



## Gender gap in entrepreneurship

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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Keywords:

Entrepreneurship  
Gender  
Venture capital  
Discrimination

### ABSTRACT

Using data on the entire population of businesses registered in the states of California and Massachusetts between 1995 and 2011, we decompose the well-established gender gap in entrepreneurship. We show that female-led ventures are 63 percentage points less likely than male-led ventures to obtain external funding (i.e., venture capital). The most significant portion of the gap (65 percent) stems from gender differences in initial startup orientation, with women being less likely to found ventures that signal growth potential to external investors. However, the residual gap is as much as 35 percent and much of this disparity likely reflects investors' gendered preferences. Consistent with theories of statistical discrimination, the residual gap diminishes significantly when stronger signals of growth are available to investors for comparable female- and male-led ventures or when focal investors appear to be more sophisticated. Finally, conditional on the reception of external funds (i.e., venture capital), women and men are equally likely to achieve exit outcomes, through IPOs or acquisitions.

### 1. Introduction

Entrepreneurship is one of the most important features of today's economy (Kacperczyk, 2012; Kacperczyk and Younkin, 2019; Carnahan et al., 2012). But launching a new venture appears to be particularly disadvantageous for women, who are significantly less likely to succeed as entrepreneurs (Canning et al., 2012). The imbalance between female and male entrepreneurs is especially stark among high-growth ventures, with women representing a much smaller share of founders able to achieve high-growth equity outcomes, including high-value acquisitions or IPOs (e.g., Robb et al., 2014). In short, there is a wide consensus that women remain largely underrepresented in high-growth entrepreneurship.

Despite this ample research, however, our understanding of gender-based gap in high-growth entrepreneurship remains incomplete. A vast majority of studies have focused on gender disparities in early investment (e.g., Canning et al., 2012; Greene et al., 2003; Gatewood et al., 2003; Brush et al., 2003; Coleman and Robb, 2009; Sørensen and Sharkey, 2014), suggesting that women are much less likely than men to obtain external capital from investors (Canning et al., 2012; Greene et al., 2003; Gatewood et al., 2003; Brush et al., 2003). However, we currently know less about how various forces might generate disparities between female and male entrepreneurs at other points in the process. Entrepreneurship involves a number of stages, from founding a new venture, to seeking capital, to exit (e.g., Aldrich and Ruef, 2006). But

few studies have assessed the relative importance of each stage for generating less-favorable outcomes for female entrepreneurs. For example, whether women face greater disadvantage at founding or whether such disparities tend to widen later in the process remains open to question. From a policy perspective, however, such understanding is critical for addressing gender inequality in entrepreneurship and increasing female representation among high-growth entrepreneurs. If differences between female and male entrepreneurs arise at different stages and accumulate over time, policies should involve numerous interventions, which target multiple actors at multiple stages of entrepreneurship.

In this study, we extend the current literature by offering a more complete account of gender disparities, and document how the gender gap arises at different points in the entrepreneurship pipeline. Specifically, we decompose the disparities between female and male entrepreneurs into the entrepreneurs' initial founding choices and the investors' subsequent funding choices. In evaluating their relative contributions to the observed imbalance between female and male founders, we propose that gender disparities will tend to reflect different forces that place women at a cumulative disadvantage, when they become entrepreneurs.

First, we build on a growing line of research which highlights the critical role of the initial differences in venture's orientation in driving subsequent performance outcomes (Carter et al., 2003; Gompers and Lerner, 2001). To the extent that new ventures vary dramatically in

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.respol.2019.03.012>

Received 13 August 2018; Received in revised form 13 March 2019; Accepted 14 March 2019

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their initial growth potential, we expect large disparities between female- and male-founded startups to already originate at founding. Consistent with studies on gender segregation (e.g., [Bielby and Bielby, 1988](#); [Fernandez and Sosa, 2005](#)) and motherhood penalty in the workplace (e.g., [Budig and England, 2001](#); [Jacobs and Gerson, 2004](#); [Correll et al., 2007](#)), gendered processes will systematically structure women's career choices, inclining female entrepreneurs to sort into startups associated with a lower growth potential. Because, due to childbearing obligations, women are generally perceived as less legitimate or less competent entrepreneurs ([Thébaud, 2015](#); [Kacperczyk and Younkin, 2019](#)), mobilizing resources to pursue a higher-growth venture will be more difficult. Second, building on the sociological perspectives which emphasize the role of gender in informing evaluations under uncertainty (e.g., [Ridgeway and Correll, 2006](#)), we propose that significant residual disparities will persist even net of differences in venture orientation. Gender disparities will continue to arise because investors hold negative biases against female-founded ventures (e.g., [Brush et al., 2003](#); [Thébaud, 2015](#); [Gompers et al., 2014](#)), given that predominantly male investors rely on negative stereotypes about gender when evaluating entrepreneurs' competences (e.g. [Thébaud, 2015](#); [Baughn et al., 2006](#); [Gupta and Turban, 2012](#)), and male investors will tend to form relations with demographically-similar entrepreneurs (e.g., [Gompers et al., 2014](#); [Pitchbook, 2017](#), [Ewens and Townsend, 2019](#)).

By analyzing the gender gap at different stages in entrepreneurship, we advance our understanding of the origins of such disparities in two main ways. First, our approach allows for a relative assessment, shedding light on the dual role of a venture's attributes and investors' assessments in contributing to the imbalance between female and male founders. Prior literature, by contrast, has primarily focused on a single stage in the process: the external investment (e.g., [Canning et al., 2012](#); [Greene et al., 2003](#); [Gatewood et al., 2003](#); [Brush et al., 2003](#); [Coleman and Robb, 2009, 2016](#); [Sørensen and Sharkey, 2014](#)).

Second, we examine the way in which a startup's attributes influence subsequent access to external funding. Researchers have argued that certain startup characteristics affect the odds of growth outcomes, such as IPOs or high-value acquisitions, and that this growth orientation is responsible for attracting external investment (e.g., [Kaplan and Lerner, 2010](#); [Alvarez and Busenitz, 2001](#)). But measuring growth orientation empirically is challenging for several reasons. First, data on new ventures are often collected in the later stages of development (such as during the receipt of venture capital), but sample selection bias might arise because lower-quality ventures are likely to fail long before they are recorded. Moreover, extant accounts have often relied on surveys to measure a venture's initial attributes that influence investment chances ([Reynolds et al., 2000](#)), but these data may suffer from important biases, as entrepreneurs reconstruct past events, attitudes, and motivations ([Kepler and Shane, 2007](#)). Finally, though a number of studies have considered variation in industries in which men and women choose to launch new ventures ([Carter and Shaw, 2006](#); [Coleman and Robb, 2009, 2009](#); [Heilman and Chen, 2003](#)), startup growth orientation can vary even within a single industry ([Guzman and Stern, 2015, 2016, 2017](#)), suggesting the need for more granular measures at the firm level. More generally, accounting for initial growth orientation requires developing indicators that leverage objective measures based on a population of new firms.

We leverage data on the population of entrepreneurs in the United States between 1995 and 2011, in which differences in the initial venturing choices that predict subsequent growth outcomes can be readily observed and measured directly. Following [Guzman and Stern \(2015\)](#), we use a novel approach that captures these underlying differences for each start-up, using publicly available business registration records. We construct a novel dataset containing *all* California and Massachusetts for-profit start-up corporations, limited liability companies, and partnerships from 1995 to 2011. We focus on California and Massachusetts as our focal states because entrepreneurship and venture

capital activity are more prevalent in these regions (NVCA, 2015).

In the resulting comprehensive empirical analysis, we decompose the entrepreneurial process into critical points, founding and funding, and identify differences between female and male entrepreneurs at those stages. First, we find that women are much less likely than men to start new ventures. In particular, female-led start-ups account for 21 percent of all startups registered in California or Massachusetts. Subsequently, female-led startups are much less likely to receive external funding, with female founders representing only 10 percent of all venture-backed startups, and 7 percent of those that achieve an equity growth outcome. However, a substantial share of this gap (65 percent) can be explained by the initial differences in startup growth orientation, as indicated by observable attributes: the legal form of organization (e.g. corporation, LLC, or partnership), the state of jurisdiction in which they choose to organize the firm (e.g. Delaware or local), startup name, industry (commerce, biotechnology, or semiconductors), founders' name (i.e., eponymy),<sup>1</sup> and whether a startup has patents and trademarks filed close to the time of registration. For example, although women represent 22 percent of all registered companies, they account for only 12 percent of Delaware registrations (a jurisdiction usually associated with growth intentions), 10 percent of companies with patents at founding, and 15 percent of all companies in the IT sector. They also account for a higher (25 percent) share of all companies with names related to local industries (rather than traded industries<sup>2</sup>). When these observables are included in a predictive model to account for a single index of growth orientation, female-founded startups represent only 13 percent of the top 5 percent high-growth startups, and 10 percent of the top 1 percent high-growth startups. Finally, we detect a significant residual difference (35 percent) and provide evidence that, at least some of this gap, reflects investors' biases and stereotypes about gender. Further, among comparable female- and male-founded ventures, this gap in funding diminishes significantly with a stronger growth orientation of a new venture (i.e., as it moves towards the top 5 percent, 1 percent, or 0.1 percent).

Overall, our findings indicate a dual impact of an initial venture's orientation and investors' bias in creating gender disparities at different stages of the entrepreneurship process. We argue that gendered processes impose constraints on women's motivation and opportunities to found high-growth ventures, creating significant gaps between women and men at different points – at founding and investment stages. Our findings further imply that the disadvantage that female entrepreneurs face tends to accumulate over time and that interventions aiming at multiple stages are therefore warranted for reducing gender inequality in high-growth entrepreneurship.

## 2. Theory and hypotheses

### 2.1. Past research

Gender inequality is a persistent feature in entrepreneurship outcomes: women are less likely to become entrepreneurs than men ([Aldrich, 2005](#); [Ruef et al., 2003](#)) and less likely to outperform once a new venture is founded ([Kim et al., 2006](#); [Yang and Aldrich, 2014](#)). But though the gender-based gap in high-growth entrepreneurship has been well documented, the precise origins of such disparities along the entrepreneurial process remain less well understood. The majority of

<sup>1</sup> Eponymy refers to the use of the founder's personal first or last name in the name of the company itself (e.g. Ford Motor Company). The use of eponymy in entrepreneurship has a recent active line of research (e.g. [Belenzon et al., 2017](#); [Guzman and Stern, 2015](#)).

<sup>2</sup> Traded industries are those whose products are sold outside the local economic area in which they are created. Examples include manufactured goods, internet services, and some financial services. Local industries are industries where the product or service is mostly sold locally, such as restaurants.

previous research has focused on early-stage investment, with numerous studies documenting that external investors (i.e., venture capitalists or angels) are less likely to provide capital to female entrepreneurs (e.g., Canning et al., 2012; Greene et al., 2003; Gatewood et al., 2003; Brush et al., 2003). Further evidence suggests that such disparities can persist even in experimental conditions, net of any observable differences between female- and male-led ventures (e.g., Thébaud, 2015; Bigelow et al. 2014; Brooks et al. 2014; Tinkler et al., 2015). Yet despite this fruitful line of inquiry, we currently know less about how each stage of the pipeline contributes to the gender gap.

Rather than being a single event, entrepreneurship is a process, and as such it consists of a number of stages, from founding a new venture, to seeking capital, to exit (e.g., Aldrich and Ruef, 2006). Although disparities between female and male founders might arise at different points in time, reflecting the different obstacles that women face, we currently know little about the relative importance of these stages for the overall gender gap in entrepreneurial activity. For example, past studies have not assessed the critical points when women tend to lose out the most, relative to men. Or, little is known about the nature of the gender gap: Are women equally disadvantaged throughout the process, or do gender disparities arise more at some points than others?

In what follows below, we shift the analytical focus to track gender disparities throughout the entrepreneurship process and quantify where the gap appears to be the most substantial. In probing the origins of disparities between women and men, we propose that differences in venture orientation and evaluations of female-founded ventures will drive, in tandem, the disparities across female and male entrepreneurs. Specifically, we expect that gendered processes will give rise to many initial differences in growth orientation amongst female- and male-led ventures, and that women will pursue ventures associated with a lower growth potential. But net of these differences, the prevalence of negative stereotypes and gendered expectations held by investors will additionally widen gender disparities, putting women at a further disadvantage. Finally, to the extent that these residual differences reflect, at least in part, the negative gender stereotypes or cultural beliefs about female entrepreneurs, differences between female and male founders will attenuate amongst female-led ventures with stronger signals of growth orientation or amongst investors who exhibit greater investment sophistication.

## 2.2. Initial growth orientation

There is a strong reason to expect that gender disparities at the investment stage tend to reflect differences that arise earlier in the entrepreneurial process. Recent studies provide evidence that there exists a considerable heterogeneity among new ventures already at founding and that not all new ventures are created equal. Startups vary significantly in their growth potential (Hurst and Pugsley, 2010; Kaplan and Lerner, 2010; Schoar, 2010) and such variation can be observed even within a single industry or even among innovative ventures (Guzman and Stern, 2015, 2016, 2017). Entrepreneurs make observable founding choices at (or close to) firm registration, deciding about the venture's legal form, naming, and intellectual property, all of which signal the growth orientation and the future aspirations of a new company. For example, characterizing differences in the growth potential of firms at founding, Guzman and Stern (2015) find that growth-oriented entrepreneurs exhibit a number of notable attributes. First, they are relatively more likely to register under Delaware jurisdiction rather than their home state (since Delaware offers a large canon of law that is useful in the process of growth and enforcement of complex contracts), while less growth-oriented entrepreneurs would find Delaware registration too costly (around a few thousand dollars per year). Second, growth-oriented entrepreneurs tend to set up their firm as a corporation (which can sell shares to investors and IPO) rather than the more tax-advantageous LLC, which is common for less growth-oriented startups. Third, growth-oriented entrepreneurs tend to explore a novel

technology or a novel idea, which can warrant the costs of applying for a patent or a trademark to protect expected brand and other marketing investments. Finally, Guzman and Stern (2015) show that the name of the company itself signals differences in growth orientation, such as growth-oriented startups being less likely to have an eponymous name (i.e., be named after the founder), and more likely to have a short name. These findings are further consistent with Belenzon et al. (2018), who argue that eponymous names reflect a trade-off between the need to signal control versus the need to secure VC financing, and Green and Jame (2013), who argue on the importance of name appeal in influencing perceived firm value. Together, these initial differences at founding affect the odds of securing external funds; Guzman and Stern (2016) predict the *ex-post* performance of companies at founding and find that over seventy percent of equity growth outcomes (IPOs or acquisitions) occur in the top 5 percent of their predicted distribution (and nearly 50 percent in the top 1 percent of growth-oriented ventures). In short, the initial founding conditions create considerable disparities across new ventures with respect to their growth orientation.

But to the extent that startups vary in their initial orientations in ways that influence investors' evaluations and subsequent growth outcomes, these signals of growth might be unequally distributed across female and male entrepreneurs. Gendered processes and structural constraints imposed on women in the workplace and at home will lead to systematic differences between female and male-led ventures at founding. First, founding a high-growth venture requires an exposure to novel opportunities and ample resources to exploit those opportunities, but structural inequalities in the workplace put women at a considerable disadvantage relative to men. Gender practices such as the expectations of an ideal worker (Kelly et al., 2014; Benard and Correll, 2010), whereby women are perceived as more committed to family obligations and therefore less fit for workplace duties (Acker, 1990; Williams, 2000; Jacobs and Gerson, 2004; Correll et al., 2007), reduce women's chances to advance to higher-level positions or to occupy roles in high-profitability industries (Fernandez and Sosa, 2005; Loscocco et al., 1991; Kalleberg and Leicht, 1991). Gender segregation across occupations and jobs can limit women's access to knowledge, information, and resources conducive to identifying high-value opportunities on which the founding of a high-growth venture depends.<sup>3</sup> This might reduce the odds that women will found new ventures in attempts to explore novel technologies or new market ideas warranting patent protection or trademarks.

Second, gendered careers can push women towards certain types of entrepreneurship, steering them away from founding ventures with a high-growth potential. Women's career choices are constrained by the disproportionate work-life demands due to childrearing and household chores, which fall to a greater extent on women and generate a "time bind" (Hochschild and Machung, 2012), or an acute conflict between work and family (e.g., Blair-Loy, 2003; Bielby and Bielby, 1988). Indeed, even among gender-egalitarian couples with dual careers, there are normative expectations that familial obligations and household chores are women's responsibility (Cha and Weeden, 2014; Hochschild and Machung, 2012). The obligation of "intensive mothering," whereby women are required to be constantly available and intensively involved in children's activities, intensifies work-family demands amongst mothers (Hochschild and Machung, 2012; Gerson, 2009), pushing them to self-sort into career paths that can accommodate family chores and help resolve work-family conflict (Aldrich and Cliff, 2003; Barbulescu and Bidwell, 2013). This structural constraint can carry over into entrepreneurship, inclining women towards entrepreneurial careers as a way to achieve greater job flexibility and a better balance between work and family demands (Georgellis and Wall, 2000; Lombard, 2001).

<sup>3</sup> Studies have shown that women are more likely to found ventures in consumer-oriented and personal services, retail, and trade (Anna et al., 2000; Brush et al., 2006).

Indeed, scholars have argued that women turn to entrepreneurship out of necessity (or as “Plan B”) when seeking to have more control over their schedules or to reduce the cost of childcare (Boden, 1999; Carr, 1996; Carter et al., 2003; Connelly, 1992; Johansson Sevå and Öun, 2015; Thébaud, 2015).

Because female entrepreneurs will likely overweigh work-family concerns, they will be less likely to self-sort into ventures with growth attributes. A number of studies suggest that achieving work-life balance is more commonly accomplished through life-style businesses and self-employment (Carter et al., 2003; Birley, 1989; Yang et al., 2019), rather than ventures with high-growth potential. Indeed, informal, home-based productions, unlikely to be incorporated or to hold intellectual property rights, are most likely to bestow on women the benefits of schedule control, job flexibility, and work-life balance.<sup>4</sup> By contrast, founders of high-growth startups tend to experience higher levels of work-related stress (Witters and Agrawal, 2012), such that many of them and their spouses cope by increasing their use of sedative and hypnotic drugs (Dahl et al., 2010). Hence, the work-life conflicts that women experience will encourage them to pursue home-based ventures (e.g., self-employment) rather than startups with high-growth potential.

Finally, women might be less likely to found high-growth startups because of the considerable gender differences in human and social capital. Negative gender stereotypes undermine female representation in technical and scientific fields (Brush et al., 2006; Ding et al., 2013; Coleman and Robb, 2009), and this scarcity can contribute to large disparities between female and male entrepreneurs at founding. For example, because women are generally less likely to be engaged in patenting or licensing activities (Ding et al., 2013; Lowe and Gonzalez Brambila, 2005), female-founded ventures will be less likely to hold IP rights or trademarks. Similar gender disparities can be detected in women’s and men’s social capital, with stark differences in structure and composition of their networks (Aldrich, 2005; Cromie and Birley, 1992). Social ties are the most important resource for entrepreneurs, since they channel capital and endorsement benefits (Stewart, 1990), but women are often excluded from the most valuable or resourceful networks (Moore, 1990; Smith, 2000; Ibarra 1992). Such inequalities in network structure can carry over into entrepreneurship (Aldrich et al., 1989; Renzulli, 1998; Ruef et al., 2003), where female founders exhibit strong (Fischer and Oliner, 1983) and homogenous ties (e.g., Ruef et al., 2003; Renzulli, 1998), which will subsequently limit their access to opportunities and resources required for founding a high-growth venture. For example, limited access to diverse information, central to identifying high-value market opportunities (Aldrich, 2005), will put women at a significant disadvantage when developing a new business idea. Similarly, a lack of ties to powerful actors, such as investors, will limit their access to valuable support and mentorship that can be critical when developing risky, breakthrough ideas. Finally, unequal access to networks deprives women of endorsement benefits, which often accrue to individuals when quality is difficult to evaluate directly, mitigating any potential discounts in the eyes of resource holders (Tinkler et al., 2015). As a result, women face significant obstacles when attempting to mobilize resources and/or develop skills necessary to start high-growth businesses.

Overall, significant differences across female and male entrepreneurs tend to arise at the critical stage of a new-venture founding. Gendered processes, in the workplace and at home, impose substantial constraints on women, steering them away from the pursuit of high-growth ventures. These processes will lead women to make choices at

founding that differ fundamentally from those made by men. As gendered processes push women to create less growth-oriented companies in favor of low-growth entrepreneurship, we expect that female founders will be less likely to make costly investments to make the kinds of choices that facilitate growth. Specifically, women will be less likely than men to register their startups in Delaware or to found incorporated ventures, in general. Similarly, because female founders will be less motivated to appeal to financiers, these female-led ventures will be less likely to adopt short, eponymous names that would presumably appeal to financiers. Finally, women will make fewer investments in setting up intellectual property assets that are most useful for firms that intend to grow.

### 2.3. Residual differences

Whereas initial differences in a venture’s growth orientation can explain a significant portion of the gender gap in entrepreneurship, there is reason to expect that these differences will continue to persist even when such orientation is accounted for. To the extent that investors play an important role in propelling high-growth entrepreneurship (Kortum and Lerner, 2000; Nanda and Rhodes-Kropf, 2013), gender differences are likely to widen at the funding stage of the entrepreneurial process.

First, negative biases about gender might be particularly prevalent amongst investors, and such gendered expectations can put women at a significant disadvantage when accessing funding. Theories of discrimination posit, for example, that gender inequalities arise because females endure disparate treatment from key resource holders due to discrimination and negative stereotypes about gender (Ridgeway and Correll, 2006; Castilla, 2008). These mechanisms are particularly likely to apply to the entrepreneurial setting because job-related schemas and stereotypes associated with entrepreneurship trigger systematic biases against women. For example, entrepreneurship is often perceived as a male-typed activity (Yang and Aldrich, 2014; Cavalluzzo et al., 2002; Shane et al., 2012; Lewis, 2006; Wajcman, 2010), and cultural beliefs about masculine characteristics can be especially strong for high-growth ventures (Thébaud, 2015). Because women are rare amongst founders of high-growth ventures, any such instance can appear even more unusual, raising questions about the overall fit or competence of female founders. Put differently, precisely because of their atypicality in the entrepreneurship setting, women tend to be perceived as less competent or less “natural” entrepreneurs (Kacperczyk and Younkin, 2019). This further suggests that resource holders will discount the female entrepreneurs and the investment-worthiness of their enterprises, putting women at an additional disadvantage.

Additional tendencies to underinvest in female startups can arise because of investors’ preferences for homophily, similarity-attraction, and in-group preference – based on the premise that individuals tend to informally associate with others who share salient demographic characteristics (e.g., McPherson et al., 2001). Given that investors are predominantly male (Gompers et al., 2014; Brush et al., 2003), similarity attraction, homophily and in-group biases (e.g., Tajfel and Turner, 1979) will lead to a higher degree of intergroup (investor/entrepreneur) interaction or greater liking and attraction (e.g., Tsui and O’Reilly, 1989), increasing the probability of an entrepreneurial investment in male-led startups. Hence, regardless of the actual performance of female-led start-ups, the stereotypes associated with entrepreneurship as well as preferences for homophily will generate additional disparities between female- and male-led ventures, leading to lower rates of venture capital deals for observationally-equivalent start-ups founded or run by women.

Finally, to the extent that the residual differences partly reflect cultural bias or negative stereotypes of female entrepreneurs, we expect the gender gap to be attenuated under certain conditions. Theories of statistical discrimination suggest that stereotypes are activated when information is limited or ambiguous (Arrow, 1977; Phelps, 1972).

<sup>4</sup> One entrepreneur noted that she pitched a possible investor from her hospital bed the day after giving birth to her daughter (Koh, 2018). Another entrepreneur noted the following: “Taking little to no maternity leave is the norm for many female founders, particularly these whose firms are simply getting off the ground. Tight deadlines, every day crises and the potential for missed opportunities demand it” (Koh, 2018).



Importantly, reliance on ascriptive characteristics or status has been found to decrease as additional information about merit or quality become available to evaluators (Podolny, 1993; Simcoe and Waguespack, 2011), or when evaluators are themselves more experienced and more capable of discerning quality directly without reliance on demographic cues (e.g., Jensen, 2006). For example, Botelho and Abraham (2017) find that evaluators are less likely to rely on gender in their evaluations when more information about individual performance is available. In the context of entrepreneurship, Tinkler et al. (2015) similarly find that venture capitalists are less likely to discount female founders when uncertainty decreases due to endorsements provided by entrepreneurs' network ties. Hence, a direct implication of these theories is that the gender gap should diminish when (a) growth-orientation signals are stronger and therefore more salient to investors; and (b) when investors themselves are more experienced or more sophisticated.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. Empirical strategy

Our empirical strategy relies on conceptually separating the entrepreneurial pipeline into events occurring before and after firm founding. Although many past events and individual attributes influence the type of a company an entrepreneur will found, most of this heterogeneity will be reflected in observable indicators of startup orientation toward growth. Hence, new ventures could exhibit stronger or weaker growth orientation and thus be more or less attractive to investors.

Using administrative business registration records, we track all new registered<sup>5</sup> ventures at the time of their legal founding, and document startup attributes at founding, shown to predict subsequent growth outcomes: the legal form of organization (e.g. corporation, LLC, or partnership), the state of jurisdiction in which they choose to organize the firm (e.g. Delaware or local), startup name, industry, founders' name, and whether a startup has patents and trademarks filed close to the time of registration. Because these attributes predict subsequent growth outcomes (Guzman and Stern, 2015), they offer a suitable measure of a startup growth orientation (or expected productivity) from the investor's perspective. Thus, in decomposing the gender gap in entrepreneurship, it is critical to account for these underlying differences across startups.

We follow the approach of Guzman and Stern (2015) of using predictive analytics with *ex-post* growth outcomes and out-of-sample predictions to examine these numerous founding choices, and to compute a summary statistic of "growth orientation." Specifically, we estimate a proxy measure of the orientation towards the outcome that the venture capitalists institutionally seek: the ability to sell equity invested in a startup in a short period of time either through an IPO or a high-value acquisition.

As such, for all startups, irrespective of funding source or outcome, with founding characteristics  $X_i$ , and an indicator of an equity growth event  $g_i$  six years after founding, we define this growth orientation  $\theta_i$  as the predicted probability of:

$$\theta_i = P(g_i | X_i)$$

and use its empirical counterpart ( $\hat{\theta}_i$ ) as our central measure in interest in understanding the underlying differences across firms.

This predictive algorithm allows us to create a single measure of startup growth orientation. Guzman and Stern (2015, 2017) find that, though no single observable predicts growth completely, together these

observables have a high predictive power.<sup>6</sup> Using this measure to understand differences in potential gains (and therefore new venture's *ex-ante* attractiveness) to investors (i.e., venture capitalists), we begin to decompose the gap in funding into variation accounted for a startup's growth orientation, versus that which still remains and is partly attributable to investors' bias against female founders.

#### 3.2. Data sources and sample selection

Business registration records are public records created when individuals register a business. Since business registration is a requirement for growth (and for receiving venture capital), it is possible to observe a quasi-population of all startups at risk of receiving such financing at a similar foundational moment.

Our sample consists of all for-profit start-up business registrants in the states of California and Massachusetts from 1995 to 2011. These states are particularly suitable for our purpose because more than 50 percent of the VC market is located in California, and 10 percent of the VC market is located in Massachusetts (by dollars invested in 2014; NVCA, 2015). During the period covered by our sample, it was possible to register several types of businesses: corporations, limited liability companies, limited liability partnerships, and general partnerships.

Our analysis draws on the complete population of firms satisfying one of the following conditions: (a) a for-profit firm whose jurisdiction is in California or in Massachusetts, or (b) a for-profit firm whose jurisdiction is in Delaware but whose principal office address is in California or Massachusetts. We exclude companies whose primary location is external to California or Massachusetts. Finally, we merge this database with VentureXpert data, which contains detailed information on venture-capital funding. All venture investments in VentureXpert are matched by exact name with start-ups registered in California and Massachusetts. These selection criteria yield a sample of 1,875,087 start-ups.

#### 3.3. Measures

##### 3.3.1. Dependent variable

**3.3.1.1. Venture-capital funding.** Our primary dependent variable is the reception of VC funding. We focus on access to VC funding as the main outcome for several reasons. First, venture capital has been a central source of external finance for commercializing innovations in the U.S. economy over the past several decades (Kortum and Lerner, 2000; Samila and Sorenson, 2011). Second, though venture-backed start-ups represent only a very small fraction of all new firms (about 1/6 of 1 percent), over 60 percent of IPOs since 1999 have been venture-backed (Kaplan and Lerner, 2010). The main dependent variable is a dummy equal to "1" if a start-up receives VC funding within 2 years after the founding date. We consider a 2-year window to control for any potential time heterogeneity, but the results are also robust to different time frames. Seventy percent of VC events occur within 2 years.<sup>7</sup> For robustness, we consider the total amount of capital raised, conditional on VC investment, and find similar results (available upon request).

##### 3.3.2. Independent variables

**3.3.2.1. Female-led start-up.** The main independent variable is a dummy equal to "1" if a start-up is female-run. The identification of female-led

<sup>5</sup> We include all corporations, partnerships, and limited liability companies, but exclude sole-proprietorships. Fairlie et al (2018) present a comprehensive survey of all firms using US Census data, and show there is little transition between sole-proprietorships and registered businesses.

<sup>6</sup> For example, in out of sample tests, they separate up to 70% of all companies that eventually are IPO or are acquired. These analyses are conducted on a small sub-sample accounting for only 5% of firms.

<sup>7</sup> This result is consistent with other samples of business registration records containing more states (Catalini et al., 2018) and samples matching the receipt of VC funds to the U.S. Census Longitudinal Business Database (Puri and Zertschke, 2012).

start-ups relies on two conditions: (a) gender could be identified for at least one of the main managers of the firm (i.e., the president or the CEO of the corporation), and (b) if gender is identified for the management team, all members for which we can identify gender are female. We construct a measure of gender based on first names provided by the business registration records for individuals in the above-mentioned positions. To do so, we use the Social Security Administration list of names registered at least five times in a year from 1950 to 2000. To handle ambiguous names (e.g., Taylor), we use only names that are five times more common in females than males (or vice versa). Following this procedure, we are able to confidently identify gender for 84 percent of firms in our sample.

**3.3.2.2. Startup growth orientation.** We use the at-founding characteristics established by Guzman and Stern (2015, 2016) as indicators of follow-on, start-up growth. Specifically, Guzman and Stern (2015, 2016) establish that certain startup characteristics strongly predict whether a startup achieves high growth outcomes, including IPO or a high-value acquisition. Following this approach, we use business registration records to construct measures of startup growth.

We first construct two binary measures that relate to how the firm is registered, *Corporation*, whether the firm is a corporation rather than an LLC or partnership, and *Delaware jurisdiction*, whether the firm is registered in Delaware. *Corporation* is an indicator equal to “1” if the firm is registered as a corporation, and “0” if it is registered either as an LLC or a partnership. *Delaware jurisdiction* is equal to “1” if the firm is registered in Delaware but has its main office in California (all other foreign firms are dropped before analysis). We then construct two additional measures based directly on the name of the firm. *Eponymy* is equal to “1” if the first, middle, or last name of the top managers is part of the name of the firm itself. Our second measure relates to the length of the firm name. Based on our review of naming patterns of growth-oriented start-ups versus the full business registration database, a striking feature of growth-oriented firms is that the vast majority of their names consist of two words. We define *Short name* to be equal to “1” if the entire firm name has three or fewer words, and “0” otherwise. Based on findings of Guzman and Stern (2015), we additionally examine the type of traded cluster a firm is associated with, focusing on whether the firm is in a high-tech cluster or a cluster associated with resource-intensive industries.<sup>8</sup> Finally, an important indicator of a startup growth orientation is the presence of patents or trademarks. These measures are constructed using a name-matching algorithm that connects the firms in the business registration data to external data sources. We include patents filed by the firm within the first year of registration and patents assigned to the firm within the first year from another entity (e.g., an inventor or another firm). Our second measure, *Trademark*, is equal to “1” if a firm applies for a trademark within the first year of registration.

### 3.4. Measuring startup growth orientation

Following the methodology in Guzman and Stern (2015), we estimate the firm-level probability of achieving a growth outcome based on observable start-up characteristics. First, we estimate the model presented in our methodology section with a growth outcome equal to “1” if a firm achieves an IPO or acquisition within 6 years, and include all early-stage observables, as described above.

Although multiple definitions of growth are possible, we use this

<sup>8</sup> For our high-tech cluster group (*Traded High Technology*), we draw on firm names from industries in 10 U.S. Cluster Mapping Project clusters: Aerospace Vehicles, Analytical Instruments, Biopharmaceuticals, Downstream Chemical, Information Technology, Medical Devices, Metalworking Technology, Plastics, Production Technology and Heavy Machinery, and Upstream Chemical.

outcome to correctly characterize the venture capital process: growth orientation at founding indicates the potential to achieve a successful exit. Accordingly, we construct a dummy variable equal to “1” if the start-up achieves an IPO or a high-value acquisition within 6 years of registration.<sup>9</sup> Both outcomes are drawn from Thomson Reuters SDC Platinum. We observe 1,099 positive growth outcomes for the 1995–2005 start-up cohorts (used in all our regressions). The median acquisition price is \$77 million (ranging from a minimum of \$11.9 million at the 5th percentile to \$1.92 billion at the 95th percentile). Finally, we use this model to predict the probability of a growth outcome for a firm, given its observable characteristics at founding. This probability is a measure of growth orientation at the time of firm founding.

Our initial model excludes gender to allow for estimates of growth orientation to be independent of whether a start-up is female or male-run. Thus, for any given firm, our measure estimates its likelihood of achieving a growth outcome, given early-stage observables without considering the effect of gender on growth. This allows us to further estimate the effect of gender while controlling for growth orientation, as indicated by initial startup characteristics.

Before we turn to analyses of gender, we first discuss our computation of the growth orientation metric, as can be seen in Table A1. We begin by estimating a logit regression specification with all startup observables, estimated for all firms registered in California and Massachusetts between 1995 and 2005. We use the observables shown to have a good fit as well as a strong predictive power in out-of-sample tests (Guzman and Stern, 2015, 2016, 2017). We find that, amongst new ventures, startups with a “corporation” form are 5.8 times more likely to grow relative to the baseline; startups with a short name are 2.5 times more likely to grow; and eponymous startups are 70 percent less likely to grow. New ventures with a trademark are almost 4 times more likely to grow, startups with a patent are 35 times more likely to grow, and startups registered in Delaware are 52 times more likely to grow. Startups that both have a patent and are registered in Delaware are 269 times more likely to grow. Finally, firms associated with high-tech industries are 53 percent more likely to grow, whereas firms associated with local industries are 33 percent less likely to grow. Interestingly, this small number of observables accounts for 34 percent of all statistical variation (*pseudo*-R-squared).

### 3.5. Summary statistics

Table 1 lists descriptive statistics for the main covariates. The mean of our independent variable, *Female*, is 22 percent, indicating the share of startups in our sample led by women. Fig. A1 plots this measure through time, for both California and Massachusetts. Our main dependent variable is a startup access to VC funding (in 2 years and 6 years). We also consider subsequent outcomes, such as IPOs and mergers and acquisitions. We provide summary statistics for controls, including firm observables, intellectual property observables, industry characteristics, and VC-targeted industry controls.

Table 2 and Fig. 1 together provide simple measures of the incidence of female founders on all our measures, categorized into three different groups: equity events including both VC financing and growth outcomes; growth orientation; and at-founding observables. We describe each one in turn.

In terms of equity events, women-led startups represent a relatively small share (22 percent) of all startups that achieve any of these events. Female-led startups further account for only 10 percent of venture-backed firms, and 7 percent of those that are sold or have an IPO. These

<sup>9</sup> Thomson Reuters limits acquisitions to known values over \$1M dollars. In unreported analyses, we have experimented with higher thresholds of this, finding no significant differences in the analysis. Similar analyses are also in the Supplementary Materials of Guzman and Stern (2016).

**Table 1**  
Summary statistics.

	N	Mean	St. Dev.	Sum
Year	1875087	2004.1653	4.4917	3.76E+09
<i>Gender Measures</i>				
Female-led Start-Up	1875087	0.2212	0.415	414682
<i>Firm Outcome Measures</i>				
Growth (IPO or M&A in 6 years)	1875087	0.0008	0.0278	1455
VC Series A in 2 Years	1875087	0.0021	0.0454	3871
VC Series A in 6 Years	1875087	0.0026	0.0506	4815
Less Sophisticated VC	2064	0.2485	0.4323	513
<i>Firm Observables</i>				
Corporation	1875087	6.30E-01	0.4828	1.18E+06
Short Name	1875087	0.5064	0.5	949510
Eponymous	1875087	1.67E-01	0.3727	312607
Delaware	1875087	0.0466	0.2108	87366
<i>Intellectual Property Observables</i>				
Patent	1875087	0.0045	0.0666	8349
Trademark	1875087	0.003	0.0548	5643
<i>Broad Industry Controls</i>				
Local	1875087	0.1556	0.3625	291774
Traded High Technology	1875087	0.0534	0.2249	100159
Traded Resource Intensive	1875087	0.1091	0.3118	204610
Traded	1875087	0.5365	0.4987	1006077
<i>VC Targeted Industry Controls</i>				
IT Sector	1875087	0.0281	0.1652	52633
Biotech Sector	1875087	0.0028	0.0529	5255
Ecommerce Sector	1875087	0.0458	0.2091	85915
Semiconductor Sector	1875087	0.001	0.0309	1788

**Table 2**  
Growth orientation indicators and female-led start-ups.

Share of Female-Led Start-ups Across Observables	
All Start-ups	22%
<i>Start-up Outcomes</i>	
IPO or Acquired	7%
Gets Venture Capital	10%
<i>Incidence Across the Distribution of Growth Orientation</i>	
In Top 10%	17%
In Top 5%	13%
In Top 1%	10%
<i>Corporate Form and Naming Observables</i>	
Corporation	24%
Short Name	22%
Eponymous	22%
Registered in Delaware	12%
<i>Intellectual Property Observables</i>	
Has Patent	10%
Has Trademark	21%
<i>Industry Sector Observables</i>	
Local Industries	25%
Traded Industries	21%
IT	15%
Biotechnology	20%
Ecommerce	17%
Medical Devices	20%
Semiconductors	14%

initial findings strongly suggest that gender gap in entrepreneurship might reflect, at least in part, differences in the kinds of startups and women and men launch. A similar pattern can be detected when considering the incidence of female-founded ventures at higher levels of growth orientation. Among startups in the top 5 percent by growth orientation, startups led by women account for only 13 percent. And among startups in the top 1 percent by growth orientation, female-founded startups account for only 10 percent.

We next turn to firm-level differences at founding to account for such disparities in entrepreneurial outcomes across female and male-

founded ventures. The results suggest that women create startups that differ from those created by men along a number of dimensions, including industry, the type of jurisdiction taken (a proxy for intent to both raise venture capital and grow), and the use of innovation technology (e.g., patenting). Although women represent 22 percent of all firms, they account for only 10 percent of startups that have a patent, 12 percent of those registered in Delaware, 15 percent of those oriented towards IT, and 14 percent of those oriented towards semiconductors. Notably, patenting and registering in Delaware were also the characteristics most associated with growth in our predictive model.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Main results

In Table 3, we assess the baseline hypothesis by considering the probability of obtaining VC funding by female-led ventures relative to their male-run counterparts. As shown in column 1, female-led ventures are 63 percent less likely than male-led ventures to obtain VC funding. In column 2, we re-estimate this baseline specification but match female- and male-run ventures on our measure of growth orientation. As can be seen, the gender gap decreases to 24 percent, suggesting that as much as 65 percent of the observed differential in access to entrepreneurial funding is due to systematic sorting of females and males into ventures of varying growth orientation. Finally, in column 3, we re-estimate the baseline specification using the Monte Carlo procedure<sup>10</sup> these findings mirror previous estimates, with the estimated gender gap equal to 22 percent.

Overall, our results lead to two important conclusions. First, while women are less likely to access venture capital than men, most of this gap arises because of the underlying differences with respect to startup growth orientation. Therefore, the initial stages of the entrepreneurial process play a much larger role in generating disparities between female and male entrepreneurs than do subsequent stages. At the same time, female-run ventures continue being less likely to access VC funding even when compared to male-run ventures of similar growth orientation. In the following section, we perform additional analyses to probe deeper into the mechanisms that may potentially explain these residual gender-based differences we observed.

### 4.2. Residual differences: statistical discrimination

Although our results indicate that most of the gender-based gap in entrepreneurship is driven by the initial differences in growth orientation across female- and male-founded ventures, as much as 35 percent of this differential persists even when such initial heterogeneity is taken into consideration. We further probe the mechanisms likely to explain the residual gender differences in the reception of VC funding. Our argument implies that, once differences in growth orientation are netted out, the residual variation will partly reflect differences in investors' bias against female entrepreneurs. We conduct additional analyses to examine if our analyses are consistent with this explanation.

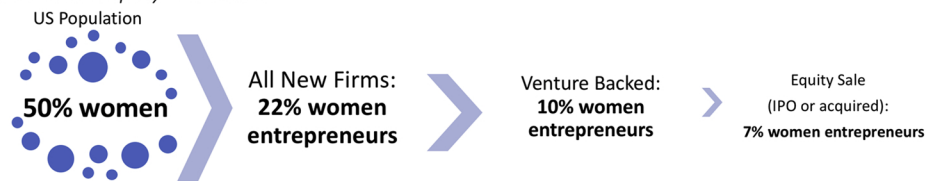
#### 4.2.1. The growth-orientation strength

We begin by examining whether gender bias diminishes for ventures with a stronger growth orientation. The results are presented in Table 4 Panel A. Panel A in this table estimates gender-based differences in VC funding at different levels of growth orientation. We classify entrepreneurial ventures in the following way: (1) 0–95th percentile of growth orientation, (2) 95–99th percentile, (3) 99th percentile, (4)

<sup>10</sup> Given the small number of female-founded firms at the high end, we prefer to match it with multiple different male-led firms. To do so, we find 100 random matches (with replacement) for each female firm, then estimate the coefficient 100 times and report the coefficient's empirical distribution.

### Incidence of Women Entrepreneurship Across Categories for all Firms Registered in California and Massachusetts, 1995–2011 (N = 1.8 million firms)

#### A. Across Equity Outcomes



#### B. Across Growth Orientation

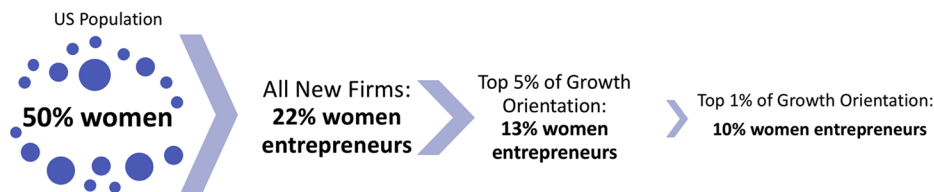


Fig. 1. Incidence of Women Entrepreneurship.

**Table 3**

The probability of female-led ventures getting VC funding in 2 years.

	Estimate Effect of Female-led start-up		
	(1) Logit Regression	(2)	(3) Bootstrapped Estimate
Female-led Start-up	0.368*** (0.0202)	0.756*** (0.0439)	0.781*** (.0285)
Corporation		19.04*** (1.783)	
Short Name		4.010*** (0.236)	
Eponymous		0.117*** (0.0277)	
Delaware Only		143.7*** (8.416)	
Patent Only		47.82*** (6.442)	
Patent and Delaware		554.3*** (38.02)	
Trademark		1.373*** (0.124)	
Broad Sector Dummies	No	Yes	
VC-Targeted Sector Dummies	No	Yes	
Observations	1875087	1875087	
Pseudo R-squared	0.008	0.483	

We report the results of a logit model with *Venture Capital* as a binary outcome. *Venture Capital* is a binary variable equal to 1 if the firm raises venture capital financing and 0 otherwise, as reported in Thompson Reuters VentureXpert. Column (1) is the unconditional relationship of gender to the probability of equity outcomes. Column (2) is the same estimate controlling for our measures of growth orientation. Column (3) controls directly for growth orientation using the predicted value of Table A1, out of sample. We follow the approach recommended in Imbens and Rubin (2015) that includes matching on this value to account for differences in the balance across genders through. Exact matching is possible due to our large sample. To estimate the confidence interval, we bootstrap this estimate 100 times. \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

99.5th percentile, and (5) 99.9th percentile. This partition is particularly suitable to the VC context because the modal investment outcome is a failure, and over 50 percent of VC investments are concentrated in the top 1 percent of the predicted distribution (see Catalini et al., 2018). For example, Hall and Woodward (2010) report that about 50 percent

of the VC-backed start-ups in their sample had zero-value exits. Because successful exits are rare for VCs, the latter tend to focus on investments with the highest potential.

As shown in columns 1 through 5, conditional on matching on at-founding observables, the gender gap is wider at lower levels of growth-orientation—or for new ventures associated with greater uncertainty. In column 1, within the 0–95th percentile, a start-up run by a female is 33 percent less likely to receive VC funding than a comparable growth-orientation start-up run by a male. Column 2 shows that the gap decreases for ventures that fall into the 95–99th percentile of the distribution: within this category, female-led ventures are 23 percent less likely to obtain VC funding than comparable male-led ventures. Column 3 estimates the probability for new ventures that fall within the top 1 percent of the distribution. Gender-based differences in access to VC capital continue to decrease: female-led ventures are 16 percent less likely to receive VC funding than comparable male-led ventures. Columns 4 and 5 further estimate the probability of VC funding for ventures at the top 0.5 percent and 0.1 percent of the estimated growth-orientation distribution, respectively. Gender-based differences disappear entirely within those subsamples, indicating that female-run start-ups at the top of the distribution are as likely as equivalently positioned male-run start-ups to secure important entrepreneurial resources.

In additional analyses, we tested whether the coefficients in these different models were different statistically. Our results show differences in the coefficients are statistically significant between the coefficient of the bottom 95% (Column 1) and the coefficient of the 95–99th group (Column 2); between the bottom 95 percent and the top 1 percent (Column 1 and Column 3); and between the top 1 percent and the top 0.1 percent (Column 3 and Column 5). The estimated differences are not statistically significant between the 95–99th group and the top 1 percent (Column 2 and Column 3), or between the top 1% and the top 0.5% (Column 3 and Column 4).

Overall, these findings are consistent with the theories of statistical discrimination, indicating that gender-based differences in access to funding are not uniform across different levels of growth orientation; instead, as ventures seem more oriented towards growth (and uncertainty decreases), evaluators rely less on gender to assess the potential exit value of a new venture.

#### 4.2.2. Non-sophisticated evaluators

As a second test, we examine whether the effect of gender varies with the evaluators' sophistication. If statistical discrimination accounts for the residual gap in funding, then we should expect the remaining



**Table 4**

Logit regression female-led ventures at different levels of firm and VC sophistication. Matched estimates on entrepreneurial growth orientation.

Panel A: P(VC Financing in 2 Years)					
	(1) 0–95 percentile	(2) 95–99 percentile	(3) top 1%	(4) top 0.5%	(5) top 0.1%
<b>Regression Coefficient</b>					
Female-led Start-up	0.674*** (0.066)	0.771*** (0.060)	0.842** (0.053)	0.892 (.071)	1.02 (0.175)
<b>Summary Stats</b>					
Observations	1,763,556	74,255	18,564	9282	1,857
Share of All Firms Female-led	24%	13%	11%	9%	8%
Total Funded Firms	302	736	2,121	1,324	480
# Female-led VC Funded Firms	48	72	192	115	40
Share of All Observations	0.0027%	0.10%	1.03%	1.24%	2.15%
# Male-led Growth Firms	254	664	1929	1209	440
Share of All Observations	0.0144%	0.89%	10.39%	13.03%	23.69%
<b>t-tests</b>	Cols (1) & (2)	Cols (1) & (3)	Cols (2) & (3)	Cols (3) & (4)	Cols (3) & (5)
T-Statistic of Difference in Means	1.54	2.87	1.25	0.10	1.38
T-Statistic p-value (df = 100–1)	0.06	0.00	0.11	0.46	0.09
Panel B: P(VC Financing in 2 Years by Sophisticated VC) (1995–2005 Only)(1)					
	(6) All Firms	(7) 0–99 percentile	(8) top 1%	t-test of Difference in Means for Cols (7) & (8)	
<b>Regression Coefficient</b>					
Female-led start-up	0.857* (0.074)	0.749** (0.097)	0.947 (0.109)	t-statistic p-value	1.92 0.03
Panel C: P(VC Financing in 2 Years by Non-Sophisticated VC) (1995–2005 Only)(1)					
	(9) All Firms	(10) 0–99 percentile	(11) top 1%	t-test of Difference in Means for Cols (10) & (11)	
<b>Regression Coefficient</b>					
Female Start-up	0.775* (0.137)	0.440** (.104)	1.033 (0.232)	t-statistic p-value	3.30 0.00

We report the results of a logit model with *Venture Capital* as a binary outcome. *Venture Capital* is a binary variable equal to 1 if the firm raises venture capital financing and 0 otherwise, as reported in Thompson Reuters VentureXpert. Ratios reported; Bootstrapped standard errors in parentheses.

\*  $p < 0.05$ .

\*\*  $p < 0.01$ .

\*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .

disparities to be greater among non-sophisticated investors.

To account for investors' sophistication, we follow [Krishnan and Masulis \(2012\)](#), who calculate a reputation score for the top 1,000 VCs between 1996 and 2002 based on past IPO performance. We use their score, expanded to the period 1995–2005. At the firm level, VC quality is the maximum of the Series A investors. We consider VCs to be less sophisticated when they fall into the bottom quartile of VC-backed firms, based on the reputation score presented in [Krishnan and Masulis \(2012\)](#).<sup>11</sup>

In Panels B and C of [Table 4](#), we examine the heterogeneous effect of gender on the probability of accessing VC funding for sophisticated and non-sophisticated VCs. To do so, we re-estimate the baseline specification for the two kinds of VCs, separately. Columns 6 through 8 report the estimates for the association between female-run ventures and VC funding for sophisticated VCs. Columns 9 through 11 re-estimate the same baseline specifications for non-sophisticated VCs. Whereas the bulk of our paper compares firms across the growth orientation distribution, here compare the coefficients of the likelihood of fundraising across more and less sophisticated VCs for the same firms. As can be seen in columns 6 and 9, the overall gender gap is greater for non-sophisticated VCs (an increase from 14 percent to 22 percent), consistent with the notion that less capable evaluators are more likely to rely on gender stereotypes in inferring the potential value of a new

venture. A further decomposition of these effects by growth-orientation levels leads to an important conclusion: differences by investor sophistication stem primarily from startups placed outside the top of the growth distribution (columns 7 and 10). Once startups have a strong growth orientation (i.e., they are placed within the top of the distribution), the effect is indistinguishable from zero for both types of investors.

Taken together, these results provide evidence consistent with the proposition that the residual gap in funding might reflect – at least in part – investors' bias against female entrepreneurs.

#### 4.3. Auxiliary analyses: alternative explanations

We conduct a number of auxiliary analyses to examine other potential explanations for the residual gap in funding between female and male-founded startups. Specifically, we consider whether such gap might reflect (a) differences in investment complementarities across female and male-founded ventures; (b) differences in investors' risk taking; and (c) differences in individual characteristics of female and male entrepreneurs.

##### 4.3.1. Gender differences in complementarities of VC funding

We first assess whether the residual gap in access to VC funding might partly arise because female entrepreneurs are less likely to benefit from receiving VC funding than male entrepreneurs. For example, fewer complementarities might exist between male-dominated VCs and female-run ventures *ex-post*, reducing investors' motivation to make bets on female-run ventures. Alternatively, female-led ventures that

<sup>11</sup> Notably, during the period 1995–2002 there were a considerable number of non-sophisticated investors in the market. Our list is mostly composed of short-lived funds such as the Boston University Community Technology Fund and corporate venture capital funds such as the Compaq Computer Corporation.

**Table 5**  
Impact of VC on growth outcomes (Only 1995–2005).

	DV: IPO		DV: Acquisition	
	(1) IPO Firms	(2) IPO Firms	(3) Acq All Firms	(4) Acq All Firms
VC Series A in 2 Years	1.822 <sup>***</sup> (0.213)	1.835 <sup>***</sup> (0.219)	4.274 <sup>***</sup> (0.358)	4.375 <sup>***</sup> (0.375)
VC Series A in 2 Years * Female-led start-up		0.914 (0.328)		0.731 (0.191)
Corporation	21.87 <sup>***</sup> (5.884)	21.87 <sup>***</sup> (5.885)	4.453 <sup>***</sup> (0.404)	4.455 <sup>***</sup> (0.404)
Short Name	1.798 <sup>***</sup> (0.165)	1.798 <sup>***</sup> (0.165)	2.134 <sup>***</sup> (0.122)	2.135 <sup>***</sup> (0.122)
Eponymous	0.474 <sup>***</sup> (0.106)	0.474 <sup>***</sup> (0.106)	0.344 <sup>***</sup> (0.0469)	0.344 <sup>***</sup> (0.0469)
Delaware Only	75.87 <sup>***</sup> (8.098)	75.88 <sup>***</sup> (8.099)	31.28 <sup>***</sup> (1.833)	31.29 <sup>***</sup> (1.833)
Patent Only	66.38 <sup>***</sup> (13.06)	66.40 <sup>***</sup> (13.06)	31.44 <sup>***</sup> (3.847)	31.48 <sup>***</sup> (3.850)
Patent and Delaware	517.0 <sup>***</sup> (67.93)	517.1 <sup>***</sup> (67.94)	144.7 <sup>***</sup> (12.31)	144.7 <sup>***</sup> (12.32)
Trademark	4.784 <sup>***</sup> (0.592)	4.782 <sup>***</sup> (0.592)	5.322 <sup>***</sup> (0.527)	5.314 <sup>***</sup> (0.527)
Broad Sector Dummies	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
VC-Targeted Sector Dummies	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	1442015	1442015	1442015	1442015
Pseudo R-squared	0.415	0.415	0.333	0.333

We report the results of a logit models with a binary outcome of whether a firm receives IPO or acquisition as reported in either the SDC New Issues database (for IPOs) or the SDC Worldwide Mergers, Acquisitions, and Alliances, database (for acquisitions). Incidence ratios reported; Standard errors in parentheses.  
\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ .

\*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ . Only firms up to 2005 used to allow enough time for growth events to occur in our sample.

receive funding may be less motivated than male-led ventures to pursue successful exit strategies *ex-post*, which would again discourage external investors from making *ex-ante* investments in female-run ventures. If this were the case, female-run ventures would underperform male-run ventures even conditional on access to VC funding.

To investigate this possibility, we examine whether the benefits of getting VC funding (i.e., its positive impact on growth outcomes) accrue differently for female- and male-led ventures. We consider the two key equity growth outcomes relevant for VC investments—IPOs and acquisitions. We then assess the heterogeneous effect of VC funding on those outcomes. As can be seen in Table 5, columns 1 and 3, VC funding has a positive and statistically significant impact on the probability of filing for an IPO as well as being acquired. The interaction effect added in Columns 2 and 4 further shows that the positive impact of VC funding on liquidity events is homogenous across male- and female-led ventures, suggesting that female-led ventures and male-led ventures are equally likely to exit conditional on access to venture capital. To the extent that female-led ventures might be undervalued due to biased investors, these findings suggest the possibility that women can still be less motivated or less willing to pursue exit strategies *ex-post*.

#### 4.3.2. VC risk-taking

Another explanation for the residual gap we observe is that higher-quality VCs might be more able and more willing to take risks than lower-quality VCs. If so, then investment in female-led ventures may reflect greater propensity to invest in risky ventures. We follow the approach of Nanda and Rhodes-Kropf (2013) to investigate whether investors are more likely to invest in female-led ventures during hot markets.

In Table 6 Panel A and Panel B, we re-estimate the baseline specification from Table 3 separately for boom years (Panel A) and bust years (Panel B). The results in columns 1 and 4 are comparable and similar to those shown in Table 4, and are not statistically different across boom and bust periods. That is, the *Female-led start-up* coefficient is less than 1 and statistically significant (column 1) in both Panel A and Panel B. Columns 2 through 3 and 5 through 6 further show that the gender gap decreases as the growth potential of a new venture increases; the gap further decreases at the top 1 percent of the growth-orientation distribution. Hence, VCs appear to be equally likely to

**Table 6**  
Logit regression impact of female-led start-ups at different levels of firm and VC sophistication during boom and bust cycles.

Panel A: P(VC Financing in 2 Years) during Boom Years (1996–2001)—Split						Panel C: Interaction	
(1) All Firms		(2) 0–99 percentile	(3) top 1%	t-test of Difference in Means for Cols (1) & (4)		(7) All Firms	
Regression Coefficient						Regression Coefficient	
Female-led start-up	0.811 <sup>***</sup> (0.063)	0.690 <sup>***</sup> (0.080)	0.946 (0.114)	T-Statistic p-value	0.67 0.25	Female-led start-up	0.826 <sup>+</sup> (0.093)
Panel B: P(VC Financing in 2 Years) during Bust Years (2002–2005) Split					Boom	2.37 <sup>***</sup>	
(4) All Firms		(5) 0–99 percentile	(6) top 1%			(0.357)	
Regression Coefficient					Female-led start-up <sup>+</sup> Boom	0.993	
Female-led start-up	0.857 <sup>+</sup> (0.074)	0.704 <sup>***</sup> (0.112)	0.877 (0.144)			(0.150)	

We report the results of a logit model with *Venture Capital* as a binary outcome. *Venture Capital* is a binary variable equal to 1 if the firm raises venture capital financing and 0 otherwise, as reported in Thompson Reuters VentureXpert. Incidence ratios reported.

<sup>+</sup>  $p < 0.1$ .

\*  $p < .05$ .

\*\*  $p < .01$ .

invest in female-led ventures in boom and bust years. In Panel C, we compare the results from Panel A and Panel B directly by estimating an interaction term between the female dummy and the boom-years dummy. As shown in column 7, we find that access to VC funding is indeed less constrained during boom periods, consistent with prior findings (Nanda and Rhodes-Kropf, 2013). However, the impact of hot markets on investments in entrepreneurial ventures does not vary across male- and female-led ventures. Hence, given these findings, it is unlikely that VCs selectively invest in female-led ventures as a form of experimentation and risk taking.

#### 4.3.3. Top female founders

Another possibility is that women who pursue high-growth ventures may differ along observable and unobservable characteristics that influence VC evaluation processes and willingness to invest. For example, those female founders who are less likely to receive investment may have relatively weaker networks than female founders who successfully receive funding. Because many studies have related lower performance of female-run ventures to gender differences in network structure and composition (Aldrich, 1989; Cromie and Birley, 1992), this explanation is credible. Nevertheless, this concern is unlikely to explain our results, for a number of reasons. First, if the growth-orientation of female-led ventures is systematically correlated with women's access to networks, then we would expect that sophisticated investors would better evaluate such differences. This implies that the gender gap in funding should be greater when investors are more sophisticated—given that such investors are better able to evaluate differences across entrepreneurs. However, in Table 4 Panel B and C, we find the opposite: as shown in columns 7 and 10, the gender gap is greater for non-sophisticated than for sophisticated investors.

#### 4.4. Robustness checks

##### 4.4.1. Falsification test

If gender, at least in part, drives differences in access to VC funding, gender differences will be *at least* mitigated when new ventures are composed of mixed-gender management teams. Presumably, male representation on the management team will compensate for negative stereotypes, if such were associated with female founders. To assess this possibility, we re-estimate our specification for new ventures with mixed-gender management teams—in this case, we consider the gender of individuals registered as president, treasurer, or secretary. These data on top management teams are only available for the subsample of business registrants registered in Massachusetts. As shown in Table 7

**Table 7**

The probability of female-led ventures on getting VC funding in 2 years: Massachusetts firms. Includes mixed-gender teams.

	(1)	(2)
Female-led start-up	0.584** (0.108)	0.523*** (0.101)
Mixed-Gender-led start-up		1.031 (0.138)
Cluster Dummies	Yes	Yes
N	289278	367267
Pseudo R2	0.449	0.445

We report the results of a logit model with *Venture Capital* as a binary outcome. *Venture Capital* is a binary variable equal to 1 if the firm raises venture capital financing and 0 otherwise, as reported in Thompson Reuters VentureXpert. All models include all controls for venture quality, as in Table 4 Model 2. Model 1 only includes firms with all female or all male founders, model 2 includes mixed-gender teams. Mixed-gender teams compose 42% of the sample. Female-led start-ups compose 11.23% of the sample. We consider part of the team only those registered as president, treasurer, or secretary. \*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

column 1, we are able to replicate the gender gap in funding, when a firm registers in Massachusetts. Column 2 additionally shows that the effect becomes zero for ventures with mixed-gender management teams. Our inability to replicate the results for these ventures reinforces the notion that our results might reflect the effect of gender.

##### 4.4.2. Generalizability

While our analyses focus on businesses registered in California and Massachusetts, one concern may be that these results capture the effect of California only and are not generalizable to other locations, either because (a) female-led ventures outside California are much less growth oriented, or because (b) investors are less likely to statistically discriminate based on gender in other states. Although plausible, the possibility that bias toward female-run ventures is systematically higher in California is unlikely—because California is home to Silicon Valley and a vibrant entrepreneurial culture. However, to address this possibility formally, we re-estimate our baseline specification for the universe of business registrants in Massachusetts (for the same study period) and Texas. Because new ventures in Massachusetts are more commonly founded within the biotech sector, the gender gap in obtaining funding may be different. Similarly, because Texas is a Southern state, it is worth investigating whether the gender gap can be replicated in this setting to alleviate the concern that our results are driven by ventures in Northern states alone.

In Table 8, we replicate similar findings for businesses registered in Texas (columns 1–2) and Massachusetts (columns 3–4): the coefficient of the *Female-led start-up* dummy continues to be less than 1, and highly significant statistically across all model specifications. Indeed, the gender gap appears to be even wider in Texas, with female-led start-ups having 70 percent lower odds of getting funding than male-led start-ups, and in Massachusetts, 33 percent lower.

##### 4.4.3. VC funding time window

Another potential concern is that gender differences in access to funding may be an artifact of the 2-year window we chose. Although the majority of ventures tend to obtain VC funding within the first 2 years, it is possible that women take longer than men to access venture capital. This raises the possibility that female-led ventures might be as likely to obtain VC funding as male-led ventures when a longer time window is considered. To address this concern, in Table 9 Panel A, we re-estimate the baseline specification to examine (a) getting VC funding within a 6-year window, and (b) getting funding “ever”—or within the entire period under study. As can be seen in Table 9 Panel A, our results are unchanged if we focus on a longer time window. Hence, our results are not merely an artifact of different time horizons that female- and male-run start-ups might adopt.

##### 4.4.4. Alternative time periods

Another concern with our identification strategy might be the period under study. Perhaps the gender gap in entrepreneurship has disappeared as female entry into entrepreneurship has increased over time. If so, then our results are simply an artifact of the time period chosen. To see whether this possibility affects our results, in Table 9 Panel B, we re-estimate our baseline specification for different time windows: 1999–2000, 2001–2007, and 2008–2011. As shown in columns 7 and 8 of Table 9 doing so is immaterial for our results: we find significant gender differences in access to funding in each of the windows considered.

## 5. Discussion

Previous research has shown a stark gender gap in entrepreneurship, with women being less successful entrepreneurs than men (e.g., Aldrich, 2005; Reynolds et al., 2000; Ruef et al., 2003; Yang and Aldrich, 2015). But despite this inequality, our understanding of its origins in the entrepreneurial process remains limited. Although

**Table 8**

The probability of female-led ventures on getting VC funding in 2 years: Texas and Massachusetts.

	(1) Texas	(2) Texas	(3) Massachusetts	(4) Massachusetts	(5) California	(6) California
Female-led start-up	0.0995*** (0.0412)	0.295** (0.125)	0.301*** (0.0439)	0.667** (0.101)	0.368*** (0.0202)	0.756*** (0.0439)
Founder Observables	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
Broad Sector Dummies	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
VC-Targeted Sector Dummies	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
Observations	702455	702455	396635	396635	1875087	1875087
Pseudo R-squared	0.017	0.392	0.010	0.428	0.008	0.483

We report the results of a logit model with *Venture Capital* as a binary outcome. *Venture Capital* is a binary variable equal to 1 if the firm raises venture capital financing and 0 otherwise, as reported in Thompson Reuters VentureXpert. Columns (5) and (6) simply replicate the Columns (1) and (2) from Table 4 for ease of comparison. Exponentiated coefficients; Standard errors in parentheses. \*p < 0.05.

\*\* p &lt; 0.01.

\*\*\* p &lt; 0.001.

entrepreneurship involves a number of stages, the majority of research has focused on the gender imbalance that arises at the early-investment stage (e.g., Canning et al., 2012; Greene et al., 2003; Gatewood et al., 2003; Brush et al., 2003; Coleman and Robb, 2009; 2016; Sørensen and Sharkey, 2014). This study, by contrast, decomposes the gender gap into separate stages and assesses the relative contribution of each stage to the imbalance between female and male founders. Specifically, we propose and find support for the notion that gendered processes in the workplace and at home influence the opportunity structure that women face, imposing significant constraints on prospective female founders. Critically, our findings suggest that these structural obstacles tend to steer women away from founding ventures with a high-growth potential. Hence, the well-established pattern of gender segregation seen in wage employment (Fernandez and Sosa, 2005) carries over into entrepreneurship, perpetuating stark inequalities amongst women and men. Not only are women less likely to found high-growth ventures, but such disparities continue to persist even when initial differences at founding are accounted for. Importantly, the residual differences between female and male founders can be partly attributed to gender expectations and negative stereotypes about gender, which play an important role in widening the initial gap between female and male founders.

We apply a novel empirical approach to separate the initial differences in startup characteristics that signal to investors a new venture's growth orientation and assess their magnitude relative to the residual

disparity. Building on recent studies using at-founding observables to characterize the expected returns of different startups (Guzman and Stern, 2015, 2016, 2017; Catalini et al., 2018), we theorize and empirically assess differences in initial growth orientation across female and male entrepreneurs.

Our findings confirm the well-established pattern that female-led ventures are significantly less likely to obtain funding. As much as 65 percent of the total disparity in funding can be attributed to differences in startup growth potential at the time of founding. In this regard, our findings suggest that women are significantly less likely than men to found ventures that exhibit growth orientation and are appealing to external investors. Specifically, women are less likely to found and run startups that have appropriable and differentiated technology (as evidenced by patents), to found companies in sectors associated with venture capital such as biotechnology, IT, or semiconductors, and to register the company in Delaware—a jurisdiction associated with an intent to raise external financing. Women are also more likely to start firms in industries associated with a local business activity, rather than traded.

The residual gap (i.e., 35 percent of the gap, or 18 percentage points) can be attributed to other factors, including, at least in part, investors' preferences and bias. We provide evidence to link this remaining difference with investors' biases or beliefs about gender. Specifically, we find that the gap between female and male entrepreneurs closes when signals of growth orientation become stronger

**Table 9**

Robustness tests.

Panel A: Distribution of effect by time to VC financing			
	(1) Gets VC in 2 Years	(2) Gets VC in 6 Years	(3) Gets VC Ever
Female-led start-up	0.781*** (.028)	0.771*** (.025)	0.798*** (.027)
Panel B: Distribution of effect through time periods			
	(4) 1995–2000	(5) 2001–2007	(6) 2008–2011
Female-led start-up	0.805*** (.054)	0.744*** (.044)	0.766*** (.056)

We report the results of a logit model with *Venture Capital* as a binary outcome. *Venture Capital* is a binary variable equal to 1 if the firm raises venture capital financing and 0 otherwise, as reported in Thompson Reuters VentureXpert. Only firms between 1995 and 2005 used in analysis. Incidence ratios. Robust standard errors in parenthesis. Matched sample. Quality ranges: Very High, top 1%; High, 95%–99%; Medium, 75%–95%; Low, less than 75%. Panels C and D use as a dependent variable a dummy equal to 1 if a firm patents (trademarks) between years 2 and 6, thus excluding the first year, which is included in the quality calculation of the company. + p < .10, \* p < 0.05, \*\* p < 0.01, \*\*\* p < .001.



(i.e., for female founders at the top of the quality distribution), or when investors are more sophisticated. Both findings are consistent with theories of statistical discrimination, suggesting that gender can be used as a cue to infer information about a new venture when signals of growth potential are weaker or when evaluators are less capable and less experienced.

Collectively, our findings make several contributions. First, we contribute to the growing line of research on female entrepreneurship. Our analyses enrich recent and vibrant line of work on gender and entrepreneurship (e.g., Kim et al., 2006; Loscocco et al., 1991; Kalleberg and Leicht, 1991), as well as work that relates to the processes of discrimination on the part of investors (e.g., Jennings and Brush, 2013; Tinkler et al., 2015). We show that the initial disparities in growth orientation across female- and male-led ventures are the most significant force in generating differences between women and men in the entrepreneurship pipeline. Such disparities are likely to reflect gendered processes which generate structural inequalities in opportunities for women to pursue different types of ventures. Finally, we offer additional evidence to link the residual gap to investors' preferences. In particular, we find that the residual differences in funding diminish when quality signals are stronger and when investors are more experienced.

More generally, our study contributes to work on gender in the strategic context. A vast number of strategy scholars have recognized the role of gender in strategy, but these studies have mostly focused on female participation rates in corporate boards (e.g., Helfat et al., 2006), CEO and executive positions (Cook and Glass, 2014; Heilman et al., 1989), or managerial roles (Blum et al., 1994; Petersen and Morgan, 1995)—and examined its influence on important firm outcomes, ranging from firm performance (e.g., Dezso and Ross, 2012; Matsa and Miller, 2011) to investors' reactions (e.g., Lee and James, 2007). Yet, the role of gender in driving strategic outcomes in the entrepreneurial context has been less well explored. Hence, our study contributes to this line of inquiry, shedding light on how gender might shape strategic outcomes, such as access to funding, in the context of entrepreneurial firms.

## Appendix

Our results have important policy implications. Findings presented in the study lead to a natural focus on interventions that improve the net-new creation of high-growth entrepreneurship rather than the performance of existing ones. Policies aimed at encouraging women to create more and higher-potential firms should focus on attenuating deep-rooted gendered processes and structural barriers that support their movement away from these ventures. Such policy initiatives might, for example, involve improving technological education, mentoring and career aspirations, and developing support mechanisms within the family. Similarly, interventions that aim at cultural biases prevalent amongst investors will further decrease gender inequality in entrepreneurship. Overall, an emphasis on institutional transformation and clear attention to this problem from powerful stakeholders at all stages of the venture pipeline can support such a change.

Our findings open up attractive opportunities for future research. First, while our study provides evidence that initial differences in the growth orientation of startups across gender drive the well-established gender gap in access to venture capital, it does not shed any light on the drivers of such differences. Future research could therefore profitably explore the reasons why women tend to found and lead ventures of lower expected economic potential. While these reasons are theorized in our study, further empirical inquiry could investigate the differences in growth orientation we document. Moreover, our study shows that gender differences are likely to be weaker and even non-existent for top-performing startups, opening up attractive opportunities for further inquiry. Future studies may, for example, want to assess whether top-performing start-ups led by females may, under some conditions, gain advantage over start-ups led by males, and reach critical entrepreneurial milestones. For example, future studies may want to assess when investors are more likely to invest in top-performing female entrepreneurs.

## Conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no relevant or material financial interests that relate to the research described in this paper.

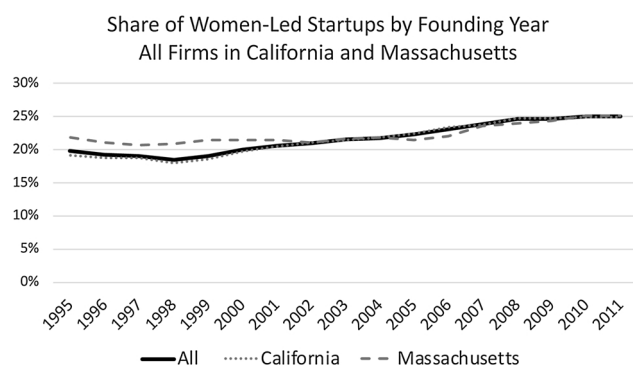


Fig. A1. Share of Women-Led Startups by Founding Year.

**Table A1**  
Growth Orientation Estimation Model.

	(1)
Corporation	5.751*** (0.681)
Eponymous	0.301*** (0.067)
Short Name	2.458*** (0.202)
Trademark	3.874*** (0.470)
<i>interactions</i>	
Patent Only	34.70*** [6.858]
Delaware Only	51.67*** (4.374)
Patent and Delaware	268.93*** (26.672)
<i>Industry Dummies</i>	
Local	0.668* (0.120)
Traded High Technology	1.525*** (0.146)
Traded Resource Intensive	0.766* (0.093)
Traded	1.107 (0.079)
Observations	1,064,914
Pseudo R-squared	0.34

We report the results of a logit model with *Equity Growth* as a binary outcome. *Equity Growth* is a binary variable equal to 1 if the firm achieves an equity sale—IPO or acquisition—and 0 otherwise, as reported in either the SDC New Issues database (for IPOs) or the SDC Worldwide Mergers, Acquisitions, and Alliances, database (for acquisitions). The predicted value of the regression above represents our ‘growth orientation’. Robust standard errors in parenthesis. Incidence ratios reported. \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

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