been associated with liberation from
41 routine social structures, norms of behaviour and other expectations (Tempest and Starkey,
42 2004; Kupers, 2011). This has led to the association of liminality with increased creativity
43 and innovation as those involved take advantage of the additional freedoms and lack of
44 constraints. For example, such freedoms and the hoped for impact on creativity and team-
45 building are a key feature of the offsite corporate away-day and strategy workshop (Johnson
46 *et al.*, 2010; Arya, 2011). However, Czarniawska & Mazza, (2003) warn 'as liminality
47 becomes routinized [through repetition or extended duration], marginal innovations may be
48 happening all the time, but rarely inventions or break-throughs' (p. 287).
49

50
51 Creativity is closely associated with entrepreneurship (e.g. Lee *et al.*, 2004; Fillis and
52 Rentschler, 2010; Ahlin *et al.*, 2014). It is often a key part of opportunity identification or
53 the use of limited resources that may characterise entrepreneurial ventures (e.g. Senyard *et al.*,
54 2013). Personal characteristics associated with creativity are also salient in
55 entrepreneurship, for example, self-efficacy, independence and risk taking (Barron and
56 Harrington, 1981; Fillis and Rentschler, 2010). A conducive environment, both physical and
57 social, has been found to be important to fostering creativity (Amabile *et al.*, 1996).
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3 Examples include 'skunk works' such as Google X, where, consistent with notions of
4 liminality, time and space outside the norm are provided to stimulate creativity.
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6 ***Anxiety and Fear***

7 Whilst liminality is associated with increased creativity, the lack of norms, routines and
8 structure can be unsettling. The temporary staff studied by Garsten (1999) described feeling
9 observed and 'constantly trying to please' (p.611). This feeling of anxiety is repeated in
10 studies of other liminal states such as graduate recruits (Tansley and Tietze, 2013) and
11 undergraduates studying leadership (Hawkins and Edwards, 2015). These latter authors coin
12 the term 'monsters of doubt' (p.24) to refer to the anxieties experienced by students.
13 Interestingly, in the first study that appears to challenge the widespread characterisation of
14 liminality as anxiety provoking, Sturdy *et al.* (2006) find that the corporate entertaining they
15 analysed was suffused with structures and social norms from both the work place and
16 hospitality and concluded that 'liminal spaces can be highly structured and conservative'
17 (p.931).
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21 In their systematic review of entrepreneurship and fear, in which they encompass anxiety and
22 worry, Cacciotti and Hayton (2015) distil the range of fears experienced to the single
23 overarching 'fear of failure'. Within this are notions of both personal and opportunity failure
24 (McMullen and Shepherd, 2006) and elements such as fear of uncertainty and, echoing
25 impression management, a fear of losing the respect of important stakeholders (Conroy *et al.*,
26 2002). Whilst fear has usually been viewed as a barrier, it has also been acknowledged as a
27 source of entrepreneurial action, provoking a fight rather than flight reaction (Van Gelderen
28 *et al.*, 2015). In some cases anxiety arises from the specific context of the entrepreneurs. For
29 example, many entrepreneurs operating businesses from home describe being anxious about
30 both professional and social isolation (Baines, 2002; Christensen, 1987; Mason *et al.*, 2011;
31 Sayers, 2009-2010; Wynarczyk and Graham, 2013), anxieties that are exacerbated for the
32 increasing number that operate their home-based business primarily online (Van Gelderen *et al.*,
33 2008; Di Domenico *et al.*, 2014).
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36 ***Back-stage Liminal work***

37 Sturdy *et al.* (2006) also identify the notion of 'liminal work'. That is, they identify that a
38 considerable amount of work is required to maintain liminal places and liminal states. This
39 work is required both by those passing through and experiencing the liminal, but importantly,
40 what some may experience as a transitional place, is the regular and routine place of work for
41 others. The focus of these authors on corporate entertaining caused them to highlight that
42 considerable 'behind the scenes' or 'back-stage work' was expended by catering staff and
43 spouses. The corporate away-days studied by Arya (2011) are only possible, and often held
44 together, by similar back-stage work of staff who are often required to have, and develop a
45 range of skills outside their core expertise, such as pacifier, arbiter and counsellor. Similarly
46 Clegg *et al.* (2015) observe the considerable work and cost involved in deterring workplace
47 romances. In order to recognise 'the liminal work of others' our study includes interviews
48 with the operators of self-storage facilities.
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52 Whilst not explicitly recognised, Gulbrandsen (2012) provides examples of liminal work in
53 the entrepreneurial domain when he discusses the work of staff in science parks and
54 technology transfer offices that supported the entrepreneurial scientists he studied. These
55 staff, and those in related facilities such as business incubators, provide facilities and support
56 services to foster entrepreneurial firms and activities (McAdam and Marlow, 2011; Salvador
57 *et al.*, 2013; Ahmad, 2014). Other examples of work undertaken to support the
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entrepreneurial activities of others could include entrepreneurship educators (e.g. Bae et al., 2014) and business advisors and consultants (Thorpe *et al.*, 2006; Robinson and Stubberud, 2009; Klyver and Hindle, 2010).

Non-traditional Spaces as Exemplars of Liminality

Drawing on the foregoing reviews, we suggest that there are multiple ways in which liminality can arise when considering entrepreneurial locations. In this discussion and throughout the paper we adopt the language of geographers, in which place refers to geographic position, whilst space refers to the organization of buildings, rooms and objects and the term location encompasses both of these (Johnstone and Lionais, 2004).

Table 1 summarises six ways we suggest entrepreneurial locations can give rise to liminality. Considering each in turn: firstly, entrepreneurs may use the location for a finite period between other locations, which we refer to as a 'transitional phase'. The location itself may be transitional, for example the airport lounges considered by Kociatkiewicz and Kostera (2011) or the insalubrious areas of town considered by Hobbs *et al.*, (2000). The space constructed for the entrepreneurial venture may exist for a limited time only. Pop-up shops and restaurants provide an example of the temporary use or creation of entrepreneurial space, often as a means of providing fun and excitement in the retail experience (Niehm *et al.*, 2006). The provision or use of facilities outside the mainstream activities of the provider can be another source of liminality. Places or spaces that are not well known or well-regarded for entrepreneurship can result in those using such locations seeming out of the ordinary or on the margins. Finally, previous studies have identified that some entrepreneurial activities span boundaries, requiring those involved to learn to manage, negotiate or blur these boundaries (Clegg *et al.*, 2015; Di Domenico *et al.*, 2014).

Table 1: Liminalities and Entrepreneurial Locations

Nature of Liminality	Description	References	Contemporary Entrepreneurial Examples
Transitional phase	Entrepreneurial use is for a period between other phases.	Lyson <i>et al.</i> , 1995	Market stalls e.g. farmers markets often used before commercial premises
Place is transitional or transitory	The physical place is linked to the movement of people or goods	Kociatkiewicz and Kostera, 2011; Neale, 2007; Hobbs <i>et al.</i> , (2000)	Serviced offices – often in locations such as major road intersections. Night life districts
Space is temporary	Some or all aspects of the space are temporary.	Niehm <i>et al.</i> , 2006	Pop-up shops or restaurants
Outside usual operations or purpose	The use is being subverted or extended	Gulbrandsen 2012; Salvador <i>et al.</i> , 2013; Ahmad, 2014	Science parks and incubators often an adjunct to Universities.
Little known	Entrepreneurial use is little known, making it seem unusual	Colegrove, 2013; Shaw, 2016	Makerspaces - shared studio space. Services that let rooms in homes as offices (e.g. Spacehop and Vrumi)

Spans a threshold or transition	Entrepreneurial activity occurs (temporally, spatially or emotionally) across one or more domains.	Clegg <i>et al.</i> , 2015; Di Domenico <i>et al.</i> , 2014	Home-based businesses span work and home
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Consistent with notion of ‘double liminality’ identified by Mascia-Lees *et al.* (1987), we suggest that self-storage businesses demonstrate multiple liminalities. As our findings show, self-storage location represents a transition between being based in the home and moving into commercial premises. The intention and design of the storage facilities is to enable rapid and short visits from retail customers, hence, the overall ambience and affordances of the facilities are temporary in nature. Given that self-storage is orientated to retail customers, those running businesses, whilst welcomed and supported by the storage operators, are subverting the original intentions of the facilities. Finally, operating from such facilities is not well known or widely recognised by other businesses, advisors or commentators. Such entrepreneurs and their businesses therefore appear on the margins or outside the mainstream.

The size of the storage-based business market has not been established. However, industry analysis suggests that 40% of all self-storage volume is used by businesses (Self Storage Association, 2014). This includes storage by larger businesses of items that are used infrequently such as old case files and documents. The self-storage operators interviewed for this study estimated that approximately 70% of their business clients are entrepreneurial businesses, suggesting that such businesses represent nearly 30% of self-storage customers.

Method

As our research addresses the previously un-researched domain of storage-based businesses, we adopted an exploratory research design based on qualitative interviews with a small set of key informants. Such interviews represent a well-accepted method that provides rich data (John and Reve, 1982; Kumar *et al.*, 1993; Homburg *et al.*, 2012) that can be analysed and synthesised to provide high-level analytical insights to guide future research. Key informant interviews allowed a progressive, iterative and reflexive approach to data gathering and theorising appropriate for our exploratory study (Alvesson, 2003).

Key Informant Enrolment

The population of interest was key informants who had formed or operated entrepreneurial businesses based in self-storage facilities and operators of such facilities. We define self-storage businesses as those where one or more members of staff were working from self-storage facilities for at least three to four hours per day. That is, the self-storage facilities represent a significant, or their major place of work. Thus we differentiated such businesses from firms which were using the facilities for activities such as document or equipment storage or as a distribution drop-off point.

We used multiple approaches to identify and recruit possible key informants. We adopted a convenience sampling approach (Bryman, 2004) based on self-storage based businesses that had participated in a television documentary, in which one of the researchers was involved. This resulted in interviews with four entrepreneurs, two self-storage operators and a representative of the trade body for self-storage operators. Further convenience sampling

through personal networks, resulted in interviews with one entrepreneur and one operator. A snowballing approach (Bryman, 2004), in which interviewees were asked to identify others that fitted our population of interest, yielded interviews with one further entrepreneur and one further operator.

The size of our sample is consistent with our intention to provide an early, exploratory study of an un-researched domain. There was a high degree of consistency of responses within the informant types, suggesting a degree of data saturation (Silverman, 2006). Finally, obtaining data from both entrepreneurs and operators provided a degree of triangulation, increasing the validity and robustness of the study (Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 2008). We recognize the possibility that our approaches to identifying key informants could be prone to self-selection bias (Bryman and Bell, 2007), with agreement to participate being more likely among informants who viewed themselves or their businesses as positively framed.

Table 2: Key Informant Interviews Undertaken

Interviewee Number	Nature of Business	Year of Formation	Location of Business	No. of locations	Nature of interview/ Duration (minutes)
Self-storage based businesses					
1	Towels and Bedding for hotels	2000	Milton Keynes	1	Face to face (90)
2	Children's Clothing	2010	South London	1	Telephone (45)
3	Children's Clothing	2005	Central London	1	Telephone (30)
4	Catering equipment and supplies	2004	Outer London	1	Face to face (75)
5	Martial arts gym	2009	Reading	1	Telephone (30)
6	Furniture and bric a brac	2011	Stroud	1	Face to face (25)
Self-storage operators					
7	Self-storage	2008	East London	1	Telephone (45)
8	Self-storage	2000	UK-wide	25	Face to face (75)
9	Self-storage	1995	UK-wide	24	Telephone (30)
10	Self-storage	2005	Derbyshire	1	Telephone (35)
Self-storage trade association					
11	Trade	n/a	Cheshire	1	Face to face

	Association				(60)
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Data Collection

Table 2 summarizes the key informant interviews conducted, and includes the nature of the businesses, year of formation and location. All participants who agreed to take part in the study received a written description of the study's aims, the ethical guidelines, and how the findings would be disseminated and research data stored. Data collection was guided by a semi-structured interview schedule (Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 2008). The schedule was similar in structure and format for the various informants, with questions worded appropriately. The schedule design followed the ideas of narrative interviewing in which interviewees are encouraged to tell their story (Larty and Hamilton, 2011; Bryman, 2004; Hamilton, 2006).

Interviews were conducted face-to-face where possible (5), with the remaining (6) being undertaken by telephone. The reluctance of some interviewees to meet face to face is consistent with issues relating to impression management discussed further in the findings section of the paper.

Face-to-face interviews included tours of the relevant self-storage facilities and the spaces occupied by the self-storage based businesses, which were captured in observational field notes. Secondary data were also collected such as information from the businesses' websites, promotional and marketing materials and press coverage (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998). Four interviews were recorded. In cases in which the interviewees did not want to be recorded or it was not possible, contemporaneous notes were taken. We followed an iterative approach to data collection (Strauss and Corbin, 1990), reflecting on each interview before undertaking subsequent interviews.

We did not explore if the businesses studied are declaring all revenues to the relevant authorities, since this was not the focus of our study, and as noted by Williams (2007) this is a complex and sensitive matter. However, the fact that they were operating with the support of the operators suggests that they are not seeking to hide their businesses and therefore not obviously part of the informal economy.

Data Analysis

Interview transcripts and notes were thematically coded using Nvivo software. As shown in Table 2, 9 hours of interviews were undertaken which yielded over 38,000 words of transcripts and interview notes.

A deductive approach to coding was adopted (Dey, 1993; Miles and Huberman, 1984), in which data was coded against the four key themes identified and discussed in the literature review. Coding was undertaken by one researcher and independently assessed by the other researcher. Inter-coder reliability was high, but differences, when they occurred were resolved by reviewing the text in its fuller context (Miles and Huberman, 1984). Matching to the four liminal themes was not forced and we remained alert to emergent themes. However, despite the open narrative interview approach adopted, the majority of data closely matched the four themes identified, supporting our notion that liminality is an appropriate theoretical lens.

Reliability and Validity

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3 Issues of reliability and validity were addressed during research design, data collection and
4 analysis. They included: use of a similar semi-structured interview guide for all interviews
5 (reliability), an explicit framework for analysis (reliability) and interviewing multiple
6 practitioners active in the domain of interest (validity), which included practitioners with
7 different perspectives such as the entrepreneurs and facility operators as well as the trade
8 body which has understanding of experiences across the industry (validity).
9

10 11 12 **Findings**

13
14 In the following sections we adopt the major themes from our theoretical lens of liminality in
15 order to interrogate and explicate our study findings.
16

17 *A Transitional Phase*

18 The development of the businesses studied, and their future plans are consistent with the
19 notion of a transitional phase that characterises liminality (Kupers, 2011). All of the
20 entrepreneurs described how they had started their businesses in their own homes, but found
21 that their need to hold considerable stock or have access to a large indoor space, was not
22 possible in their home and so they had begun operating their business from self-storage.
23

24
25 *I started the business at home.... The market stall helped the web site and the business really*
26 *took off but so did the stock holding. My husband and I realised we need somewhere else*
27 *when one half of our small London flat was full of stock and it was difficult to move around.*
28 [Interviewee 2]
29

30
31 Although the entrepreneurs interviewed recognised the benefits that self-storage offered and
32 were very positive about these, they envisioned a time when they would move to their own
33 premises or were already planning to do so. Interviewee 4, who operated a catering supplies
34 business, described how they were just about to move. He stressed that the move was not for
35 more physical space, rather to allow the business to develop in ways that were not possible in
36 storage facilities:
37

38
39 *...Not space in terms of additional units, we could have loads of additional units. We don't*
40 *have the environment that would work for chefs, really. So what we need really is more a*
41 *supermarket environment for trade where we can lay out all the products.... Also we're*
42 *moving to training and education as well. So we need a kitchen too... [Interviewee 4]*
43

44 Hence, the transition afforded by the liminal phase may not be confined solely to a growth in
45 the size of the business, but may also encompass an enrichment of the nature of the business,
46 moving from emphasis on product distribution to added value and services.
47

48
49 Whilst all of the entrepreneurs interviewed appeared cognizant that their time operating from
50 storage facilities will be bounded, the storage operators described how some did not
51 recognise when they had outgrown the self-storage facilities and operators were sometimes
52 required to suggest it was time for them to move on:
53

54
55 *Some facilities have limited car parking and if for example you have 400 customers that are*
56 *storing with you of which 100 are businessesthen all of a sudden if you have ten of those*
57 *business customers who have ten visitors that is all of your car parking spaces filled and*
58 *there is no room for the other 300 customers that want to come and go. That is when you*
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3 *need to start talking to them* [the entrepreneurs] *about whether they need to move onto*
4 *somewhere new.* [Interviewee 7]
5

6 Finally, our findings echo notions from the literature that the state of liminality does not need
7 to be brief (Czarniawska and Mazza, 2003; Sturdy *et al.*, 2006). Interviewee 1 had been
8 operating from the same self-storage facilities for ten years, and although he described that
9 they would leave promptly if their sales volume increased significantly, there were no clear
10 plans or expectations of when this might happen.
11

14 ***Creativity or Conservatism?***

15 The entrepreneurs interviewed were emphatic that operating from self-storage liberated them
16 from the concerns and restrictions associated with leases on properties, and the variable costs
17 of associated services such as rates, electricity, water and property repairs. Interviewee 5 was
18 clear they would not have been able to start their martial arts gym if they had to lease their
19 own property:
20

21
22 *We started with £2,000 – that was not enough to lease a property and fit it out with*
23 *equipment – and the banks were not interested in a business model like ours and anyway we*
24 *weren't interested in increasing the risk.* [Interviewee 5]
25

26 The flexible and low risk nature of self-storage allowed the entrepreneurs to start businesses,
27 in some cases which they could not otherwise have started, and therefore engage in the
28 creativity inherent in entrepreneurship. However, we did not witness levels of, or approaches
29 to innovation, above those witnessed in most micro-businesses. All of the entrepreneurs
30 consistently strove to make their businesses more efficient, often related to reducing the space
31 requirements of the business so that they could reduce the amount and hence cost of space
32 rented. Also, like most small businesses, they worked consistently hard to grow their
33 business by finding new customers and by extending their product ranges. However, such
34 efforts appear to represent incremental or marginal improvements rather than significant
35 Schumpeterian innovation. It would therefore suggest that in the case of self-storage,
36 inhabiting the liminal does not appear to be associated with high levels of creativity.
37
38

39 The lack of creativity may be associated with the long tenure of self-storage, discussed in the
40 previous section. However, in addition to this, when it is considered that the prime rationale
41 for operating from self-storage expressed by the entrepreneurs is the consistency and
42 reliability of their property costs and the services provided by the operators, it may not be
43 surprising that it is not associated with high levels of creativity. Rather, we suggest that self-
44 storage provides a liminal place that is associated with stability and security consistent with
45 Sturdy *et al's* (2006) findings that 'liminality can in fact be a highly and multi-structured
46 comfortable and strategic or tactical space' (p.929).
47
48

49 Whilst operating from self-storage may be associated with lower levels of creativity,
50 observations from the storage operators suggest that it may help business sustainability. The
51 operators noted that the businesses operating from their premises had very low failure rates,
52 much lower than the failure rates attributed to the small business population overall:
53
54

55 *From what I see operationally there is not as high a drop-out rate as you would imagine.*
56 *Once they have gotten to us I think they are on the path to succeed. They have started*
57 *somewhere in the back of their terrace and by the time they have gotten to us they have*
58
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3 *managed to stabilize and iron out all of the kinks. You probably get a 10% rate of people*
4 *that do not succeed... [Interviewee 7]*
5

6 As noted by this operator, the lower failure rate may be because these businesses have
7 typically been operating for some time from home, and only those that are continuing to
8 thrive will consider moving to self-storage. However, the ability for a small business to
9 match their property, utility and some employment costs with the fortunes of their business
10 significantly reduces the pressure on cash flows and hence can positively contribute to
11 business sustainability.
12

13 ***Anxiety and Fear***

14 Inhabiting the liminal has been associated with feelings of anxiety and fear (Kupers, 2011).
15 In contrast, the entrepreneurs interviewed were not anxious or fearful. Instead they were
16 comfortable with the current state of their business and felt that their choice to operate from
17 self-storage was one that suited themselves and their businesses. They felt that the costs of
18 their storage rental were high, but this was balanced by their ability to vary the amount of
19 space rented to match their immediate business needs and the additional services offered by
20 the operators, often at no additional cost.
21

22 The only aspect for which the entrepreneurs manifested feelings of anxiety was related to the
23 negative perceptions associated with operating from self-storage. They attributed these
24 perceptions to external parties, such as customers and suppliers, for example Interviewee 1
25 asserted that operating from self-storage '*had a stigma*' attached to it:
26

27 *If you say I'm in self-storage, they think, oh, he's got a pokey little room, he's not very big,*
28 *can't be very successful, his product can't be very good... People like to know they're dealing*
29 *with a big company, big infers successful. [Interviewee 1]*
30

31 Other interviewees noted that as well as negative perceptions of others, they also had
32 negative self-perceptions which they sought to repress:
33

34 *I don't like the idea of my warehouse being in a self-storage unit. I guess it's an ego thing.*
35 *It's less prestigious. It's a bit of vanity. But I have to ignore these feelings. [Interviewee 2]*
36

37 Consistent with studies of impression management techniques adopted by small and
38 entrepreneurial businesses (Mohamed *et al.*, 1999; Bolino *et al.*, 2008; Nagy *et al.*, 2012) the
39 entrepreneurs adopted various techniques to obfuscate the fact that they operated from self-
40 storage, for example by not being explicit about their premises:
41

42 *I've always made out as if I operate from an industrial unit I just say I'm in Milton*
43 *Keynes and we're on an industrial estate [Interviewee 1]*
44

45 The self-storage operators colluded in this impression management. For example, one
46 provided separate mailboxes for each business so they did not need to use the name of the
47 storage operator in their address:
48

49 *We have a mail box offer so clients can pay to have their address as ABC Ltd, ...in these*
50 *terms the address looks professional. [Interviewee 6]*
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Much of the impression management literature associated with entrepreneurship finds that entrepreneurs seek to use such techniques to address the ‘liability of newness’ or ‘liability of smallness’ (Überbacher, 2014). Our study suggests that entrepreneurs are concerned about being seen to be operating from unconventional or marginalized locations, suggesting that entrepreneurs operating from such locations suffer a ‘liability of liminality’.

Liminal Work

Sturdy *et al.* (2006) urge us to ‘consider the other kinds of non-liminal work, both paid and unpaid, that has to occur to sustain liminal spaces’ (p.951). We therefore consider the managers and employees of the self-storage operators that work to maintain the liminal spaces for the entrepreneurs.

The operators described how they welcomed entrepreneurial businesses since they tended to improve occupancy rates, even if this was associated with discounts for occupying large spaces and multiple units. However, they were clear that these entrepreneurial businesses increased the workload of staff:

Commercial customers are great because they tend to pay well and they want long term... but they're also high users of the site. So, they do require more work from the staff, because they are coming and going..... Your average residential customer rarely goes into the unit... A commercial customer can be in there daily.. [Interviewee 9]

Some of the extra work done by the self-storage staff was not directly related to storage rental or services provided, and although voluntary, took time and creative effort from the staff. For example, one operator described how he tweeted about some of his business clients:

On a Friday if I have time I tweet about the clients. A good example, we have XX ales and I'll tweet that he's released a new beer and I can't wait to taste it. The clients love being tweeted about. [Interviewee 6]

The additional work required by the self-storage staff was graphically illustrated by the comments of one of the entrepreneurs, who light-heartedly referred to them as his own staff since he relied on them helping his business:

There is Carly and David at reception who are there from 8/9 o'clock in the morning up until 5.30/6 o'clock at night. ... I keep calling her our receptionist as she looks after our deliveries and things. David I call my warehouse guy, and he looks after the forklift. That's two salaries I save, plus the forklift. [Interviewee 1]

Our study therefore supports the findings Sturdy *et al.* (2006) that much work is undertaken by staff in the self-storage operator, so that others can experience the transcendence or liberation of the liminal. Studies of front-line staff in other domains, such as financial services and the travel sector, who also need to find a balance between organizational rationale and customer demands, have been shown to suffer from increased workloads, increased anxiety and the need to develop coping strategies to balance conflicting demands (Ball *et al.*, 2014).

Discussion

Our study suggests that liminality is a germane lens with which to commence theorisation of the growing phenomenon of transitional entrepreneurial locations. Self-storage based businesses provide a compelling exemplar of such transitional and hence liminal locations.

Extant studies have associated the uncertainty and otherness of liminal spaces with increased levels of creativity (Tempest and Starkey, 2004; Kupers, 2011; Gulbrandsen, 2012). Whilst the entrepreneurs interviewed had shown originality in using self-storage as a business base when it is not well known and had worked hard to develop their businesses, we did not find evidence of high levels of Schumpeterian innovation or creativity. In order to theorise our findings beyond the application of liminality and relate to extant entrepreneurial studies, we draw on studies that have associated self-efficacy and risk taking with entrepreneurial creativity (Barron and Harrington, 1981; Fillis and Rentschler, 2010). Our findings indicate that the entrepreneurs using self-storage are seeking to reduce their risk suggesting they are relatively risk averse and may also have relatively low levels of self-efficacy, compared to entrepreneurs who move directly into commercial premises. Hence the location chosen not only meets the needs of their business, for example large areas for storage of stock, it also provides a means of meeting their personal preferences for risk avoidance, thus meeting their emotional or psychological needs as well as the physical requirements of their business. The low levels of risk taking provide a plausible explanation for the low levels of creativity observed.

However, a vicious cycle may ensue. Extant literature shows that both social and physical environment will influence creativity (Amabile *et al.*, 1996; Clegg *et al.*, 2015). In the case of self-storage the paucity of opportunity for interaction, particularly as we found, customers and suppliers are dissuaded from visiting, provides an impoverished environment for creativity. Hence whilst prior studies have associated liminality with enhanced creativity, we suggest that the particularities of the liminal may also reduce creativity.

Sturdy *et al.* (2006) made a valuable extension to ideas of liminality in the business domain when they noted that rather than always being unsettling, 'some apparently liminal practices.... can readily be seen as a comfortable, 'usual practice', but also as liminal' (p.953). Hence liminality has been characterised as either unsettling and uncertain, or comfortable and expected. Our findings add an additional nuance to the characterisation of liminality. Our identification of feelings of increased operational certainty, coupled with increased reputational anxiety, suggests that certain liminal states may comprise both increased feelings of certainty and, simultaneously increased feelings of anxiety and marginalization.

We broaden our consideration of liminal entrepreneurial locations beyond the specific instance of self-storage by returning to Table 1. In Table 3, we extend our suggested typology of Table 1 by applying our overarching findings. That is idiosyncratic characteristics of liminal locations attract entrepreneurs with different personal characteristics and needs (e.g. physical, financial, psychological), who will in turn be influenced by those locations. For each of the six types of liminality, we suggest salient characteristics that can provide distinctive opportunities for entrepreneurs, and also how those locations may influence the entrepreneur or their venture. We note that there are many commonalities between the locations suggested, and with self-storage facilities. For example, many of them allow premises costs to be incurred on a variable basis, which we have found to be associated with feelings of liberation and comfort, but which also may be associated with extended

occupancy and limited radical innovation. Whilst we find self-storage facilities provide limited opportunity for interaction, other spaces such as makerspaces and incubator units may encourage interaction or co-location of staff from different businesses in order to encourage idea exchange (Colegrove, 2013; Ahmad, 2014). Entrepreneurs based in prestigious locations or associated with high profile organisations may benefit from a halo-effect and hence not be anxious about the impact of location on the legitimacy of their business. However, operation in such locations may provoke other anxieties, such as fear of losing control of ideas, copying or even not being able to 'keep up' with the progress or success of other businesses. The comments in Table 3 result from the deductive combination of our findings and prior literature. However, we would encourage empirical studies of the liminal locations identified since these may yield unexpected affordances and effects.

Table 3: Idiosyncratic Characteristics and Potential Influence of Liminal Entrepreneurial Locations

Liminal Entrepreneurial Locations	Idiosyncratic Characteristics of Location (physical, financial, psychological)	Potential Influence of Location on Entrepreneur
Transitional phase e.g. market stalls	Allows experimentation and growth. Costs can be matched to business performance.	Comfort may encourage long term use – which has been associated with limited innovation.
Place is transitional or transitory e.g. serviced offices	Like self-storage, costs can be matched to business performance – likely to attract trepidatious entrepreneurs. Lack of large area/volume space.	Reduced concern about property costs can be liberating. Less likely to be anxiety provoking if location recognised/ accepted.
Space is temporary e.g. pop-up shops	Provides element of fun and urgency – removes feeling of routine and mundane.	Likely to cause uneven work patterns – may cause stress and anxiety.
Outside usual operations or purpose e.g. University adjunct science parks	Halo-effect from sponsoring organisation may increase perceived legitimacy.	Increased liminal work to support non-mainstream operations.
Little known e.g. makerspaces and home office lets	Anxiety that unusual location will damage perceived legitimacy.	Creativity if space allows co-location, especially since other users may be outside mainstream. Liminal work to promote little known locations
Spans a threshold or transition e.g. home-based businesses	Allows operation in more than one domain at the same time (e.g. work and family/childcare)	Isolation since not inhabiting the multiple domains that provide varied social/professional interaction.

Prior literature suggests that entrepreneurship exhibits many of the characteristics of liminality. For example, it is considered a distinctive domain (Shane and Venkataraman, 2000) and in particular, an in between or border-zone, which is a 'fertile middle space' (Steyaert, 2005 p.7). Entrepreneurs have been characterised as living in a state of becoming – operating between a here and now and a future there and then (Henfridsson and Yoo, 2014; Anderson, 2005). Our study has considered the specific case of locational liminality. Bringing these together suggests a number of alternative interpretations. It may be that the creativity associated with entrepreneurship (Lee *et al.*, 2004; Fillis and Rentschler, 2010; Ahlin *et al.*, 2014) allows those involved to see and exploit the idiosyncratic affordances of liminal spaces, such as those associated with self-storage we have highlighted in this study. Hence entrepreneurs may be drawn to what Steyaert (2005) describes as heterotopic locations. In contrast, the liability of newness and smallness (Überbacher, 2014) may push entrepreneurs to liminal locations. Whether it is by choice or otherwise, it suggests that entrepreneurs in liminal locations face multiple liminalities (Mascia-Lees *et al.*, 1987). Consistent with notions of entrepreneurial fit (Markman and Baron, 2003; Dvir *et al.*, 2010) complementarity between liminalities may lead to enhanced performance and satisfaction. In other cases, inconsistency may exacerbate characteristics explored in this study such as anxiety, fear, conservatism and liminal work. Like the development of Table 3, we suggest that this is a topic for further research.

Conclusion

The significant increase in business start-ups witnessed over the last decade has resulted in entrepreneurial businesses being operated from a wide diversity of locations. Our study contributes to the entrepreneurship by answering Steyaert and Katz's (2004) call for studies in unfamiliar places and spaces.

We have looked outside the oft explored high tech, high growth ventures and have shown that non-traditional, often liminal spaces can widen the constituency of entrepreneurship. The idiosyncratic characteristics of such locations attract entrepreneurs with different personal characteristics and needs, who will in turn be influenced by those locations, for example, finding them liberating or anxiety provoking, or both. In the case of self-storage facilities, the liminal space allows trepidatious entrepreneurs to 'try on' (Hawkins and Edwards, 2015, p.15) operating a new venture. Whilst they are liberated from concerns about property costs, they are anxious about the impressions made. Also, whilst the entrepreneurs benefit from the additional services provided by the self-storage operators, this may be at the expense of extra 'liminal' work and anxiety experienced by the front-line staff of the self-storage operator.

We also make a theoretical contribution to the notion of liminality. To date liminality has most commonly been viewed as an uncomfortable, unsettled state outside the ordinary, or more recently as a state that certain staff inhabit comfortably and as a routine part of their working lives. Our findings suggest that liminality may manifest as a dualism: simultaneously engendering both feelings of increased certainty and security and feelings of increased anxiety.

The value of our study is that it highlights spaces outside the mainstream that can widen the appeal and access to entrepreneurial endeavour. Whilst alternative entrepreneurial places have been studied (e.g. Ekinsmyth, 2011; Duberley and Carrigan, 2013) self-storage facilities provide unique aspects not offered by other non-traditional spaces. Our study is of particular

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3 value to operators of such facilities, who wish to encourage entrepreneurs to use their
4 facilities to increase occupancy rates. Enabling creativity, for example providing
5 opportunities to host supplier and customer visits, is likely to enhance the experience of the
6 entrepreneurs.
7

8 9 10 **Limitations and Future Research**

11
12 We recognise that despite the consistent responses, our sample is modest in size. Whilst we
13 believe that the businesses and the entrepreneurs that we studied are representative of many
14 businesses operating from self-storage facilities, future studies should include a greater
15 diversity of types of business. As noted previously, we are also aware that our key
16 informants will have a positive-bias. Entrepreneurs involved in self-storage based businesses
17 that have failed are difficult to identify and may be unwilling to participate in research
18 studies. However, future studies of transitional business locations should seek to include the
19 experiences of those that did not succeed or those that considered such locations but made
20 other locational choices.
21

22
23 We suggest that as the demand for and use of transitional and non-traditional locations for
24 business operations increases, further research is undertaken to identify such usage and the
25 opportunities and challenges that arise. In particular we encourage empirical studies of the
26 types of liminality and locations suggested in Tables 1 and 3. As demonstrated in this study,
27 liminality appears to provide a pertinent theoretical lens for such studies, sensitising the
28 research to themes such as transitions, creativity, unsettledness, comfort, anxiety and the
29 liminal work of others.
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