

Beyond the Venture: Investigating Neurodiverse Entrepreneurship and Entrepreneurial
Practice as a Form of Healing

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Abstract

This thesis examines how entrepreneurship can act as a pathway for psychological recovery, identity reconstruction, and post-traumatic growth (Kira, 2001; Shepherd & Williams, 2018). Chapter 1 presents a systematic review of 112 peer-reviewed articles, highlighting how neurodiverse conditions and mental health treatments shape entrepreneurial intentions and outcomes (Wiklund et al., 2018; Yu et al., 2022). It further extends this finding to propose a more complete model of this relationship.

Chapter 2 will explore how entrepreneurship can serve as a pathway for psychological recovery, identity reconstruction, and post-traumatic growth, particularly by leveraging resilience, creativity, and resource mobilization (Angeler et al., 2023; Shir & Ryff, 2021; Yao et al., 2023). This chapter applies an inductive, multi-layered qualitative design inspired by Conservation of Resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 1989) and identity work frameworks (Brown, 2015). This two-stage approach shows how individuals narrate the transformation of trauma and mental health challenges into venture creation, drawing on motivations and peer storytelling to reclaim agency and meaning (Morris et al., 2012).

The findings aim to illuminate the varied ways in which entrepreneuring becomes a relational and evolving practice for coping and recovery, contributing to current debates on mental health, neurodiversity, and venture creation.

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Dedication

I dedicate this work to my mentors and peers who inspired me to pursue this path, and to my family and friends who provided endless support along the way.

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Chapter I

Neurodiversity and Entrepreneurship: Understanding Enduring Creation Through Different Minds¹

¹ Previous versions of this chapter were co-authored Ma & Greidanus (2025) and presented at both ASAC and EGOS conferences.

ABSTRACT

This research explores how neurodevelopmental conditions, particularly ADHD, autism, and dyslexia, influence entrepreneurial outcomes and creativity. We perform a comprehensive systematic review at the intersection of neurodiversity and entrepreneurship that includes 105 empirical studies from 2014-2024. Our analysis from the review supports a dueling model of both challenges and benefits of neurodiversity's relationship to entrepreneurship. We further extend this finding to propose a more complete model to this relationship that includes coping and comorbidity to capture the relationship between neural diversity and entrepreneurship. Future research and remaining gaps in the literature are also discussed.

INTRODUCTION

The intersection of neurodiversity and entrepreneurship presents a unique opportunity to understand how different cognitive styles influence business creation and innovation (Wiklund et al., 2018). While traditional research has focused on neurotypical entrepreneurial traits, emerging evidence suggests that neurodevelopmental conditions may offer distinct advantages in creative problem-solving and opportunity recognition (Freeman et al., 2024). Understanding how these distinct cognitive processes influence entrepreneurial success has drawn more scholarly attention due to the rising recognition of neurodiversity in commercial situations.

Recent research has emphasized the difficulties and possible advantages of neurodiversity in entrepreneurial settings. For instance, ADHD traits like impulsivity and hyperactivity can drive rapid innovation but may also lead to unsustainable business practices (Lerner et al., 2018). Similarly, autism spectrum traits such as pattern recognition and systematic thinking can enhance problem-solving capabilities while presenting social interaction challenges (Patton, 2022). Dyslexic entrepreneurs often demonstrate superior visual-spatial abilities and delegative leadership styles, though they may struggle with conventional business documentation (Logan & Martin, 2012).

This systematic review synthesizes over a decade of research findings to understand how neurodiversity influences entrepreneurial creativity and lasting business success. Through examining 105 empirical studies from 2014-2024, we explore how different neurodevelopmental conditions contribute to or hinder enduring entrepreneurial creation, identify mechanisms that enable neurodiverse entrepreneurs to transform potential challenges into sustainable advantages and investigate how entrepreneurial environments can be designed to support and enhance neurodiverse contributions. This work builds on existing

frameworks of entrepreneurial cognition while introducing new perspectives on how different thinking styles can drive lasting innovation.

Our research contributes to both theoretical understanding and practical applications in supporting neurodiverse entrepreneurship. We clarified the complex connection between neurodiversity and entrepreneurial success in order to facilitate the development of more inclusive and effective support systems for neurodiverse entrepreneurs. This knowledge is essential for creating entrepreneurial settings that actively take advantage of and accommodate a range of cognitive types in order to promote long-term innovation and commercial success.

BACKGROUND

There have been a number of reviews exploring the complex relationship between ADHD, neurodiversity, and entrepreneurship. Lerner et al. (2018) proposed a fundamental dualistic framework, conceptualizing ADHD's influence on entrepreneurship as having both positive (yang) and negative (yin) aspects that manifest differently across the entrepreneurial journey - from opportunity identification through evaluation to exploitation. Building on this understanding, Anstshel (2018) conducted a systematic review that emphasized the crucial role of context for individuals with ADHD, finding that hyperactivity-impulsivity symptoms correlate with higher entrepreneurial orientation and intentions, often mediated through traits like risk tolerance and novelty-seeking.

Expanding beyond ADHD specifically, Lacomini et al. (2022) broadened the scope to examine entrepreneurship as an employment strategy for individuals with various neurodevelopmental and psychiatric disorders. Their work highlighted how entrepreneurship can provide greater independence and economic empowerment, while emphasizing the

importance of supportive policies for neurodiverse entrepreneurs to thrive. This broader perspective on neurodiversity in entrepreneurship was further developed by Freeman et al. (2024), who examined these relationships through a dopaminergic lens. Their review suggested that dopamine-related traits can simultaneously empower entrepreneurs through enhanced creativity and risk-taking while potentially increasing their vulnerability to mental health challenges.

The mental health aspects of entrepreneurship were thoroughly explored by Gish et al. (2022), who highlighted entrepreneurship as a unique domain for studying mental health outcomes. Their editorial overview demonstrated how the entrepreneurial environment, characterized by high uncertainty and autonomy, can foster both resilience and stress, emphasizing the need for specialized mental health support for entrepreneurs. This work complements the neuroscientific perspective offered by Nicolaou et al. (2019), who proposed that neuroscientific methods can provide valuable insights into entrepreneurial behavior by uncovering cognitive processes and emotions that are difficult to measure through traditional methods. Their research, along with earlier work (Nicolaou et al., 2011), established a bidirectional relationship: people with ADHD are more likely to become entrepreneurs, and entrepreneurs are more likely to exhibit ADHD-related symptoms. This relationship was further nuanced by Klopp and Saylor (2021), who found that an individual's orientation toward neurodiversity may impact their behavior differently than their preferences, highlighting the complexity of how founders perceive and respond to neurodiversity.

Together, these studies paint a picture of entrepreneurship as a unique context where neurodiversity, particularly ADHD traits, can manifest as both advantages and challenges. While the field has focused mostly on ADHD, we note that there is relatively little attention given to a broader review of the general relationship between neurodiversity as a whole and entrepreneurship.

METHODOLOGY

The primary research question guiding this systematic review is: What is the current understanding of the relationship between neurodiverse conditions especially ADHD, autism and dyslexia and entrepreneurship. This question requires a cross-disciplinary approach that draws from entrepreneurship, psychology, and management literature, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of the intersection between neurodiversity and entrepreneurship.

A systematic review is the most rigorous and appropriate format to build on and overcome the gaps of prior reviews. Compared to a traditional narrative literature review, a systematic review uses transparent, reproducible methods to comprehensively search, appraise, and synthesize all relevant studies on a question (Grant & Booth, 2009). This minimizes selection bias and provides a “broader and more accurate” understanding of the evidence (Pati & Lorusso, 2018). In contrast, a narrative or “state-of-the-art” review may reflect an expert’s subjective perspective and can inadvertently omit important studies (Grant & Booth, 2009). A scoping review was considered but deemed less suitable: scoping studies map the literature’s extent without critical appraisal, and their findings cannot be used to draw robust conclusions or inform policy. Grant and Booth (2009) note that scoping reviews are often just a preliminary step to determine if a full systematic review is warranted (Paul, J., & Barari, 2022) – in our case, the existence of two prior reviews and many new studies justifies proceeding directly to a systematic synthesis. Finally, a meta-analysis (quantitative pooling of data) is not feasible here. As Paul and Barari (2022) explain, meta-analysis requires multiple homogeneous quantitative studies, whereas the neurodiverse entrepreneurship literature spans heterogeneous methods and outcomes. A qualitative systematic review allows us to integrate diverse evidence (quantitative and qualitative) and assess the state of knowledge holistically. In sum, adhering to systematic review best

practices (e.g. using PRISMA guidelines for transparent selection and quality appraisal) will lend methodological rigor and credibility to the paper.

To answer this questions we conducted a systematic review of the last 10 years of the management and psychology literatures. The review process started by using Google Scholar. Google Scholar is worthy for conducting the first-round search, getting the most related papers for the specific topic (Jacsó, 2005). We mainly use keywords including “ADHD,” “Autism” “neurodiversity,” “dyslexia,” “entrepreneurship,” “entrepreneurs,” and “new ventures” to search for empirical papers which are highly cited in entrepreneurial journals.

Next, following the method of Bafera and Kleinert (2023), we the Financial Times' top 50 journals (FT-50) is the second pool to double check and complement the list of journals. Following this step, Journal Citation Reports have also been searched, and papers are aimed under the large category “Economics and business,” and then the sub-categories are “Management,” “Business,” “Healthcare care sciences & Services,” and “Industrial Relations & Labor.” But the created journal list do not have related papers for our review topic, so switched to using Scopus ranking of four subject areas (business and international management, management of technology and innovation, organizational behavior and human resource management, strategy and management) and choose only to show the top 10 percent from Citescore highest quartile, as the second batch of journals for a double check, which are

in total 69 journals. Double verifying from the FT-50 lists and the searching results from Scopus, papers are mainly from 7 journals in the entrepreneurship and management field. They are Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice, Journal of Business Venturing, International Small Business Journal, Journal of Business Venturing Insights, Strategic Entrepreneurship Journal, Strategic Entrepreneurship Journal and Small Business and Economics. But it turns out to be not much journal for us to review. Therefore, apart from these seven journals, other papers come from journals in other disciplines like psychology, education, sociology, etc.

The search targeted general article topics, so it encompassed the title, abstract, and keywords (Shepherd et al., 2019). For Elsevier, 8 keywords are the maximum for Boolean, so the complete Boolean has been separated into several parts for searching several times. However, for other databases like SAGE, typing the complete Boolean can get the ideal papers. The full Boolean we made use of has two parts. The first part is about entrepreneurs, which are nine keywords referring from Bafera and Kleinert (2023): “entrepreneur” OR “entrepreneurship” OR “entrepreneurial” OR “early-stage” OR “newness” OR “new organization” OR “new firm” OR “start-up” OR “start-up” OR “Initial Public Offer” OR “IPO.” The second part is about neurodiversity which is a rather long Boolean, for example, "dyslexia" OR "neurodevelopmental disorder" OR "bipolar disorder" (McPheeters et al., 2016; Hossain et al., 2020) OR "bipolar I disorder" OR "ADHD" OR "attention deficit disorder" OR "combined ADHD" (Protopapas, 2019) OR "mental disorder" OR "mental illness" OR "psychiatric disorder" OR "psychological disorder" "dyslexia" OR "reading disorder." The review span is set as a ten-year range from 2014 to 2024., since in the browsing stage at the very beginning, the results look like that most of the papers in this topic are starting to be published from 2014.

Table 1 Screening from Multiple Databases

Keywords for the first part	Search Results
Entrepreneur	39

early-stage	75
newness	0
new organization	0
new firm	0
start-up	7
startup	5
Initial Public Offer	0
IPO	2
entrepreneurship	62
entrepreneurial	54
Total	244

Table 2 Distribution of Papers by Journal Type

Entrepreneurship and management related journals	# Articles	Non-entrepreneurship related journals	# Articles	Non-journals	# Articles
Frontiers of Entrepreneurship Research Journal	15	Creativity Research Journal	6	Entrepreneurship, Dyslexia, and Education	4
Journal of Business Venturing (JBV)	12	Inclusive Practice	2	Proceedings of the 9th Annual South-East European Doctoral Student Conference	1
Journal of Business Venturing Insights	10	Frontiers in sociology	1	University of Sheffield	1
Small Business Economics (SBE)	7	Journal of African American Males in Education	1	Neurodiversity and Work: Employment, Identity, and Support Networks for Neurominorities	1
Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice (ETP)	7	Applied Psychology: An International Review	1	Entrepreneurship, Dyslexia, and Education: Research, Principles, and Practice	1

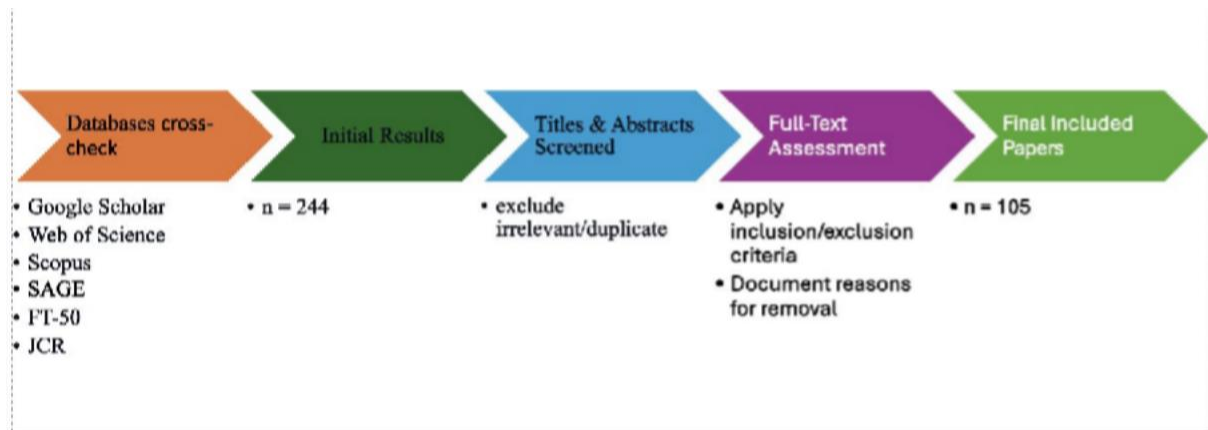
Academy of Management Perspectives International Review of Entrepreneurship International Entrepreneurship and Management Journal International Small Business Journal World Encyclopedia of Entrepreneurship Review of Entrepreneurship	6	European Journal of Epidemiology	1	Doctoral dissertation, Liberty University	1
International Review of Entrepreneurship and Management Journal International Small Business Journal World Encyclopedia of Entrepreneurship Review of Entrepreneurship	2	Scientific Reports	1		
International Entrepreneurship and Management Journal International Small Business Journal World Encyclopedia of Entrepreneurship Review of Entrepreneurship	2	Asia Pacific Journal of Developmental Differences	1		
International Small Business Journal World Encyclopedia of Entrepreneurship Review of Entrepreneurship	2	Local Economy	1		
World Encyclopedia of Entrepreneurship Review of Entrepreneurship	1	Policy Studies Journal	1		
Review of Entrepreneurship	1	Journal of Clinical Developmental Psychology	1		
European management review	1	Tizard Learning Disability Review	1		
Global Journal of Entrepreneurship	1	medRxiv	1		
International journal of entrepreneurial behaviour & research	1	Personality and Individual Differences	1		
Review of International Comparative Management	1	Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation	1		
Emerald Emerging Markets Case Studies	1	Administration & Society	1		
Technovation	1				
Management Review	1				

Quarterly			
Journal of Entrepreneurship in Emerging Economies	1		
Journal of Small Business Management	1		
n t	74	22	9
			105

Screening and Selection

The searching strategy for combining these two parts is to choose one of those eleven entrepreneurship-related terms (Table 2) plus all the keywords in the second part and search eleven times in case any related ones are missing. In this way we returned 244 papers (Table 1).

In the next stage of the review, the 244 articles were scanned for relevance. Titles and abstracts were screened for relevance using a two-stage process. In the first stage, irrelevant studies were excluded based on title and abstract. In the second stage, full texts of the remaining articles were reviewed against the inclusion criteria. Throughout the screening, reasons for exclusion were documented to maintain transparency and adherence to systematic review protocols (Meline, 2006). After extracting the final pool (244 papers) with full texts, the exclusion reasons including, lack of relevance to the review’s research question, inferior methodology comparing to other existing well-designed studies (like randomized controlled experimental studies and longitudinal studies), and seems like relevant but does not present data in any extractable format (Stevens & Milne, 1997; Pullin & Stewart, 2006).



The final 105 papers were then read and analyzed for key themes and research questions. Key themes are described below, and further analysis organized these themes into a model of the Neurodiversity and Entrepreneurship. This model also allowed us to identify gaps in the current knowledge and suggest future research questions.

Figure 1 Exclusion Reasons and Example Paper

Exclusion Reasons	Example Paper
the research focus is on how neurodiversity can increase public organizations' innovations and output quality but not entrepreneurship.	Neurodiversity in (Not Only) Public Organizations: An Untapped Opportunity?
Not related to entrepreneurship at all, more clinical based	Neurodevelopmental pathways in bipolar disorder
Excluded because the article is an editorial that summarizes other studies rather than presenting original empirical findings	The advantages and challenges of neurodiversity employment in organizations
The paper is primarily conceptual, focusing on framing neuroatypicality as a diversity issue in workplaces rather than presenting empirical findings or systematic evidence. Since your systematic review emphasizes empirical studies examining measurable relationships between neurodiversity and entrepreneurship, this article does not meet the inclusion criteria	Neurodiversity in the workplace: Considering neuroatypicality as a form of diversity
This source is a bachelor's thesis that employs a narrative literature review rather than a systematic review or empirical research. Since it synthesizes secondary sources without conducting original data collection or systematic methodology, it does not meet the inclusion criteria for empirical evidence-based studies relevant to your review.	Innovation Through Neurodiverse Teams
The paper focuses on workplace diversity and conceptual framing of neuroatypicality within organizational contexts, not on entrepreneurship or self-employment. It does not examine entrepreneurial outcomes, intentions, or behaviors, so it does not meet the scope of the review.	Neurodiversity in the workplace: Considering neuroatypicality as a form of diversity
The paper focuses on workplace inclusion, organizational diversity policies, and employment practices for neurodivergent individuals rather than on entrepreneurship or self-employment. It does not address entrepreneurial intentions, behaviors, or outcomes, so it falls outside the review's scope.	Enhancing business education: neurodiversity informed faculty

RESULTS

Key themes from the reading of the 105 papers are presented in figure 1 below.

Figure 2 Themes Chart

Theme	ADHD	Dyslexia	Autism
Opportunity Recognition	Impulsivity & novelty-seeking drive rapid idea generation (Lerner et al., 2018; Wiklund et al., 2017), but inattention may weaken idea evaluation (Stappers & Andries, 2022).	Visual-spatial thinking aids in seeing patterns (Logan, 2009); delegation helps manage written info gaps (Meehan et al., 2020).	Systematic thinking supports niche discovery but rigidity can limit pivoting (Patton, 2022; Wiklund et al., 2014).
Entrepreneurial Self-Efficacy	Strong ESE from high activity, but low follow-through without coping (Tucker et al., 2021; Duong & Le, 2022).	Resilience from early struggles builds ESE (Santoro et al., 2020; Powers et al., 2020).	Expertise in special interests boosts task-specific ESE, but social barriers can lower it broadly (Wiklund et al., 2014).
Teams &	Teams help channel	Team roles & delegation	Teams offer role clarity
Social Context	impulsivity (Thomas et al., 2020); conflict risk is higher (Tran et al., 2022).	buffer writing challenges (Logan & Martin, 2012).	but social difficulties may persist (Patton, 2022).
Gender	ADHD may worsen stigma for women, lowering confidence (Tran et al., 2021).	Women with dyslexia may have lower ESE in financial areas (Powers et al., 2020).	Limited studies, but networking may be harder for autistic women (Patton, 2022).
Trauma & Resilience	Coping with ADHD setbacks builds resilience (Hatak et al., 2021).	Early exclusion leads to higher resilience, driving self-employment (Logan, 2009; Alexander-Passe, 2017).	Bias pushes autistic founders into niches they can control (Patton, 2022).
Coping Strategies	Treatment, therapy, structure help manage traits (Greidanus & Liao, 2021).	Delegation, tech tools, family support aid coping (Meehan et al., 2020).	Routines & selective interaction reduce stressors (Austin & Pisano, 2017).
Entrepreneurial Outcomes	High intentions, entry — but mixed performance (Wiklund et al., 2019).	Strong in creative sectors; often serial founders (Logan, 2009).	Favor self-employment in niche markets (Patton, 2022).

Evaluate ADHD-Related factors influencing Entrepreneurial Factors

The hallmarks of attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) include recurrent episodes of impulsivity, hyperactivity, and inattention (APA, 2013). The prevalence of ADHD in workplace settings has increased significantly in recent years (de Graaf et al., 2008), with undiagnosed cases potentially outnumbering clinically diagnosed ones. These undiagnosed people frequently display symptoms of ADHD of various intensities, which calls for the attention of both practitioners and researchers (Lerner, Verheul & Thurik, 2019). According to Antshel (2018), ADHD is becoming a more important field of research due to its increasing social prevalence. The concept of "ADHD-like symptoms" has emerged as a useful research construct to capture this broader spectrum of manifestations. Given that ADHD is a lifelong condition (Lerner, Hunt & Verheul, 2018) that presents unique management challenges in professional settings (Kessler et al., 2009), it has garnered

increasing attention from scholars in entrepreneurship and management fields (Wiklund, Patzelt, & Dimov, 2016).

Early research established foundational connections between ADHD and entrepreneurial characteristics. Dimic and Orlov (2014) tested clinically diagnosed individuals with ADHD and found a positive relationship with entrepreneurial characteristics, though they treated ADHD as a unified construct. Building on this, Thurik et al. (2016) advanced the field by examining both attention deficit and hyperactivity separately among French small firm owners, finding both components positively related to entrepreneurial orientation (EO) across innovation, risk-taking, and proactiveness dimensions.

This differentiation between ADHD components sparked a series of studies with varying findings. Yu et al. (2021) extended Thurik's work through a strategic leadership lens, demonstrating that inattention might not lead to entrepreneurial orientation (EO). Canits et al. (2019), using self-reported measurements among academic researchers, found only a negative relationship between inattention and entrepreneurial preference, with no significant relationship for hyperactivity. Similarly, Shirokova et al. (2022), in their quasi-replication of Yu et al.'s work among Russian SMEs, revealed that hyperactivity/impulsivity symptoms, while not directly linked to overall EO, showed positive associations with specific EO sub-dimensions. Stappers and Andries (2022) further emphasized the importance of treating ADHD symptoms separately, finding that attention deficit symptoms specifically influence the translation of entrepreneurial intentions into behaviors.

The methodological approach to studying ADHD in entrepreneurship has also evolved. Patel et al. (2021) introduced a novel approach using polygenic risk scores (PRS) to measure ADHD predisposition, building on Demontis et al.'s (2019) findings. Their research suggested that while individuals with high ADHD PRS are more likely to choose self-

employment, they generally earn less than in wage employment, it can further make us understood people with ADHD prone to entrepreneurship are more likely triggered by their passion for this but not mainly for a monetary reason (Hatak et al., 2021). Verheul et al.'s research trajectory (2015, 2016) demonstrates the field's methodological development. Their 2015 study examined ADHD-like behavior and entrepreneurial intentions among university students, with risk-taking as a mediator. Their 2016 follow-up expanded to a broader population using the Swedish Twin Registry's STAGE cohort and Dutch GUESSS data, importantly distinguishing between ADHD symptoms and finding that only hyperactivity positively associates with self-employment.

Recent research has introduced novel perspectives on how ADHD traits interact with other factors in entrepreneurship. Hatak et al. (2021) highlighted the role of positive emotions, particularly passion, in entrepreneurial success for individuals with ADHD, drawing from Gestalt theory and building on Cardon et al.'s (2013) work on entrepreneurial perseverance. Gunia et al. (2021) explored how sleep problems might lead to increased entrepreneurial intentions through ADHD-like tendencies, while Klopp and Saylor (2019) examined how individuals' orientation toward their ADHD-like traits (affirmation orientation) moderates the relationship between ADHD traits and entrepreneurial outcomes.

But for the line of research regarding ADHD and entrepreneurship, they are not aiming at propagandizing people with ADHD should go for entrepreneurship with no condition, since there are also way more examples of failure in their job seeking journey and keep on struggling for a position in an organization (Barkley & Brown, 2008). Popular celebrities cannot represent the whole group of people with ADHD, and also, cannot aggregate the distinct dimensions of ADHD symptoms function separately or together depending on so many factors. The relationship between ADHD and entrepreneurship is a complicated and mysterious picture, ongoing research about many angles is necessary. From the lens of the

whole business process is beneficial (Hunt & Kiefer, 2017), from the day-to-day execution of their businesses to exploiting opportunities, or more specific start-up activities like open a bank account, prepared business plans and hired employees (Gartner, Carter & Reynolds, 2004). People with ADHD are in the different stage of business (Lerner et al., 2018) might have mixed results to the outcome, and there might be one stage that is most struggling for them to march on this journey.

Self-efficacy Boost Entrepreneurs with neurodiversity

Many studies in the review list try to add self-efficacy as a mechanism between neurodiversity and entrepreneurial construct. Self-efficacy refers to an individual's cognitive assessment of their ability to mobilize motivation, cognitive resources, and necessary actions to effectively exert control over events in their life (Wood & Bandura, 1989; Chen, Greene & Crick, 1998). People tend to choose situations they perceive or anticipate high personal control but avoid those perceived as low personal control (Wood & Bandura, 1989). To succeed as an entrepreneur, people with neurodevelopmental disorders such as dyslexia and ADHD frequently benefit from self-efficacy. These studies consistently show a connection between self-efficacy, resilience, and entrepreneurial outcomes. Santoro et al. (2020) found that self-efficacy positively influences both personal and business success for disadvantaged entrepreneurs, with resilience strengthening this relationship. Studies focusing specifically on ADHD have revealed nuanced relationships - while Tucker et al. (2021) examined ADHD as a moderator between entrepreneurial self-efficacy and opportunity recognition, Duong and Le (2022) found that ADHD symptoms indirectly influence entrepreneurial intentions through self-efficacy and perceived desirability. Similarly, Powers et al. (2020) demonstrated how self-efficacy mediates the relationship between dyslexia and entrepreneurial intentions, with notable gender differences. More recent research has shifted focus to entrepreneurial self-efficacy (ESE), a specialized form of self-efficacy specific to entrepreneurial tasks (Boyd &

Vozikis, 1994). Both Tucker et al. (2021) and Tran et al. (2023) explored how ADHD symptoms interact with ESE, finding that while ADHD traits may align with entrepreneurial tendencies, building self-efficacy remains crucial for successful opportunity recognition and entrepreneurial intentions.

Santoro et al. (2020) explores how self-efficacy and resilience impact the success of disadvantaged entrepreneurs, particularly those with dyslexia, ADHD, or physical disabilities. The authors find that self-efficacy positively influences both personal and business success, with resilience enhancing this relationship, particularly in challenging environments. According to their research, for underprivileged entrepreneurs, resilience has a greater impact on personal success than on company results. The study also highlights that the combined benefits of resilience and self-efficacy are greater for disadvantaged entrepreneurs than for their non-disadvantaged counterparts.

Tucker et al. (2021) started from the sociocognitive perspective to test if clinically diagnosed ADHD can be a moderator between entrepreneurial self-efficacy and the tendency to recognize opportunities. Powers et al. (2020) explores the entrepreneurial intentions and self-efficacy of adolescents with dyslexia. The association between dyslexia and entrepreneurial intentions was found to be mediated by self-efficacy perceptions, which were found to be especially influenced by gender differences, with different levels of self-efficacy being displayed by males and females. The results highlight the necessity of providing dyslexic adolescents with entrepreneurial education in order to boost their self-efficacy and inspire them to pursue entrepreneurship. Duong and Le (2022) investigates the relationship between ADHD symptoms and entrepreneurial intention among Vietnamese college students. Using Shapero's model of entrepreneurial event and Bandura's social learning theory as a conceptual foundation, the study reveals that ADHD symptoms, while not directly influencing entrepreneurial intention, do contribute indirectly through the mediators of self-

efficacy and perceived desirability. Data showed that individuals with ADHD symptoms may possess increased entrepreneurial self-efficacy and a heightened desire for entrepreneurship, even though they may perceive their feasibility of success as lower.

Aside from self-efficacy, some scholars are using entrepreneurial self-efficacy instead of self-efficacy. Entrepreneurial self-efficacy is rooted in self-efficacy theory, acting as an individual's belief in their capability to perform tasks related to entrepreneurship, specifically influencing their entrepreneurial intentions and actions (Boyd & Vozikis, 1994). Tucker et al. (2019) examines the impact of ADHD on entrepreneurial self-efficacy (ESE) and opportunity recognition. Using data from 179 working adults who have never started a business, the study tests the relationships between ADHD symptoms, ESE, and opportunity recognition. Specifically, while ADHD directly does not influence opportunity recognition, its effect is mediated by reduced self-efficacy, suggesting that individuals with ADHD may feel less capable of identifying business opportunities. This study implies that while ADHD traits may align with entrepreneurship, fostering self-efficacy could be crucial for those with ADHD to succeed in identifying and acting upon opportunities. Tran et al. (2023) also examines entrepreneurial self-efficacy rather than self-efficacy. They tested the influence of ADHD symptoms and UPPS impulsivity traits on entrepreneurial self-efficacy and entrepreneurial intentions among Vietnamese university students. The study explores how ADHD symptoms and impulsivity traits, such as urgency, lack of premeditation, lack of perseverance, and sensation-seeking, shape students' intentions to pursue entrepreneurship. Findings indicate that ADHD symptoms and certain impulsivity traits positively influence entrepreneurial intentions but can also weaken the relationship between self-efficacy and entrepreneurial intentions.

Impulsivity, Behavioral Inhibition and Genetic Factors

We now have an extremely separate understanding of entrepreneurial tendencies, especially when considering biological predispositions and genetic factors, thanks to recent developments in behavioral genetics and neuroscience. The relationship between neurodevelopmental conditions like ADHD and entrepreneurial behavior has emerged as a compelling area of research, with studies revealing how dopaminergic systems and behavioral activation/inhibition mechanisms influence entrepreneurial decision-making (Nicolaou et al., 2021; Freeman et al., 2024). This biological perspective offers novel insights into why certain individuals are more predisposed to entrepreneurial activities, moving beyond traditional personality-based explanations.

The integration of behavioral inhibition theory and genetic research has revealed a complex interplay between impulsivity and entrepreneurial outcomes, particularly through the Behavioral Inhibition System (BIS) and Behavioral Activation System (BAS) framework (Lerner et al., 2018; Leung et al., 2020). Rather than viewing impulsivity and behavioral disinhibition merely as deficits, emerging research suggests these traits can become advantages in entrepreneurial contexts, particularly in rapid decision-making and opportunity recognition. This research synthesizes findings from behavioral genetics, neuroscience, and entrepreneurship studies to examine how biological factors shape entrepreneurial behavior and success.

Behavioral inhibition is often studied in early childhood development, as it can predict impulsivity or self-regulation issues later in life. Genetic predispositions like variations in dopamine-related genes and other environmental influences like stress and parenting style can shape it. Under psychological lens, behavioral inhibition is the ability to suppress prepotent or automatic responses, allowing someone to pause and reflect before acting on it. But impulsivity is characterized as a tendency to act without forward planning, often ignoring

the potential negative consequences of actions. Weaker behavioral inhibition tends to connect with higher levels of impulsivity.

ADHD is primarily explained by two theoretical models under this standpoint: the response inhibition model (Barkley, 1997) and the dual-pathway model (Sonuga-Barke, 2002). While these models differ, they both align in suggesting that ADHD originates from biological factors (Wiklund et al., 2017).

Wiklund and colleagues conducted a series of influential studies examining the relationship between neurodiversity and entrepreneurship. Their initial study (Wiklund et al., 2014) used a grounded theory approach, interviewing 15 entrepreneurs formally diagnosed with ADHD and/or autism. This groundbreaking work suggested that entrepreneurship might provide a unique context where individuals with these conditions could thrive, effectively reframing these psychological traits as potential advantages rather than limitations in entrepreneurial settings. Building on these insights, Wiklund et al. (2016) focused specifically on ADHD's relationship to entrepreneurial success through interviews with fourteen diagnosed entrepreneurs. This study revealed two key mechanisms: impulsivity and hyperfocus. Impulsivity enables quick decision-making in uncertain situations, though it could sometimes lead to inadequately considered choices. Hyperfocus, meanwhile, allowed entrepreneurs to become deeply engaged with work they found passionate, enhancing their persistence in specific areas. The researchers utilized the framework of "hot" impulsive and "cool" reflective systems to examine how different aspects of impulsivity (sensation seeking, lack of premeditation, lack of perseverance, and urgency) influenced entrepreneurial preferences and startup likelihood. The research stream continued with Wiklund et al. (2017), who surveyed MBA alumni to examine how ADHD-associated traits interact with entrepreneurial contexts. This study made a crucial distinction in ADHD's impact: hyperactivity showed positive associations with entrepreneurship, while attention deficit

demonstrated negative effects. The research suggested that while certain ADHD-related characteristics presented challenges, they could become assets in entrepreneurship's fast-paced, uncertain environment, particularly regarding decision speed and autonomy. Wiklund et al. (2018) further developed these ideas by examining how impulsivity might differently affect various phases of the entrepreneurial process. However, in a significant theoretical development, Wiklund (2018) later published a critique challenging the notion that impulsivity in entrepreneurship should be understood as rational judgment. Drawing on the UPPS model of impulsivity (Carlson et al., 2013), he argued that impulsivity, while potentially beneficial for entrepreneurial action, is inherently irrational and should not be forced into rational frameworks. This work provided a more nuanced understanding of impulsivity as a trait manifesting from two distinct ADHD symptoms: potentially positive for entrepreneurial behaviors through hyperactivity, while potentially negative through attention deficit. This research trajectory demonstrates a progressive refinement in understanding how ADHD traits, particularly impulsivity, function in entrepreneurial contexts. The work moved from initial exploration of ADHD as a potential advantage, through detailed examination of specific mechanisms, to a more nuanced understanding of how different ADHD components might help or hinder entrepreneurial success.

Moore et al. (2019) have stated that people who are clinically diagnosed with ADHD are much more likely to attend venturing activities but also broaden the discussions into the field of entrepreneurial mindset and cognitive mindset. Impulsivity is an important trigger for people with ADHD to start their business as they prefer to choose those existing schema rather than building a new schema. ADHD is a tool to create a type of biological need for avoiding stagnation and translating to the actions of entering venturing. Higher levels of alertness to become entrepreneurs is also the case for those with ADHD.

Walker et al. (2020) in their research have examined another impulsivity related factor which is disinhibition—a tendency to act on impulses, despite its potential negative outcomes to both entrepreneurial intentions and subclinical psychopathy. The authors examine whether the same trait, disinhibition, can drive individuals towards both constructive and destructive behaviors, analyzing data from two studies involving full-time workers and university students. Utilizing the Balloon Analogue Risk Task (BART) to measure disinhibition, the results indicate that disinhibited individuals are more likely to demonstrate entrepreneurial intentions, which are generally considered beneficial, as well as tendencies associated with psychopathy, which can have antisocial implications. The study builds on the response modulation model, which suggests that disinhibited individuals pursue dominant, reward-oriented responses even when circumstances change, often failing to adjust their behavior in adverse conditions, underscore disinhibition's dual nature. This research contributes to the field by broadening previous research to understand how personality traits associated with impulsivity impact both positive and negative life outcomes, especially in entrepreneurial settings where the boundary between risk-taking and recklessness is often blurred.

Lerner (2016) investigates the role of impulsivity in entrepreneurial success. Using agent-based simulations, the study explores the trade-off between speed and accuracy in decision-making, particularly focusing on impulsive entrepreneurs who prioritize quick action over thorough analysis. Key findings reveal that impulsive entrepreneurs are less likely to establish a business successfully but may experience higher growth if they do succeed. While impulsivity often leads to organizational failures due to insufficient planning, it can also drive rapid growth and lead to extreme positive outcomes in high-growth contexts. The study highlights that impulsivity's value in entrepreneurship is context-dependent; it may be advantageous for growth under uncertainty but detrimental for business establishment in structured environments. This research contributes to understanding how impulsive traits can

both hinder and propel entrepreneurial ventures, depending on the specific outcomes and environmental conditions.

Pietersen and Botha (2021) continue the topic about impulsivity's influences on entrepreneurial behavior through an unreasoned pathway rather than traditional judgment-based decision-making. The authors propose that impulsivity leads individuals to prioritize the desirability of an opportunity over its feasibility, which deviates from the rational, cost-benefit analyses typically expected in entrepreneurial models. This study, using structural equation modeling and longitudinal survey data from South African entrepreneurs, supports the theory that trait impulsivity can bypass conventional judgment pathways, with impulsive individuals acting based on opportunity attractiveness rather than practicality. This "unreasoned" approach to decision-making is shown to foster entrepreneurial engagement, particularly in uncertain contexts, where impulsive traits like sensation-seeking and lack of premeditation enhance action likelihood. The findings are aligned with Wiklund et al. (2016, 2017) papers about impulsivity and entrepreneurship.

The Behavioral Inhibition System (BIS) and Behavioral Activation System (BAS) provide a foundational framework for understanding how biological predispositions might contribute to mental disorders such as ADHD, bipolar disorder, and mania, which in turn intersect with entrepreneurial tendencies. The BIS, associated with sensitivity to punishment and avoidance, and BAS, linked to reward-seeking and impulsivity, may explain variances in entrepreneurial intentions among individuals with ADHD and other neurodivergent traits (Johnson et al., 2003). Following this line, researchers have tried to delineate how BIS/BAS affect entrepreneurial intentions and outcomes. Rauch and Hatak (2015) found that behavioral inhibition is negatively correlated with entrepreneurial intentions in students and firm performance in entrepreneurs, suggesting that low BIS—often linked with traits like

resilience and persistence—supports entrepreneurial success, especially in dynamic, fast-changing environments where adaptability is essential.

Lerner (2016) explores the complex role of behavioral disinhibition—traits like impulsivity, hyperactivity, and attentional variability—in entrepreneurship. Lerner hypothesizes that while disinhibition may aid in launching entrepreneurial ventures by fostering impulsive and exploratory behavior, it could simultaneously hinder the entrepreneur's ability to attract resources and support. This paradox is rooted in the conflicting perceptions that disinhibited entrepreneurs may appear creative and visionary but lack reliability and administrative skills essential for successful venture organization. Using a randomized experimental design, Lerner found that potential resource providers were less likely to perceive ventures led by disinhibited entrepreneurs as successful or to support these ventures. The study contributes to emerging literature on the "dark side" of entrepreneurship traits, suggesting that while behavioral disinhibition aligns with a creative and entrepreneurial stereotype, it may reduce confidence among supporters in the entrepreneur's capacity to implement ideas systematically.

Geenen et al. (2016) also examine this systems' impact on entrepreneurial intentions. The authors find that BAS dimensions, particularly BAS-Drive (BAS-D) and BAS-Fun Seeking (BAS-FS), are positively associated with entrepreneurial intent, indicating that individuals motivated by intrinsic factors and goal-directed drive are more inclined to pursue entrepreneurship. Conversely, BAS-Reward Responsiveness (BAS-RR), associated with a desire for extrinsic rewards, has a negative relationship with entrepreneurial intent, suggesting that entrepreneurs may be less motivated by external rewards. The study finds no significant effect of BIS on entrepreneurial intent, emphasizing the importance of approach-oriented traits in entrepreneurial behavior.

Lerner et al. (2018) extend the study from Geenen et al. (2016) which examined entrepreneurial intention, empirically testing the connection between BIS/BAS sensitivity and entrepreneurial outcomes. In Study 1, they found that high BAS-Drive correlates with increased entrepreneurial action, while BIS does not show a significant relationship. Study 2, however, reveals that high BIS is negatively associated with venture performance, implying that sensitivity to threats may impede long-term business success. The research highlights that BIS/BAS Reinforcement Sensitivity Theory can explain entrepreneurial motivations, suggesting that these psychophysiological traits shape different aspects of the entrepreneurial process, from initial action to sustained performance.

Leung et al. (2020) continue this line of research and finally find what is the role that BAS play in the link between mental disorder and entrepreneurial intention. They investigate four specific psychiatric traits— inattention, hyperactivity, narcissism, and hypomania—and their impact on entrepreneurial intention, both independently and jointly. The study finds that the Behavioral Activation System (BAS) mediates the relationship between these psychiatric symptoms and entrepreneurial intention, particularly highlighting BAS's role in connecting hyperactivity and narcissism to entrepreneurial intentions. This mediation effect suggests that BAS could serve as a unifying theoretical framework for understanding the complex associations between psychiatric traits and entrepreneurship.

Nicolaou et al. (2011) examines how genetic variations, particularly in the DRD3 dopamine receptor gene, might influence entrepreneurial behavior. They found that a specific genetic marker (rs1486011) is linked to a higher likelihood of being an entrepreneur, suggesting a possible genetic component to entrepreneurial tendencies, especially related to sensation-seeking behavior. Nicolaou et al. (2021) examines how biological factors, such as genetics, physiology and neurodevelopmental conditions, can shape entrepreneurial behavior. Biology can provide a foundational layer to explain why risk-taking, impulsivity and other

traits are related to entrepreneurial behaviors. And following this route, also explaining why people with ADHD and other neurodiverse symptoms are more likely to become entrepreneurs, by highlighting the genetic predictors.

Freeman et al. (2024) wrote their paper from the dopaminergic perspective, offering an integrative framework that includes dopaminergic personality traits (e.g., openness and extraversion) and dopaminergic psychiatric conditions (e.g. ADHD, bipolar spectrum syndromes, substance and behavioral addiction). Using this framework allows us to view these entrepreneurial traits and symptoms not as isolated phenomena but as part of a neuropsychological continuum influenced by dopamine. Through this framework, they highlight how dopamine-related traits enhance opportunity recognition, risk-taking, and persistence, essential for entrepreneurial success, while also posing risks for mental health challenges. The study also underscores the importance of developing supportive environments and self-regulation strategies for entrepreneurs to balance these traits effectively.

While research has established clear links between biological predispositions and entrepreneurial behavior, particularly through dopaminergic systems and BIS/BAS mechanisms (Freeman et al., 2024; Leung et al., 2020), significant questions remain about the precise neurobiological pathways that mediate this relationship. The current literature, while extensive in documenting correlations between ADHD traits and entrepreneurial tendencies (Wiklund et al., 2017, 2018), lacks detailed exploration of how specific genetic markers (such as DRD3 variations) interact with environmental factors to influence entrepreneurial outcomes (Nicolaou et al., 2011, 2021). A more intricate temporal dynamic than previously recognized is also suggested by the seeming contradiction between impulsivity's function in venture initiation and sustained success (Lerner, 2016, 2017).

Bounce back from Traumatic Experiences-Dyslexia and Entrepreneurship

Dyslexia is defined as a specific learning difficulty that affects language learning and cognition processing, leading to an injured reading and spelling ability (DAS, 2019). Research suggests a complex relationship between people with dyslexia and entrepreneurship. Childhood trauma has boosted entrepreneurs' entrepreneurial orientation through increased promotion focus and self-dehumanization (Nguyen & Tran, 2024). Dyslexics commonly experience adversity as they are children educationally and socially excluded and bullied by their peers due to their learning differences (Alexander-Passe, 2016; Scott, 2004). They usually face phonological processing, spelling, reading, and writing difficulties in the mainstream education system (Thomson, 2000; Hulme & Snowling, 2009). People with dyslexia are generally identified as having a lower self-esteem level since they are not recognized by teachers and peers, which makes them experience ostracism and exclusion, which might lead to depression, withdrawal, self-harming, and post-traumatic stress disorder. In this vein, people with dyslexia define success through a different lens compared with neurotypical persons. Logan's (2009, 2010) investigation of dyslexic entrepreneurs shows that many struggle in corporate organizations, cannot follow strict working schedules, and are prohibited from advancing.

But how about those examples of successful dyslexics? Like Richard Branson (UK-music and airline entrepreneur), Lord Richard Rogers (UK-architect), and Tom Cruise/Whoopi Goldberg (USA-film stars) etc. In stark contrast, many undiagnosed dyslexics stuck in low self-esteem and end up in prison (Dyslexia Action, 2005). For those successful ones, they have developed their coping strategies from their traumatic experiences to move on smoothly (Logan, 2009). Guess this is the reason for positive psychology viewpoint is a popular theme when talking about entrepreneurs with dyslexics. A decent work environment is extremely

hard for dyslexics to find within the normal job market but self-employment gives them the previous chance to “win” (Sefotho, 2020).

Dyslexia can bring advantages to the entrepreneurship field is a rarely addressed topic (Logan, 2009; Powers et al., 2021). Most studies keep on talking about how to help dyslexics find a position within any organization or how to revise the tutorial or educational design to help them out their struggles. People with dyslexia often have exceptional spatial skills (Hewes, 2020) and visual thinking (Smith, 2008), but empathy abilities and tackling interpersonal relationships are hard for them (Kirk & Reid, 2001). The relationship between dyslexia and entrepreneurial success operates through several distinct mechanisms. Dyslexic entrepreneurs often demonstrate superior pattern recognition and innovative thinking, combined with strong empathy and people skills that prove valuable in business contexts (Eide & Eide, 2011). This enhanced creativity and interpersonal capability often develops as a coping mechanism in response to earlier challenges, leading to what Alexander-Passe (2017) describes as a form of post-traumatic growth where difficulties are transformed into entrepreneurial advantages.

Logan (2008, 2009) has found that among 35 % entrepreneurs which are dyslexic, only 1 percent are corporate managers. There are interesting comments about dyslexic entrepreneurs, which is entrepreneurs with dyslexia are more comfortable in a start-up or become a serial entrepreneur which make them always do things on their own way (Pavey et al., 2020). The quicker growth compared with those non-dyslexics might be because of delegation. Cross-national comparisons are included in her 2009’s paper, a more structured follow-up methodology has also been used to validate results from the surveys. As a compensatory strategy, delegation and learning how to delegate are crucial for dyslexia entrepreneurs, higher communication skills as a buffer for challenges faced when writing. A

higher risk-taking rate is another signal for their appropriateness to the start-up stage since they are prone to manage their own businesses on a short-term basis.

Smith (2008) examines how dyslexia contributes to entrepreneurial success, by adopting online anecdotal evidence, autobiographies and interviews to understand that if dyslexics are talented or not depending on how the exterior environment understand them but not their intelligence level. Social class is a critical factor that should be included in this line of research, since society or the job market prefers to believe young people from higher social class are more qualified and intelligent (Sepulveda, 2018). Age is mentioned in this paper as a factor contributing to their entrepreneurial behaviors as well. When people with dyslexics get older and more mature, they will be more likely to delve into the career of entrepreneurship so a longitudinal design for the study towards them might be helpful in the future.

Quaye et al. (2012) choose to study the relationship of dyslexia and entrepreneurship tendencies based on genetic influences. A two-stage design with data sourcing from TwinsUK cohort (1,500 Caucasian twins) has been used to investigate. Genes like rs6548678 in ROBO1 are the representative genetic marker which interacts with education, can increase entrepreneurial likelihood.

Sepulveda et al. (2018) which published as a book chapter examines how dyslexia can provide unique entrepreneurial advantages, particularly focusing on extending the findings from Logan (2009). Through qualitative interviews with 10 dyslexic entrepreneurs from Brazil and the UK, the study identifies 11 core traits linked to entrepreneurship, such as strong communication, empathy, delegation, risk-taking with caution, and a high need for autonomy and freedom. Positive dyslexia are the perspectives that authors propose to use when dealing with dyslexics in the context of entrepreneurship. They supported the idea that

dyslexics individuals are resilient in the entrepreneurship journey since they have suffered in their early age during schooling time.

Research consistently shows that individuals with dyslexia can leverage their challenges into entrepreneurial success through resilience and adaptation. Meehan et al. (2020) studied university students with dyslexia, revealing common entrepreneurial traits like determination, creativity, people skills, and risk tolerance, though they also face challenges such as financial concerns and self-doubt. Their study emphasizes that family support, along with mentors (Logan, 2008), is crucial for dyslexic people to thrive as entrepreneurs.

Hewes and Ram (2020) highlight the importance of "champions" - supportive individuals who recognize and amplify dyslexic individuals' strengths - through case studies of three successful dyslexic entrepreneurs. In their research, one entrepreneur's wife played this vital supporting role, while formal mentorship significantly influenced another's life trajectory. Hewes (2020) found that in Singapore, dyslexic entrepreneurs reported negative educational experiences in primary and secondary schools, though interestingly, they showed lower levels of empathy compared to non-dyslexic entrepreneurs.

The intersection of dyslexia with other factors creates unique entrepreneurial journeys. Robinson (2021) provides an autobiographical study exploring how being both Black and dyslexic shaped his entrepreneurial path, with sociocultural challenges and educational neglect contributing to the development of resilience and adaptability. Alexander-Passe et al. (2015) document Sharon Hewitt's case, demonstrating how she transformed early educational struggles into business success by developing strong interpersonal and problem-solving skills, while strategically using technology and delegation.

In the agricultural sector, Smith et al. (2016, 2020) explore how dyslexic entrepreneurs show particular strengths in visual-spatial abilities and innovative problem-solving. Their

studies of dyslexic farmers highlight unique coping strategies to manage business operations, while advocating for increased policy support and practical accommodations. In the 2020 book chapter, the intersection of dyslexia, entrepreneurship, and education are further talked about.

Recent research, particularly in the post-pandemic context, reveals interesting patterns. Bressler et al. (2021) explore how entrepreneurs with psychological disorders, including dyslexia, can leverage their unique strengths during crises like COVID-19. Gong et al. (2022) found that in Singapore, nascent entrepreneurs generally experience higher stress and lower life satisfaction compared to established entrepreneurs. Fan et al. (2024) discovered in their Chinese study that lifestyle factors, particularly sleep quality and religious engagement, significantly influence entrepreneurs with dyslexia symptoms, with religious engagement appearing to mitigate dyslexia-related challenges. These findings align with Wiklund et al.'s (2024) strength-based approach to studying dyslexic entrepreneurship.

Autism and Entrepreneurship

American Psychiatric Association (2013) defines autism spectrum disorder (ASD) as a neuro-developmental disorder that is characterized by “persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction across multiple contexts, including deficits in social reciprocity, non-verbal communicative behaviors used for social interactions, and skills in developing, maintaining and understanding relationships. Within the ASD umbrella, there are a range of different but similar terms about it appears, but they can mainly be understood as feel difficult to build up social interactions and connections in both verbal and non-verbal way, and have developed a pattern of repetitive behaviors (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; Hendrickx, 2008; World Health Organization, 2013).

For dyslexic people, rule-bound thinking and repetitive behaviors can make traditional employment challenging (Parr et al., 2013) but they are loyal and willing to do repetitive

work, normally they are visual learners and skillful in specialized areas (Austin & Pisano, 2017). Despite their potential, employment statistics for individuals with ASD are not positive, with an estimated 85% unemployed even among those with high-functioning autism (Austin & Pisano, 2017). Given these obstacles, entrepreneurship emerges as a promising pathway for individuals with ASD (Patton, 2022; Harris et al., 2013), which gives them autonomy and a better alignment of work with their interests and capabilities.

Wiklund et al. (2014) provide valuable insights through their qualitative study examining the potential advantages of autism traits in entrepreneurship. Through interviews with formally diagnosed autistic individuals, they discovered an interesting divergence in how certain traits are interpreted between psychiatric and entrepreneurial contexts. Characteristics that might be viewed as challenges in traditional settings, such as poor self-regulation and boundarylessness, can be reframed as valuable entrepreneurial attributes like intuition and action orientation. This perspective suggests that entrepreneurship may offer a unique context where these psychological traits can be advantageous, providing a productive outlet for individuals with autism (Wiklund et al., 2014, 2016).

Individuals with ASD are often driven toward entrepreneurship due to a combination of “push” and “pull” factors (Patton, 2022). Push factors stem from external pressures such as discrimination, biases, and low expectations in traditional workplaces (Patterson, Williams & Jones, 2019). Traditional employment fails to accommodate ASD people’s specific needs such as sensory sensitivities or communication difficulties, making entrepreneurship become a necessary tool which can create environments tailors to their needs (Izuno-Garcia & Pagán, 2024). Conversely, pull factors attract individuals with ASD to become self-employed out of their unique strengths and preferences. Thinking and acting differently, focusing on a narrow market which are deemed as not important make them well-suited for entrepreneurship.

Effects of Treatments

Previous studies indicate that therapies like medication and mindfulness can help manage symptoms of ADHD, including impulsivity, emotional regulation, and inattention (Zylowska et al., 2008). For entrepreneurs, this management is especially important because they frequently work in fast-paced, high-stress settings where self-control and concentration are critical. Actively seeking and pursuing treatment can help them become more emotionally resilient, make strategic decisions, and concentrate for longer periods of time. Success in business over the long run requires these abilities. In order to maximize their strengths and minimize any potential ADHD-related issues, entrepreneurs can benefit from treatments that improve their personal and professional well-being (Thurik et al., 2016). Although treatment is not the only pathway to coping, it reflects an acknowledgment of the challenges associated with ADHD and provides individuals with strategies to effectively manage these difficulties (Greidanus & Liao, 2021). For entrepreneurs with ADHD, combining cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) and medication may enhance essential skills like organization and self-regulation, fostering resilience and enabling them to better leverage their unique strengths in the dynamic entrepreneurial environment (Cherkasova et al., 2020).

Thomas et al. (2020) investigates the impact of neurodiversity—specifically ADHD, mood disorders, and addiction—on the performance of new venture teams (NVTs) in Denmark. The authors examine the treatment effect by analyzing how receiving treatment influences the performance outcomes of new venture teams (NVTs) with neurodiverse members. They find that treatment plays a significant role in moderating the relationship between neurodiversity conditions (such as addiction and mood disorders) and team performance. Specifically, founders with mood or addiction conditions who are undergoing treatment show enhanced performance, indicating that treatment helps manage the potential challenges associated with these neurodiverse conditions while allowing beneficial traits to

positively impact team outcomes. Interestingly, treatment for ADHD does not show a positive moderating effect and, in fact, appears to have a negative impact on team performance, likely due to the characteristics of the sample, which includes mostly diagnosed individuals on medication rather than untreated individuals with ADHD. This underscores that the effect of treatment may vary across neurodiverse conditions and that it can help leverage some traits for better business performance in certain contexts.

Greidanus and Liao (2021) explore the complex relationship between ADHD and entrepreneurship. They propose the Coping-Dueling-Fit theory, which suggests that ADHD symptoms can act as both assets and liabilities in entrepreneurial contexts, and treatments here is the coping mechanism to moderate these effects. They found that untreated ADHD often leads to higher rates of business ownership (entry into entrepreneurship), yet with challenges in performance and persistence. Treatment is found to be positively moderate for entrepreneurs with ADHD and their performance and persistence, but not the case for those with ADHD but not started their businesses. The limitation of their study is that their data cannot explore the types of medication or therapy or the severity of ADHD, which might affect the study results significantly. Nevertheless, their findings further corroborate the model proposed by Lerner, Hunt, and Verheul (2018), which states that ADHD affects entrepreneurship in different stages, and researchers should separate every stage to see the effects and compare them.

The study from Gunia et al. (2021) creatively uses "treatment" but is not used in the conventional sense of clinical intervention or therapeutic measures. Instead, they emphasize sleep issues as a situational factor that "treats" or influences the psychological characteristics indirectly linked to ADHD. Here, sleep disruptions function as a biological stressor that intensifies ADHD-like symptoms like impulsivity, hyperactivity, and attentional variability rather than as a formal therapeutic intervention. This increased ADHD-like state brought on

by sleep deprivation affects entrepreneurial intentions by enhancing characteristics that can promote risk-taking and action. Enhanced ADHD-like behaviors brought on by sleep issues are positively correlated with a rise in entrepreneurial aspirations. Thus, people with trouble sleeping are more likely to act in ways linked to entrepreneurship, like taking risks and being proactive. This "treatment," as opposed to a formal intervention or treatment, refers to a situational, natural factor (lack of sleep) that alters psychological characteristics. The novel framing provides insight into how environmental factors can influence entrepreneurial behaviors in ways similar to clinical ADHD traits without actual medical treatment.

Unfortunately, there is limited research that focuses on leveraging samples of clinically diagnosed entrepreneurs or compare diagnosed and self-evaluated samples.

Team as the Research Context

Teams are increasingly recognized as the main drivers behind new venture creation. The use of entrepreneurial teams, as opposed to solo entrepreneurs, allows for the integration of diverse perspectives, skills, and approaches, which can enhance problem-solving and innovation. In the context of neurodiversity, working in a team may provide neurodivergent individuals with the support and complementary skills they need to mitigate personal challenges while leveraging their unique strengths. This team-based environment can amplify the positive impacts of neurodiversity on performance, fostering an inclusive space where each member's contributions support the collective success and resilience of the venture (Kamm et al., 1990; Grant, 1993; Cooney, 2005). The relationship between team composition and entrepreneurial outcomes appears complex and sometimes contradictory when neurodiversity is involved. Current evidence suggests that optimal team configurations may vary depending on the specific type of neurodevelopmental condition and business context.

The team context offers an important dimension for studying neurodiversity because teams often create a support system, distribute responsibilities, and benefit from diverse

perspectives, which may amplify or mitigate individual traits and behaviors. In their study, they find that team composition—particularly the presence of neurodiverse individuals and the size of the team—impacts performance. Thomas et al. (2020) focus on entrepreneurial teams (NVTs) to explore the effects of neurodiversity. For instance, larger teams show better performance when they include members with addiction or mood conditions, while smaller teams are more effective when they include individuals with neurological conditions like ADHD. This indicates that team dynamics and social support within teams can enhance the adaptive potential of neurodiverse traits, showing that the effects of neurodiversity are context-dependent and influenced by team structure and composition. Stappers and Andries (2021) examines how ADHD symptoms in entrepreneurs impact their growth aspirations, with a focus on the moderating effects of team size and industry type. Building on expectancy theory. In this study, the entrepreneurial team plays a critical moderating role, influencing the relationship between ADHD symptoms and growth aspirations. Specifically, the presence of co-founders strengthens the positive effects of ADHD traits (such as increased innovation and internationalization tendencies) on an entrepreneur's growth aspirations. The rationale is that co-founders provide complementary skills, shared responsibilities, and diverse perspectives, which can enhance the strategic and operational capabilities of ventures led by ADHD-affected entrepreneurs. This collective setting can compensate for potential impulsivity or attention variability associated with ADHD, allowing for better channeling of these traits into productive entrepreneurial outcomes, particularly in complex and dynamic contexts like innovation-focused or knowledge-intensive industries. After around 3 years, they built on previous work by examining how contextual factors—specifically, team size and industry knowledge intensity—moderate the relationship between ADHD symptoms and growth aspirations in entrepreneurs (Stappers & Andries, 2024). Unlike their 2021 research, which emphasized the direct positive impact of ADHD symptoms on entrepreneurial orientation, the

2024 study highlights how team dynamics and industry context can enhance or constrain this relationship. The study uses expectancy theory to propose that in knowledge-intensive industries and within larger top management teams, entrepreneurs with ADHD symptoms may experience greater support for innovation and internationalization activities, leading to higher growth aspirations.

The mechanisms through which team dynamics influence neurodivergent entrepreneurial performance are multifaceted and sometimes counterintuitive. Recent research has identified several key processes that merit deeper investigation.

One critical mechanism is the relationship between ADHD symptoms and team conflict. Tran et al. (2022) found that ADHD symptoms correlate with higher levels of both cognitive and emotional conflict in teams. While cognitive conflict did not significantly impact well-being, emotional conflict negatively affected entrepreneurial well-being and firm profitability. This suggests that how teams manage, and channel conflict may be crucial for success.

Psychological safety emerges as another vital mechanism. Peick et al. (2023) discovered that while ADHD-like symptoms generally reduce team member satisfaction, psychological safety can moderate this effect. Teams that cultivate acceptance of neuropsychological differences may be better equipped to leverage diverse cognitive styles productively.

The apparent contradiction between solo and team performance for ADHD entrepreneurs (Thomas et al., 2020) might be explained by examining specific team dynamic mechanisms like communication patterns and their impact on task coordination, decision-making processes and how they accommodate different cognitive styles, role distribution and its alignment with individual strengths and support systems that enable effective collaboration while maintaining autonomy. These mechanisms appear to be influenced by contextual

factors. As demonstrated by Stappers and Andries (2024), team dynamics interact with industry context to shape outcomes. In knowledge-intensive industries, larger management teams may better support ADHD entrepreneurs' innovation and internationalization activities.

Gunia et al. (2021) examines how sleep problems may lead to increased entrepreneurial intentions through the experience of ADHD-like tendencies. Through four studies, they find that sleep issues can indeed influence entrepreneurial drive by fostering ADHD-like behaviors. In a team context, impulsivity, sleep issues and so on can influence group dynamics, possibly amplifying or mitigating the impact of individual challenges on the team's overall intentions and actions. The study found that sleep disturbances can exacerbate ADHD-like symptoms such as impulsivity and attentional variability, which in turn increase entrepreneurial intentions. However, in a team setting, the presence of other members may help buffer or balance these tendencies, potentially affecting decision-making and resilience in different ways compared to an individual entrepreneur.

Unlike solo entrepreneurs, teams provide diverse skills and perspectives, enabling better delegation and idea development. Team structure allows entrepreneurs, including those with neurodiverse conditions like dyslexia, to compensate for individual limitations and enhance leadership. Logan and Martin (2012) explore how dyslexia influence the leadership and management styles of successful entrepreneurs, highlighting the unique strengths dyslexic individuals bring to entrepreneurship. and create dynamic environments that foster innovation and growth. Dyslexic entrepreneurs excel in oral communication, delegation, and intuitive thinking, which help them build strong teams and delegate tasks, compensating for challenges in traditional corporate settings. The research suggests that the entrepreneurial path allows individuals with dyslexia to thrive by leveraging their strengths and adapting in the team context, potentially providing them with a competitive edge in business.

While not all research reveals that team is a better context for people with ADHD. Wiklund et al., (2019) investigates the dual effects of ADHD on entrepreneurial behavior and outcomes using a comprehensive, population-level dataset from Statistics Denmark. The study examines individuals formally diagnosed with ADHD, assessing their likelihood of entering entrepreneurship, performance in self-employment, and persistence. Findings indicate that while individuals with ADHD are more likely to pursue entrepreneurship at a younger age and as solo founders, they generally show lower performance and persistence compared to those without ADHD. However, the study reveals that certain factors, like having a stable romantic partner and a higher level of education, can mitigate these disadvantages, leading to better entrepreneurial outcomes for individuals with ADHD.

Gender Might Matters

Recent research has increasingly examined the intersection of gender, neurodiversity, and entrepreneurship through multiple lenses. Tran et al. (2021) provided foundational insights by studying how ADHD symptoms affect entrepreneurial well-being across a large international sample. Their findings revealed that ADHD's negative impact on well-being was more pronounced for women entrepreneurs, likely due to additional challenges from societal expectations and gendered stereotypes. This gender dimension was further explored in Tran et al. (2022), which examined disabilities and entrepreneurial intentions among college students. While they found no direct relationship between disabilities and entrepreneurial intentions, important gender and racial differences emerged, with male students and students of color showing higher entrepreneurial intentions.

The role of gender in moderating neurodiversity's impact on entrepreneurial outcomes has been examined from multiple angles. Tran, Wiklund and Yu (2022) investigated whether gender moderated the relationship between ADHD and team conflict, building on observations that women entrepreneurs typically experience less cognitive and emotional

conflict than their male counterparts. Though their moderation hypothesis was not supported, their work contributed to understanding how gender and ADHD interact in entrepreneurial settings.

Looking at leadership and innovation, Artamoshina et al. (2023) expanded this line of inquiry by examining how CEOs with ADHD symptoms influence business model innovation in SMEs. Their research revealed interesting gender differences, finding that male CEOs and those with longer tenure showed stronger relationships between ADHD traits and innovative business practices, particularly in high-risk environments.

The intersection of gender and neurodiversity extends beyond ADHD. Wolfe and Patel (2017) examined Obsessive-Compulsive personality disorder's relationship with self-employment, noting how gender interacts with different neurodevelopmental conditions to influence entrepreneurial outcomes. Similarly, Powers et al. (2021) provided insights into how gender affects entrepreneurial intentions among individuals with dyslexia. While they found that females with dyslexia maintained similar levels of self-efficacy to their male counterparts, they noted that females often report lower self-efficacy in crucial entrepreneurial skills like problem-solving and financial management, with these differences emerging as early as middle school age.

This body of research collectively suggests that gender plays a complex moderating role in how different forms of neurodiversity influence entrepreneurial outcomes, from initial intentions through to business performance and well-being. The studies highlight the importance of considering both gender and neurodiversity when designing support systems for entrepreneurs and understanding entrepreneurial outcomes.

Other Mental Disorders

Lots of entrepreneurs also experience other mental disorders like obsessive-compulsive personality disorder (OCPD) (Wolfe & Patel, 2017) and bipolar disorder and borderline personality disorder (Walker et al., 2020). Several studies highlight the positive contributions of other psychiatric traits to entrepreneurial success. For instance, Hatak (2021), in her book chapter, notes that bipolar disorder may enhance entrepreneurial performance by fostering creativity, risk tolerance, and heightened opportunity recognition. Similarly, Wolfe et al. (2020) and Pushkarskaya et al. (2020) suggest that hypomanic traits-characterized by elevated mood, goal-directed behavior, and high activity-are positively associated with entrepreneurial engagement and financial success, particularly among self-employed individuals with better education backgrounds.

Biologically, traits such as disinhibition and impulsivity-often related to bipolar disorder and ADHD-can promote risk-taking and adaptability in uncertain entrepreneurial environments (Walker et al., 2020). While potentially maladaptive in other contexts, these traits may enable entrepreneurs to thrive in dynamic and high-pressure scenarios by fostering rapid decision-making and resilience under stress.

While some psychiatric traits can enhance entrepreneurial drive, not all mental health conditions give advantages as good deals. Johnson et al. (2015) found no evidence linking manic tendencies to entrepreneurial success, either in intentions or outcomes. Individuals with high manic vulnerability were less likely to pursue entrepreneurship, and when they did, they would experience more significant corporate losses. This shows that the type and stage of entrepreneurship activity and the existence of support systems may influence the association between manic traits and entrepreneurship.

Further, Wolfe and Patel (2017) explored the role of obsessive-compulsive personality disorder (OCPD) in entrepreneurship, finding that traits like persistence and perfectionism

positively correlated with entrepreneurial tendencies, particularly among younger males. This indicates that the effects of psychiatric traits on entrepreneurship may be moderated by demographic factors such as age and gender.

Mental health traits often show dually; both contribute to productive and maladaptive outcomes, depending on the context. Walker et al. (2020) emphasize that impulsivity and risk-taking, while advantageous for innovation and opportunity-seeking, can also lead to counterproductive behavior, such as overextension or poor decision-making. These findings underscore that channeling such traits toward constructive entrepreneurial paths through supported systems is important.

Taken together, these findings suggest that some other mental health conditions also have invisible connections with entrepreneurship and are more complex to understand. Enhancing factors and potential risks exist in the same route. Tailored resources, mentoring, and mental health interactions can help maximize their potential while mitigating challenges.

How will Entrepreneurs with Neurodiversity Influence Others around Them

The influence of neurodiverse entrepreneurs extends beyond their personal achievements to impact their family members and organizational culture. Freeman et al. (2019) revealed an interesting intergenerational pattern through their study of 242 entrepreneurs and 93 comparison participants. They found that 72% of entrepreneurs experienced either personal or familial mental health conditions, suggesting a complex interplay between entrepreneurship and family mental health dynamics. The high prevalence of psychiatric conditions among entrepreneurs' immediate family members indicates that these traits may be shared within families, potentially influencing both business practices and family relationships.

The impact of neurodiverse entrepreneurs on their support systems becomes particularly evident in how they structure their work environments. West (2022) demonstrates how dyslexic entrepreneurs, shaped by their own experiences with supportive family environments, often create workplace cultures that emphasize individual strengths and adaptability. During challenging times such as the COVID-19 pandemic, these entrepreneurs leveraged their experiences to foster resilient and creative problem-solving environments, benefiting both their families and employees.

Alexander-Passe (2020) further explores this dynamic in "Dyslexia, Trauma, and Traits for Success," showing how neurodiverse entrepreneurs, having experienced inadequate support in traditional educational settings, often become advocates for inclusive practices in their own businesses. Their personal experiences with family support and self-employment influence how they mentor and develop their employees. These entrepreneurs frequently create work environments that emphasize positive relationships and goal setting, drawing from their own experiences of overcoming challenges. Their approach to leadership is characterized by understanding and accommodation, reflecting the supportive environment they either received or wished they had received during their own developmental journey.

This transformative influence creates a ripple effect where neurodiverse entrepreneurs' experiences shape not only their immediate family dynamics but also their organizational cultures, fostering environments that value neurodiversity and support individual growth.

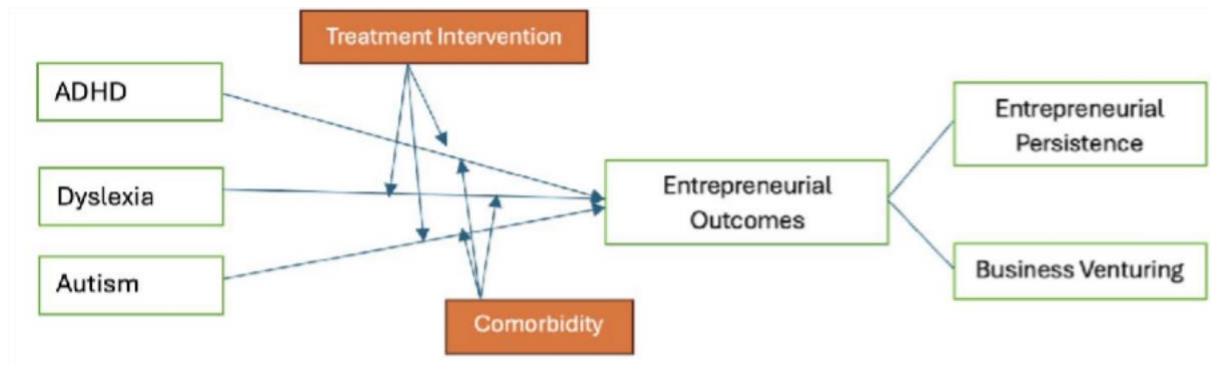
ANALYSIS

To further understand the state of the field and to offer suggestions for future research, we further analyzed the key themes from the systematic review and organized them around one of the more recent theoretical models in the field, the Coping Dueling Fit (CDF) model (Greidanus & Liao, 2021). The CDF model was developed as an extension of both the the

person-environment fit model and the dueling banjos models that are found in the ADHD-entrepreneurship literatures. The model, with extensions for future research, is presented in figure 2 below.

Proposed Model

Figure 3 The Coping-Dueling Framework for Entrepreneurial Outcomes



The above model focuses on how neurodevelopmental conditions like ADHD, autism, and dyslexia influence entrepreneurial outcomes through both individual traits and external interventions. The model identifies Entrepreneurial Outcomes as the core focus, influenced by two critical mechanisms: **Treatment Interventions** and **Comorbidity**. Neurodiverse traits, such as ADHD's impulsivity (Wiklund et al., 2019), dyslexia's visual-spatial skills (Logan & Martin, 2012), and autism's systematic thinking (Wong et al., 2021), create both advantages and challenges within the entrepreneurial process. For example, while ADHD traits may foster opportunity recognition and creativity, they can also hinder persistence and detailed execution (Lerner et al., 2018; Boot et al., 2020). Similarly, autistic traits may drive niche innovation and a higher level of creativity (Patton, 2022), and dyslexic individuals excel in pattern recognition and leadership (Alexander-Passe, 2020). These traits interact with interventions to shape outcomes like **entrepreneurial persistence** and **business venturing**.

Treatment Interventions, including therapies, coping strategies, and pharmacological aids, help individuals manage symptoms that might impede entrepreneurial success while amplifying strengths. According to Thomas et al. (2020), ADHD therapies, for example, can

enhance attention and decrease impulsivity, which promotes better alignment with business activities. By offering frameworks that improve their potential for success, environmental interventions like mentoring, inclusive team dynamics, and flexible work arrangements help neurodiverse people even more (Stappers & Andries, 2021).

Based on the comprehensive review by Antshel and Russo (2019), we add **comorbidity** of ADHD, autism spectrum disorder (ASD) as another potential moderator in the neurodiversity-entrepreneurship link. Individuals with ADHD and ASD show different cognitive profiles - while those with ADHD struggle more with inhibition and planning, those with ASD face challenges with cognitive flexibility and adapting to change. These distinct cognitive patterns could theoretically lead to different entrepreneurial approaches and outcomes. These neurological differences might translate into entrepreneurial strengths and challenges, particularly there is an increased prevalence of both conditions (Baio, 2018; Visser et al., 2014).

FUTURE DIRECTION

Recent critiques of research linking mental disorders and entrepreneurship have highlighted significant methodological concerns and ethical considerations. Agafonow and Perez (2020) raised a fundamental issue with the field's heavy reliance on self-reported symptoms rather than clinical diagnoses of conditions like ADHD, autism, and dyslexia. They argue that this approach may intensify the Hawthorne effect, potentially leading individuals to align themselves with an entrepreneurial identity based on their self-perceived mental health conditions. Moreover, they note that clinical psychology has largely avoided this research direction, concerned that focusing primarily on successful entrepreneurial cases might inadvertently discourage individuals with diagnosed mental disorders who haven't achieved entrepreneurial success. This critique underscores a potential privilege bias in the

research, as it often centers on individuals with sufficient social and economic capital to pursue entrepreneurial ventures, regardless of their outcomes.

Beyond methodological concerns, there's a broader discussion about the implications of positioning entrepreneurship as an ideal career path for individuals with mental disorders. As Krakovsky (2014) emphasizes, entrepreneurship should not be viewed as a universal solution for career success, particularly for individuals with ADHD. Success and fulfillment can take many forms - while some individuals with ADHD might thrive in self-employment, others might find their calling in traditional employment settings by rationally evaluate their career choice and join those industries that they are interested into (Lachenmeier, 2023). This diversity of potential career paths suggests that research should avoid prescriptive approaches that might inadvertently pressure individuals toward entrepreneurship as a primary solution.

Another nuanced approach for future research might involve shifting focus from specific neurodevelopmental disorders to examining traits and their relationship with entrepreneurial outcomes. Polderman et al. (2014) provide a framework for this approach, noting how certain dimensions of autism spectrum disorders and ADHD, particularly restricted and repetitive behaviors (ASDr), correlate with inattention and hyperactivity, though not through direct item overlap. This trait-based perspective could offer a more objective lens for understanding the intersection of neurodiversity and entrepreneurship, particularly given the frequent comorbidity between conditions like ADHD, bipolar disorder, and dyslexia. Such an approach would move beyond potentially stigmatizing diagnostic labels while still acknowledging the role of specific cognitive and behavioral traits in entrepreneurial contexts.

Beyond methodological refinements, future research might also consider educational implications, particularly in entrepreneurship education (EE). For instance, Haukland and Wiklund (2022) have examined how entrepreneurship education can be adapted to better

serve students with ADHD. Their Delphi study with global experts revealed critical areas for designing inclusive entrepreneurship education, including understanding ADHD's impact on learning processes, innovative course design, and targeted pedagogical interventions. This educational perspective complements the trait-based research approach suggested by Polderman et al. (2014), as it focuses on practical applications while maintaining sensitivity to individual differences. The combination of trait-based research and tailored educational approaches could provide a more comprehensive framework for supporting neurodiverse individuals in entrepreneurial pursuits. Such integration would not only benefit students with diagnosed conditions but could also enhance entrepreneurship education for all learners by promoting more flexible and inclusive teaching methods. Future studies could examine how specific traits identified in clinical research could inform educational design, creating a bridge between theoretical understanding and practical application in entrepreneurship education.

The future of ADHD and entrepreneurship research necessitates several key shifts in approach. First and foremost, as emphasized by Agafonow and Perez (2020), there is a critical need to move beyond self-reported questionnaires to focus on clinically diagnosed populations. This shift would help address concerns about the Hawthorne effect and self-identification biases that may influence current findings.

Researchers might consider shifting focus from specific neurodiverse disorders to examining broader trait patterns in entrepreneurial conversations. As highlighted by Polderman et al. (2014), certain dimensions of autism spectrum disorders and ADHD share associations with inattention and hyperactivity, suggesting value in a more trait-based research approach. This recommendation gains relevance given the frequent comorbidity between conditions like ADHD, bipolar disorder, and dyslexia. Based on the comprehensive review by Antshel and Russo (2019), there is a compelling opportunity for future research to

examine the intersection of ADHD, autism spectrum disorder (ASD), and entrepreneurship. Given that both conditions exhibit overlapping but different executive functioning and social interaction patterns, as well as shared genetic heritability, it may be worthwhile to look into the potential effects of these neurodevelopmental conditions on entrepreneurial behavior and outcomes. The authors highlight that individuals with ADHD and ASD show different cognitive profiles - while those with ADHD struggle more with inhibition and planning, those with ASD face challenges with cognitive flexibility and adapting to change. These distinct cognitive patterns could theoretically lead to different entrepreneurial approaches and outcomes. Future research should explore how these neurological differences might translate into entrepreneurial strengths and challenges, particularly examining if the increased prevalence of both conditions (Baio, 2018; Visser et al., 2014) correlates with any patterns in entrepreneurial activity. Furthermore, since the overlap between ASD and ADHD peaks in adolescence due to elevated demands for executive functioning and social adaptation (Hartman et al., 2016), studies should investigate how this developmental pattern may affect the timing and success of entrepreneurial endeavors among those who are impacted. As highlighted by Anstshel (2018), the field should move beyond studying entrepreneurial intentions to investigate variables like growth, profits, and satisfaction over time, particularly considering the impact of psychiatric comorbidity with autism, dyslexia and other mental disorders. More longitudinal studies examining long-term entrepreneurial outcomes is worthy.

The field would also benefit from more research examining interaction effects with other conditions within the link between neurodiversity and entrepreneurship. The work of Wiklund et al. (2019) has shown how factors like education level can influence entrepreneurial outcomes for those with ADHD.

For the impulsivity and behavioral inhibition standpoint, future research must move beyond simply identifying biological predictors to understanding how these traits manifest differently across various entrepreneurial stages and contexts (Walker et al., 2020), particularly examining the molecular and neural mechanisms that allow some individuals to harness potentially disadvantageous traits for entrepreneurial advantage. This understanding could lead to more targeted interventions and support systems that help entrepreneurs leverage their biological predispositions while mitigating associated risks (Pietersen & Botha, 2021; Moore et al., 2021).

The last point is about treatment effects. Treatment-focused research presents another vital avenue. Greidanus and Liao (2021) introduced the Coping-Dueling-Fit theory highlighting how treatments can moderate entrepreneurial outcomes, but more work is needed to understand different treatment types, timing, and their specific impacts on entrepreneurial processes. From the employer perspective to say, it might be cost-effective to implement some workplace screening programs with a short screening scale to detect and also provide treatments for those managers and employees with ADHD (de Graaf et al., 2008).

While many businesses rely on imitation and emulation as short-term competitive strategies, sustained competitive advantage in today's dynamic business environment increasingly depends on creativity and innovation. In this context, neurodiversity represents not just a consideration for inclusive practices, but a potential source of distinct competitive advantage through enhanced organizational creativity and innovative capacity (Bernick, 2022; Loiacono & Ren, 2018). Organizations may gain strategic advantages by studying and adopting neurodivergent thinking patterns and problem-solving approaches, even in the absence of neurodivergent individuals on their core teams, as these perspectives can enhance creative capacity and drive innovation.

CONCLUSION

Research on neurodiversity in entrepreneurship has gained increasing scholarly attention, yet the current literature predominantly focuses on identifying potential challenges and opportunities without establishing a comprehensive theoretical framework to systematically analyze and predict its impact (Lerner et al., 2018; Wiklund et al., 2018). Unlike more traditionally studied diversity dimensions in organizational contexts such as gender, race, or educational background, neurodiversity presents unique complexities that make it challenging to define and measure as a team diversity factor in new ventures (Lerner et al., 2018).

Furthermore, while existing research often emphasizes entrepreneurial orientation and intentions among neurodivergent individuals, the influence of neurodiversity extends throughout the entire entrepreneurial journey, from opportunity recognition to venture scaling (Axbey et al., 2023; Shepherd & Patzelt, 2022). As organizations increasingly recognize neurodiversity as a crucial element of their diversity strategies, evidence suggests that neurodivergent individuals can contribute significantly to organizational innovation and creative problem-solving capabilities (Axbey et al., 2023; Austin & Pisano, 2017).

Table 3 Potential Research Question for Each Stream

Stream of Research	Potential Research question
Previous Review of Neurodiversity and Entrepreneurship Research	How do the distinct thinking patterns and cognitive traits of entrepreneurs with ADHD influence their creative problem-solving capabilities throughout different stages of the entrepreneurial journey?
ADHD	How do the distinct impulsivity and attention patterns associated with ADHD influence an entrepreneur's ability to generate and refine creative solutions across different phases of venture development?
Self-efficacy	What role does environmental validation play in building self-efficacy among neurodivergent entrepreneurs, particularly in their willingness to pursue unconventional creative solutions?
Impulsivity, Behavioral Inhibition and Genetic Factors	How does the interaction between behavioral inhibition and dopaminergic systems influence creative problem-solving in entrepreneurial contexts, particularly for individuals with ADHD or similar neurodevelopmental conditions?

Treatments	How do the timing and duration of ADHD treatments influence entrepreneurial creativity across different stages of venture development, from ideation to scaling?
Team as Context	How do team composition and psychological safety mechanisms influence the translation of neurodivergent entrepreneurs' creative abilities into organizational innovation, particularly in knowledge-intensive industries?
Gender	How do societal expectations and gender-specific barriers create different entrepreneurial pathways and outcomes for neurodivergent women versus men, and what implications does this have for support system design?
Dyslexia	How does early adversity and trauma experienced by dyslexic individuals transform into entrepreneurial advantages through specific coping mechanisms and support systems?
Autism	How do communication preferences unique to ASD individuals shape innovative workplace design and management practices in their entrepreneurial ventures?
Other mental disorders	What role does heightened risk tolerance associated with certain mental health conditions (particularly bipolar disorder and ADHD) play in opportunity recognition and venture scaling decisions, and how does this impact long-term business sustainability?
Influence on others	How do neurodiverse entrepreneurs' unconventional approaches to creative problem-solving transform traditional mentoring and talent development practices within their organizations, particularly in fostering innovative thinking among neurotypical employees?

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Appendix 1 Reviewed Papers List

Journal	Year	Title
AMP	2018	ATTENTION DEFICIT/HYPERACTIVITY DISORDER (ADHD) AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP
AMP	2018	DUELING BANJOS: HARMONY AND DISCORD BETWEEN ADHD AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP
APPLIED PSYCHOLOGY: AN INTERNATIONAL REVIEW	2016	ADHD Symptoms and Entrepreneurial Orientation of Small Firm Owners
Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice	2019	ADHD Symptoms, Entrepreneurial Orientation (EO), and Firm Performance
European Journal of Epidemiology	2016	The association between attention-deficit/hyperactivity (ADHD) symptoms and self-employment
Small business economics	2020	ADHD symptoms, entrepreneurial passion, and entrepreneurial performance
Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice	2019	Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and Earnings in Later-Life Self-Employment
Small business economics	2019	Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) symptoms and academic entrepreneurial preference: is there an association?
International Review of Entrepreneurship	2014	Entrepreneurial tendencies among people with ADHD
Small Business Economics	2018	Entrepreneurship and attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder: a large-scale study involving the clinical condition of ADHD
Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice	2021	ADHD-related neurodiversity and the entrepreneurial mindset
Journal of Business Venturing Insights	2021	ADHD and entrepreneurship: Beyond person-entrepreneurship fit
Small business economics	2018	The prevalence and co-occurrence of psychiatric conditions among entrepreneurs and their families.
JBV Insights	2024	Dopamine and entrepreneurship: Unifying entrepreneur personality traits, psychiatric symptoms, entrepreneurial action and outcomes
World Encyclopedia of Entrepreneurship	2021	Mental health in entrepreneurship
SBE	2015	ADHD-like behavior and entrepreneurial intentions
International journal of entrepreneurial behaviour & research	2020	“When I get older, I wanna be an entrepreneur”: the impact of disability and dyslexia on entrepreneurial self-efficacy perception
Asia Pacific Journal of Developmental Differences	2020	Entrepreneurs with Dyslexia in Singapore: The Incidence, Their Educational Experiences, and Their Unique Attributes
Asia Pacific Journal of Developmental Differences	2020	BEING DIFFERENTLY ABLED: LEARNING LESSONS FROM DYSLEXIC ENTREPRENEURS.
Proceedings of the 9th Annual South-East European Doctoral Student Conference	2014	Dyslexics and Their Entrepreneur Behaviors
Asia Pacific Journal of Developmental Differences	2020	Characteristics of entrepreneurs who experience dyslexia: an interview study on the role of school in supporting an entrepreneurial mindset
Journal of African American Males in Education	2021	A Black, Dyslexic, Gifted and Male Entrepreneur: The Unheard Voice

University of Sheffield	2018	Dyslexia: Hidden talents in the workplace
Neurodiversity and Work Employment, Identity, and Support Networks for Neurominorities	2024	Neurodiversity and Entrepreneurship
Entrepreneurship, Dyslexia, and Education	2020	Dyslexia, Entrepreneurship, and Education in Singapore
Entrepreneurship, Dyslexia, and Education	2020	Documenting the Role of UK Agricultural Colleges in Propagating the Farming-Dyslexia-Entrepreneurship Nexus
Scientific Reports	2024	Entrepreneurial mental health in the wake of COVID-19 in China with an emphasis on attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and dyslexia analysis
Local Economy	2016	Assessing the impact of ‘farming with dyslexia’ on local rural economies
European management review	2020	Self-efficacy and Success of Disadvantaged Entrepreneurs: The Moderating Role of Resilience
Entrepreneurship, Dyslexia, and Education: Research, Principles, and Practice	2020	An Award-Winning Entrepreneur
Global Journal of Entrepreneurship	2021	CAN THE POSITIVE TRAITS OF ENTREPRENEURS WITH PSYCHOLOGICAL DISORDERS ENABLE THEM
Doctoral dissertation, Liberty University	2020	TO SUCCEED THROUGH THE PANDEMIC? Learning Disability as an Influence on Entrepreneurial Calling and Success
Entrepreneurship, Dyslexia, and Education	2020	Dyslexia, Trauma, and Traits for Success
Review of Entrepreneurship	2022	Research on the Association between Physical and Psychiatric Disabilities and Entrepreneurial Intention Among College Students
Asia Pacific Journal of Developmental Differences	2022	CAN THE POSITIVE TRAITS OF ENTREPRENEURS WITH PSYCHOLOGICAL DISORDERS ENABLE THEM
Frontiers in sociology	2022	TO SUCCEED THROUGH THE PANDEMIC? Established and nascent entrepreneurs: comparing the mental health, self-care behaviours and wellbeing in Singapore
Policy Studies Journal	2019	Private Citizens as Policy Entrepreneurs: Evidence from Autism Mandates and Parental Political Mobilization
Journal of Clinical Developmental Psychology	2022	Self-employment and Entrepreneurship for Youngs and Adults with Neurodevelopmental or Psychiatric Disorders: a Systematic Review
Tizard Learning Disability Review	2021	Making the world a better place: achieving impact through innovation and an entrepreneurial ethos
Review of International Comparative Management	2021	Beyond Adaptations and Accommodations: Management Practice that Matters as the Key to Retention of Employees with Autism (Part 1)
Emerald Emerging Markets Case Studies	2024	Autism Ashram
Academy of Management Perspectives	2018	Mental Disorders in the Entrepreneurship Context: When Being Different Can Be An Advantage
Journal of Business Venturing Insights	2017	Persistent and repetitive: obsessive-compulsive personality disorder and self-employment
Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice	2021	The Biological Perspective in Entrepreneurship Research

Small Business Economics	2020	Depression among entrepreneurs: a scoping review How childhood ADHD-like symptoms predict selection into entrepreneurship and implications on entrepreneurial performance.
Journal of Business Venturing	2021	
Academy of Management perspectives	2018	Depression and Entrepreneurial Exit ENTREPRENEURIAL DISAPPOINTMENT: LET DOWN AND BREAKING DOWN, A MACHINE-LEARNING STUDY
Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice	2020	
Journal of Business Venturing Insights	2018	Deep roots? Behavioral inhibition and behavioral activation system (BIS/BAS) sensitivity and entrepreneurship
Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice	2020	The Influence of Hypomania Symptoms on Income in Self-Employment Wild spirits: Elevated hypomanic tendencies are associated with entrepreneurship and entrepreneurial success
medRxiv	2020	
Journal of Business Venturing Insights	2020	Psychiatric symptoms and entrepreneurial intention: The role of the behavioral activation system
Personality and Individual Differences	2016	BIS and BAS: Biobehaviorally rooted drivers of entrepreneurial intent Manic tendencies are not related to being an entrepreneur, intending to become an entrepreneur, or succeeding as an entrepreneur
Journal Affective Disorders	2015	
Journal of Business Venturing	2016	Behavioral disinhibition and nascent venturing: Relevance and initial effects on potential resource providers
Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice	2020	The Weary Founder: Sleep Problems, ADHD-Like Tendencies, and Entrepreneurial Intentions
Academy of Management Perspectives	2017	Impulsivity and Entrepreneurial Action
Technovation	2023	ADHD symptoms of CEOs and business model innovation in the SME context The link between attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder symptoms and entrepreneurial orientation in Japanese business owners
Management Review Quarterly	2021	
International Entrepreneurship and Management Journal	2023	Entrepreneurs' attention deficit hyperactivity disorder symptoms and growth aspirations: the moderating role of team and industry characteristics The role of distinct ADHD symptoms for pre-entry entrepreneurial behavior: when intentions do not translate into action
Small Business Economics	2021	
International Small Business Journal	2019	Exploring the potential and limits of a neuroscientific approach to entrepreneurship
International Small Business Journal	2021	Impulsivity and entrepreneurial behaviour: Exploring an unreasoned pathway
Journal of Business Venturing Insights	2019	Entrepreneurial impulsivity is not rational judgment
Journal of Business Venturing Insights	2016	Entrepreneurship and psychological disorders: How ADHD can be productively harnessed The effects of subclinical ADHD symptomatology on the subjective financial, physical, and mental well-being of entrepreneurs and employees
Journal of Business Venturing Insights	2021	
Journal of Business Venturing Insights	2022	Entrepreneurship as an auspicious context for mental health research
Journal of Business Venturing Insights	2020	Disinhibition predicts both psychopathy and entrepreneurial intentions

Journal of Business Venturing Insights	2022	Entrepreneurial orientation as a mediator of ADHD – Performance relationship: A staged quasi-replication study
Journal of Entrepreneurship in Emerging Economies	2021	ADHD symptoms and entrepreneurial intention among Vietnamese college students: an empirical study
Frontiers of Entrepreneurship Research	2016	IMPULSIVITY AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP
Frontiers of Entrepreneurship Research	2019	ADHD, ENTREPRENEURIAL SELF-EFFICACY AND OPPORTUNITY RECOGNITION
Frontiers of Entrepreneurship Research	2016	ENTREPRENEURIAL INTENTIONS, BEHAVIOR, ADHD, & FLOW
Frontiers of Entrepreneurship Research	2017	SPEED VERSUS ACCURACY: EXPERIMENTALLY MODELING THE STRATEGIC UTILITY OF IMPULSIVITY IN ENTREPRENEURSHIP
Frontiers of Entrepreneurship Research	2015	THE DARK SIDE OF ENTREPRENEURSHIP: APPLYING REINFORCEMENT SENSITIVITY THEORY TO EXPLAIN ENTREPRENEURIAL BEHAVIOR
Frontiers of Entrepreneurship Research	2018	THE IMPACT OF MENTAL HEALTH ON ENTREPRENEURIAL OUTCOMES
Frontiers of Entrepreneurship Research	2019	WHEN ADHD HELPS AND HARMS IN ENTREPRENEURSHIP: AN EPIDEMIOLOGICAL APPROACH
Frontiers of Entrepreneurship Research	2014	ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND PSYCHOLOGICAL DISORDERS
Frontiers of Entrepreneurship Research	2020	DOES NEURODIVERSITY IN NEW VENTURE TEAMS ENHANCE PERFORMANCE?
Frontiers of Entrepreneurship Research	2021	THE IMPACT OF PSYCHOLOGICAL VULNERABILITIES AND GENDER ON ENTREPRENEURIAL WELL-BEING
Frontiers of Entrepreneurship Research	2021	NEURODIVERSITY AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP: TESTING THE MODERATING ROLE OF AFFIRMATION ORIENTATION
Frontiers of Entrepreneurship Research	2021	INSPIRING LEADERS OR ERRATIC BOSSES? ADHD-LIKE SYMPTOMS OF ENTREPRENEURS AND THEIR INFLUENCE ON TEAM MEMBER SATISFACTION
Frontiers of Entrepreneurship Research	2022	ENTREPRENEURSHIP EDUCATION FOR STUDENTS WITH ADHD
Frontiers of Entrepreneurship Research	2022	ADHD, GENDER AND ENTREPRENEURIAL TEAM CONFLICT
Frontiers of Entrepreneurship Research	2022	ENTREPRENEUR'S ADHD SYMPTOMS AND GROWTH ASPIRATIONS: THE MODERATING ROLE OF TEAM AND INDUSTRY CHARACTERISTICS
Small Business Economics	2019	The prevalence and co-occurrence of psychiatric conditions among entrepreneurs and their families
Journal of Business Venturing	2021	Toward a coping-dueling-fit theory of the ADHD-entrepreneurship relationship: Treatment's influence on business venturing, performance, and persistence
Journal of Business Venturing	2017	ADHD, impulsivity and entrepreneurship
Journal of Business Venturing	2019	Self-employment and allostatic load
Journal of Applied Research in Higher Education	2023	UPPS impulsivity, entrepreneurial self-efficacy and entrepreneurial intentions among university students: ADHD symptoms as a moderator
International entrepreneurship and management journal	2024	Entrepreneurs' attention deficit hyperactivity disorder symptoms and growth aspirations: the moderating role of team and industry characteristics

Social Enterprise Journal	2024	Addressing autistic unemployment through autistic owned and led social enterprise
Handbook on Disability and Entrepreneurship	2022	The push and pull of entrepreneurship for individuals with autism spectrum disorder
Book	2014	An Asperger's Guide to Entrepreneurship: Setting Up Your Own Business for Professionals with Autism Spectrum Disorder
Journal of Clinical and Developmental Psychology	2022	Self-employment and Entrepreneurship for Youngs and Adults with Neurodevelopmental or Psychiatric Disorders: a Systematic Review
Academy of Management Perspectives	2020	ENTREPRENEURSHIP AND CONTEXTUAL DEFINITIONS OF MENTAL DISORDERS: WHY PSYCHIATRY ABANDONED THE LATTER AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP SCHOLARS MAY WANT TO FOLLOWSUIT
Administration & Society	2015	Asia Pacific Journal of Developmental Differences
Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation	2017	Entrepreneurship as a means to Employment First: How can it work?
Creativity Research Journal	2016	Scope of Semantic Activation and Innovative Thinking in College Students with ADHD
Creativity Research Journal	2021	The Advantage of Disadvantage: Is ADHD Associated with Idea Generation at Work?
Creativity Research Journal	2016	Imagining Garage Start-Ups: Interactive Effects of Imaginative Capacities on Entrepreneurial Intention
Creativity Research Journal	2017	Creativity, Bipolar Disorder Vulnerability and Psychological Well-Being: A Preliminary Study
Creativity Research Journal	2025	The Mr. Plumbean Approach: How Focusing Constraints Anchor Creativity
Creativity Research Journal	2023	The Contribution of Openness and Intellect to the Examination of the Idea Generation and Selection Processes: An Exploration with Business Students
Journal of Small Business Management	2024	Childhood trauma and entrepreneurs' individual entrepreneurial orientation.

Chapter II

AN EXPLORATION OF ENTREPRENEURSHIP AS THERAPY

Abstract

In this chapter, I have drawn from conservation of resources theory literature and entrepreneurial emancipation and bricolage to frame and develop the research question: How does entrepreneuring serve as a therapeutic mechanism for trauma survivors by facilitating identity reconstruction, psychological healing, and post-traumatic growth? This question is further explored through three sub-questions in the process of analyzing Reddit posts and cases: (1) How do trauma survivors on grassroots platforms like Reddit articulate their motivations for entering entrepreneurship, and what psychological needs do these narratives reflect? (2) What recurring themes and coping mechanisms emerge across the process of entrepreneurship as a pathway for healing? Moreover, (3) how are these mechanisms further elaborated, deepened, or reframed in curated case studies of trauma-experienced / mental problems-experienced) entrepreneurs? To bridge this gap and build a more grounded understanding, this study adopts a two-stage qualitative design. The first stage explores publicly shared experiences on Reddit, where trauma survivors candidly discuss their entrepreneurial journeys. In the second stage, I analyzed four cases to further complete the codebook and form the “entrepreneuring as therapy” model to understand the mechanism.

INTRODUCTION

Trauma can shape and intersect with entrepreneurship, an emerging topic and significant area of scholarly inquiry that challenges traditional understandings of both entrepreneurial motivation and trauma recovery pathways, offering a new perspective on navigating entrepreneurship (Rugina & Harima, 2024; Shepherd & Williams, 2020). While entrepreneurship has long been viewed primarily through economic and opportunity recognition lenses (Herron & Sapienza, 1992; Kolvereid, 1996), a growing body of research suggests that entrepreneurial activities can serve as powerful mechanisms for psychological healing and identity reconstruction among trauma survivors (Shepherd & Williams, 2016; Haynie & Shepherd, 2011).

Trauma, as a profound disruption in an individual's psychological, emotional, or physical well-being due to overwhelming stress, affects a substantial portion of the global population. According to trauma taxonomies proposed by Kira (2001), individual traumas are often categorized by their effects on critical domains such as attachment, identity, survival, and achievement. These traumas may manifest as singular and acute events (Type I), prolonged and repetitive experiences (Type II), or cumulative impacts across life domains (Type III). The prevalence of trauma exposure is increasing dramatically, with surveys from the United States to Australian National Surveys of Mental Health and Well-being documenting widespread trauma experiences (Kessler, 2000; Mills et al., 2011).

What makes this intersection particularly compelling is the recognition that many successful entrepreneurs have emerged from backgrounds marked by significant adversity. From veterans returning from combat to survivors of childhood abuse, refugees displaced by conflict, and individuals managing chronic mental health conditions, trauma survivors often demonstrate remarkable resilience and innovation in creating new ventures (Miller & Le Breton-Miller, 2017;

Williams & Shepherd, 2016). However, the mechanisms through which entrepreneurial activities facilitate trauma recovery and potentially promote post-traumatic growth remain underexplored in existing literature.

This research aims to explore entrepreneuring, which is viewed as a dynamic, adaptive process rather than a static event, that facilitates the recovery of trauma survivors through mechanisms of entrepreneurial emancipation, bricolage, and identity reconstruction. We deliberately use "entrepreneuring" rather than "entrepreneurship" to emphasize the processual, ongoing nature of entrepreneurial activities that unfold across multiple phases, from opportunity recognition to venture creation and market interaction (Baron & Markman, 2018; Bhawe, 1994).

To guide our study we draw on the theoretical frameworks of entrepreneurial emancipation (Rindova et al., 2009), which conceptualizes entrepreneurship as a process of breaking free from constraints and creating new possibilities; entrepreneurial bricolage (Baker & Nelson, 2005), which involves creative recombination of available resources to overcome limitations; and identity reconstruction processes that enable trauma survivors to rebuild their sense of self through meaningful entrepreneurial action.

We also draw on Conservation of Resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 1989, 2012), which explains how individuals respond to threats by either investing or protecting resources. For trauma survivors, entrepreneurial activities provide structured pathways for resource investment that can counteract the loss spirals typically associated with traumatic experiences, enabling the development of resource-gain cycles that support both venture creation and psychological recovery.

Therefore, the research question is: How does entrepreneuring serve as a therapeutic mechanism for trauma survivors by facilitating identity reconstruction, psychological healing,

and post-traumatic growth? This question is further explored through three sub-questions in the process of analyzing Reddit posts and cases: (1) How do trauma survivors on down-to-earth digital platforms like Reddit articulate their motivations for entering entrepreneurship, and what psychological needs do these narratives reflect? (2) What recurring themes and coping mechanisms emerge across the process of entrepreneurship as a pathway for healing? Moreover, (3) how are these mechanisms further elaborated, deepened, or reframed in curated case studies of trauma-experienced (mental problems-experienced) entrepreneurs?

In seeking to answer these questions, this paper makes two main contributions. Firstly, the Reddit posts offer a “crowdsourced platform that provides the initial conceptual foundation for this study, revealing how everyday individuals narrate entrepreneurship as a response to mental health struggles, trauma, and identity challenge. Furthermore, this thesis extends current understanding of the relationship between trauma and entrepreneurship by developing a nuanced conceptualization of entrepreneuring as identity work. Methodologically, this study contributes to research design by applying a sequential, two-layer approach that integrates in-depth founder case studies with discourse analysis of peer interactions on Reddit. This strategy aligns with Yin’s (2013) principle of theoretical replication in case research and answers Eisenhardt’s (2021) call for rich theory-building through constant comparison and diverse sampling.

LITERATURE REVIEW

When we talk about trauma, most of us will think about natural disasters, childhood abuse, mental health problems or big events in anyone’s life. Williams and Shepherd (2016) explore their research question in the context of the Black Saturday bushfire disaster in Australia. Under the peak of Black Saturday, more than 400 fires burned which killed people, destroyed their homes and properties, for ever changing their lives. This large natural disaster impacts a big

community and motivates them to be more courageous and compassionate towards their neighbors, friends and family. They have built their own ventures to help others to provide social benefits, sustaining their communities and reducing the threats of future disaster. The autonomy that generated from the venturing process (Smith & Miner, 1983) empowers them with the right to control their lives again (Oyserman et al., 2002). But this influential work builds on how venture creation helps others in the community. In this paper we aim to explore how venture creation can help the trauma experiencers themselves to become stronger. This contrasts with existing research that explores how social entrepreneurship might help other people following a disaster.

Trauma used to be understood as a medical term and usually appears in the medical literature (Van der Kolk et al., 1994). Old and classical literature usually talked about the physical aspects of trauma but usually overlooked the psychological aspects. As time goes by, a new term “railway spine” has emerged to describe those survivors from train accidents experiencing psychological problems but no physical injuries, firstly raised by a British surgeon John Eric Erichsen in the context of post-traumatic stress disorder getting to be known (PTSD) (Braga et al., 2008; Papadopoulos, 2021). Following this, trauma theory starts to appear and influence some scholars like Freud. Freud proposed that trauma has a lasting impact on people in their later life after the painful experience. Gradually, trauma has been formally recognized, and PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder) was included in the DSM-III officially (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders).

Trauma has a devastating impact on a person's identity, even changing their expectations for the future, life roles, and self-concept completely. This disruption is characterized by Haynie and Shepherd (2011) as a key identity shock that pushes people to reconsider their objectives, values,

and aspirations in a deeper way than before. This identity crisis is frequently made worse by trauma-related employment setbacks, which force people to reevaluate their career path and add more choices such as becoming self-employed to their lists.

Trauma can also disrupt a person's sense of identity by creating a disconnection between their self-perception and lived experiences. This misalignment mirrors Rogers' (1959) concept of incongruence, where the self and experience clash. When trauma challenges pre-existing beliefs and self-structures, it can lead to symptoms like re-experiencing and avoidance, which are core characteristics of PTSD. Rogers' theory explains this tension as a struggle between the instinct to reject painful experiences and the need to fully process and integrate them into self-awareness. Joseph et al. (2004) highlights that it is through resolving this incongruence that personal growth becomes possible.

As trauma shakes the foundations of who individuals believe they are before, they need to re-evaluate and reimagine their identity. Deliberate rumination normally functions in this process and helps them intentionally reflect on the past and present to bridge the gap between the person they once were and who they are becoming after the trauma. People start to confront these uncomfortable feelings after reflection and try to rebuild something about themselves, along with the pain of loss and the strength of resilience.

Becoming an entrepreneur presents a distinctive opportunity for identity reconstruction among trauma survivors and this way aligns well with their psychological needs and boosts the recovery processes. We theorize that entrepreneurial context enables these people to meet their necessary needs, distinctiveness and self-authorship. While existing research has explored various motivations for entrepreneurial entry (e.g., Herron & Sapienza, 1992; Kolvereid, 1996),

limited attention has been paid to how entrepreneurship processes and activities functions as identity work for individuals managing trauma histories.

The entrepreneurial role provides individuals with substantial autonomy (e.g., Akande 1994; Boyd & Gumpert 1983) that enables them to exercise greater influence over their venture's development and, more broadly, enhanced control over their environment. For trauma survivors, whose fundamental sense of agency has often been violated, this control becomes particularly salient in identity reconstruction. Through entrepreneurship, these individuals can situate their ventures, and by extension themselves, in relation to others in ways that maximize psychological safety while building sustainable boundaries, feel more comfortable to be themselves and reveal themselves (Newman et al., 2019).

The distinctiveness characteristic of entrepreneurial processes, combined with the array of actions individuals undertake to meet entrepreneurial ends (e.g., creating a new venture, exploiting opportunities), offers trauma survivors multiple pathways to differentiate themselves and craft new identities. Narratives of venture founders illustrate that many see "the enterprise in terms of personal growth or fulfillment" and believe that "life would not have been complete without proving one had the ability to successfully start a business" (Bruno et al., 1992). For trauma survivors, this ability to author a new identity through concrete achievements can be particularly reparative and restorative.

Conservation of Resources Theory and Trauma Recovery

Hobfoll's (1989, 2012) Conservation of Resources (COR) theory provides a foundational framework for understanding how entrepreneuring facilitates post-traumatic growth. According to COR theory, individuals strive to obtain, retain, and protect valued resources, with resource loss being particularly salient during traumatic experiences. The theory emphasizes that resource

loss is disproportionately more impactful than resource gain, but paradoxically, the salience of resource gain increases under conditions of resource loss.

When trauma survivors engage in entrepreneurship, they activate processes of resource investment – strategically deploying remaining resources to generate new ones, creating potential gain spirals that can counteract the loss cycles typically associated with trauma. This process is particularly powerful because, as Wells, Hobfoll, and Lavin (1999) demonstrate, resource gains become more salient during periods of extreme loss.

COR theory illuminates how entrepreneurial activities provide natural opportunities for vigorous, dedicated, and meaningful work (Schaufeli et al., 2002). This engagement becomes particularly crucial during recovery, as it enables individuals to remain committed to life tasks even while processing trauma. Entrepreneurship offers structured pathways for such engagement through goal setting, skill development, and relationship building.

When individuals encounter losses linked to a threat, the process of resource investment is initiated to restore existing resource stocks (Benight et al., 1999). Generally, those possessing more resources are more likely to have a superior capacity facilitating the replenishment of resources and to derive benefits despite experiencing loss. Conversely, resource protection represents a reactive stance grounded in loss aversion, aimed at safeguarding individuals against further losses (Hobfoll, 1989, 2002). This protective posture becomes evident when individuals confront potential threats or actual losses (Halbesleben et al., 2014). Although resource protection can yield benefits in terms of immediate coping strategies—such as “grief work” or restorative coping, which involves the exploration of lost facets of one's identity and an intellectual confrontation with the reality of loss (Stroebe & Schut, 2010)—it may also lead to

the deterioration of resources over time if they are not properly sustained through reciprocal investment (Halbesleben et al., 2014, p. 1346; Bickerton et al., 2014).

Resource loss, particularly in the context of disasters, tends to be more obvious than resource gain, primarily due to the huge impact on the loss. This observation reveals a paradox: the perception of resource gain tends to heighten in the face of resource loss (Wells et al., 1999). Specifically, individuals who experience losses are prone to discover avenues for create gains. This phenomenon is especially defined in the context of trauma (Hobfoll, 2011, p. 132). Recognizing the factors that promote resource gains amidst losses is vital, as this understanding can enhance insights into the mechanisms influencing resilience and well-being in response to disasters (Hobfoll, 2011). Additionally, investigating how individuals construct and combine resources—essentially how they nurture and amplify these resources (Hobfoll, 2012) which is likely to play a significant role in shaping post-disaster functioning. In this context, the thesis mainly utilizes Conservation of Resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 1989, 2002) to develop a model of victim entrepreneurship that focuses on the creation of ventures aimed at alleviating the suffering of themselves. The model examines how, during widespread threats that induce individual losses, those who possess greater resources (and thus greater potential to replenish these resources) exhibit varying responses to loss—ranging from investment strategies to protective measures—and how these variations subsequently affect post-disaster functioning.

Research has increasingly recognized trauma's dual role: while it can hinder functioning and impair decision-making, trauma can also catalyze self-reflection, resilience, and purposeful action (Yeshi et al., 2024). Adverse experiences, mental health problems and traumatic experiences often bring emotional distress and make effective resources shrink (Shepherd et al., 2020; Yu et al.,2022). Meanwhile, these barriers empower them to be resilient and even trigger

them to become self-employed (Shepherd & Williams, 2020; Harima & Plak, 2024). From this side, these adverse experiences become a catalyst for entrepreneurship, helping them overcome the coming adversities in the process of entrepreneuring (Klyver et al., 2022).

Entrepreneuring as Identity Work

The entrepreneurial context provides unique opportunities for identity reconstruction among trauma survivors. Unlike traditional employment, entrepreneurship offers substantial autonomy (Akande, 1994; Boyd & Gumpert, 1983) that enables individuals to exercise greater influence over their venture's development and, more broadly, enhanced control over their environment. For trauma survivors, whose fundamental sense of agency has often been violated, this control becomes particularly salient in identity reconstruction processes.

The distinctiveness characteristic of entrepreneurial processes, combined with the array of actions individuals undertake to meet entrepreneurial ends, offers trauma survivors multiple pathways to differentiate themselves and craft new identities. Narratives of venture founders illustrate that many see "the enterprise in terms of personal growth or fulfillment" and believe that "life would not have been complete without proving one had the ability to successfully start a business" (Bruno et al., 1992). For trauma survivors, this ability to author a new identity through concrete achievements can be particularly reparative and restorative.

Entrepreneuring, conceptualized as an ongoing process rather than a discrete event, involves what Morgan (1986) and Johannisson (2011) describe as three key elements: analogizing (generic ways of coping), bricolage (balancing the need for change and stability), and organizing context (building self-confidence and creating environments that can be enacted). Through these processes, individuals transform existing resources into new settings, making their identity more visible and tangible.

The relationship between career and identity becomes particularly salient in trauma recovery contexts. As Dutton, Dukerich, and Harquail (1994) emphasize, career and identity are inextricably linked. When trauma occurs, it often results in career loss or disruption, leading to feelings of alienation and hopelessness (Haynie & Shepherd, 2011). This career disruption forces individuals to question both their previous identity and career path, creating space for entrepreneurial alternatives that offer greater self-control and autonomy.

Entrepreneurial Emancipation and Constraint-Breaking

Rindova et al. (2009) conceptualize entrepreneuring as emancipation – a process of breaking free from constraints and creating new opportunities. This perspective moves beyond traditional entrepreneurship theories focused on opportunity recognition to examine how entrepreneurial activities enable individuals to challenge existing power structures and create new possibilities for themselves and others.

The emancipation perspective encompasses three core elements: seeking autonomy (reflecting entrepreneurs' desire to free themselves from current power structures and constraints), authoring (defining new relationships and operational frameworks for making change), and making declarations (positioning projects within existing meaning structures through discursive and rhetorical acts) (Rindova et al., 2009).

For trauma survivors, entrepreneurial emancipation provides pathways to reclaim agency and challenge the constraints imposed by their traumatic experiences. This process extends beyond individual transformation to encompass broader social change. As Goswami et al. (2023) demonstrate in their research on indigenous entrepreneurs, entrepreneurship enables individuals to reshape their relationships with historical trauma, converting challenging experiences into vehicles for community change.

The emancipatory nature of entrepreneuring manifests at multiple levels, from changing personal circumstances to transforming entire social collectivities. However, the key criterion for identifying emancipatory entrepreneurship lies in the extent to which enacted practices deviate from pre-existing environmental constraints, emphasizing the role of the entrepreneur as an active agent for change rather than simply engaging in business activity.

Entrepreneurial Bricolage and Resource Recombination

Baker and Nelson's (2005) concept of entrepreneurial bricolage as making use of whatever by hand, recombining resources and creating something new from their existing network or recourse they have at their hand. This provides a crucial framework for understanding how trauma survivors can transform resource constraints into entrepreneurial opportunities. Originally conceptualized by Lévi-Strauss (1966) and later adapted to entrepreneurship contexts, bricolage represents both a practical and psychological mechanism for trauma recovery.

Entrepreneurial bricolage involves several dimensions: material bricolage (repurposing physical and financial resources), network bricolage (leveraging and reconfiguring social connections), and what we term identity bricolage (reconstructing self-concept through entrepreneurial action) (Stenholm & Renko, 2016). This multifaceted approach enables trauma survivors to work creatively with whatever resources remain available to them following their traumatic experiences.

The process of bricolage aligns closely with key mechanisms of post-traumatic growth, particularly the reconstruction of meaning through active engagement with adversity (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). When trauma survivors engage in bricolage, they must think creatively about resource utilization and challenge existing assumptions about what is possible with limited

resources. This creative problem-solving process helps rebuild crucial psychological resources such as self-efficacy and agency.

Research by Williams and Shepherd (2016) demonstrates how trauma survivors engaging in entrepreneurial bricolage often develop enhanced cognitive flexibility and adaptive capabilities. These developments correspond with key domains of post-traumatic growth, particularly in relation to personal strength development and recognition of new possibilities.

Trauma Types and Entrepreneurial Responses

Different types of trauma lead to distinct entrepreneurial approaches to recovery, reflecting the varied ways individuals process and transform their experiences. Williams and Shepherd's (2016) research on post-disaster entrepreneurship demonstrates how collective trauma extends to community-focused ventures that address recovery needs while rebuilding social connections and community resilience.

Individual trauma survivors often follow different paths in their entrepreneurial journeys. Their ventures frequently emerge from deep personal understanding of specific challenges related to their trauma experiences. For example, survivors of serious illness might create healthcare-related businesses that address gaps they experienced in their own care, reflecting what Yitshaki and Kropp (2016) term "therapeutic entrepreneurship."

The experience of combat veterans presents unique patterns in entrepreneurial development (Haynie & Shepherd, 2011). Military experience often provides valuable skills for entrepreneurship, while the business creation process can help veterans process their trauma in constructive ways. These entrepreneurial endeavors often emerge from military experiences or traumatic moments, helping veterans thrive in civilian contexts while maintaining psychological balance.

Refugee entrepreneurs face particular challenges related to displacement, cultural adaptation, and resource scarcity. However, research demonstrates how entrepreneurship can serve as a pathway for integration, identity reconstruction, and community building among displaced populations (Rugina & Harima, 2024).

But the previous research is aiming for creating a cooperative community and building up the space that helps them altogether (Williams & Shepherd, 2016; Shepherd & Williams, 2020), more close to the perspective of social entrepreneurship. My thesis here instead, more focusing on how to help survivors themselves, or starting their own businesses standing from the trauma itself. Venture creation itself is a transformational process for the person, since when the venture is created, resources like human capital are drew from to boost it and help individuals to structure new ways for accessing and using new ways to combine these existing resources, resilience is also showing up (Dimov, 2010; Delmar & Shane, 2006). So, the theorizing background can help enhance the understanding of how individuals make use of stocks of resources to act on while building up their new venture. Previous research has drawn upon COR theory to understand the venture creation process under traumatic stressors like disasters (Benight et al., 1999; Bonanno et al., 2007) but rarely talk about mental health and personal trauma experiences.

METHODOLOGY

To build a more grounded understanding which includes the voices of people around and successful entrepreneurs, this study adopts a two-stage qualitative design. The first stage explores publicly shared experiences on Reddit, where trauma survivors candidly discuss their entrepreneurial journeys. These posts offer raw, real-time insight into how individuals grapple with trauma, search for meaning, and experiment with self-employment as a form of

psychological repair. From this grassroots layer, I identify recurring patterns and first-level codes. In the second stage, I examine four curated case studies of trauma-experienced entrepreneurs whose life stories offer richer, longitudinal accounts of healing through entrepreneurship. By comparing and refining themes across both layers, this research develops a nuanced model of entrepreneuring as therapeutic identity work. To enrich the interpretive depth of the research, this study employed a two-layer design.

In the reddit post analysis, I first create the first level codes, then use MAXQDA to categorize them into themes, and add excerpts for making synthesized code charts. The decision to use MAXQDA rather than NVivo for this thesis is grounded in my research tasks, which involve thematic content analysis and two-level coding without sentiment analysis or advanced quantification. Both MAXQDA and NVivo are robust CAQDAS (Computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software) tools offering similar core functionalities for qualitative content analysis, including coding, memoing, and visualization. However, Oliveira et al. (2016) highlight that while both software packages provide similar analytical support, MAXQDA's interface is often perceived as more intuitive for managing basic coding processes and thematic categories, which aligns well with my straightforward, theme-focused approach.

Similarly, Schönfelder (2011) notes that MAXQDA's design prioritizes flexibility in handling and organizing data without unnecessarily emphasizing quantification features that can make researchers over-generalize qualitative results. Given that my work relies on close reading, clear theme construction, and an interpretive approach rather than frequency counts or sentiment detection, MAXQDA's emphasis on visual transparency and coding consistency makes it the more suitable choice for analyzing both the case study materials and Reddit posts. This choice

also ensures methodological coherence with the aims of thematic content analysis, as described by Bardin (2011) and discussed in Oliveira et al. (2016).

Data collection from Reddit involved various steps to ensure the reliability and validity of the findings. First of all, a list of subreddits focused on mental health and entrepreneurship was identified. This was done by Rstudio by the `find_subreddits` function to search the website for relevant keywords and exploring existing mental health and trauma subreddits.

To begin, a broad search range was conducted to identify relevant subreddits, more specifically, posts from “r/mentalhealth”, “r/trauma” “r/MentalHealthSupport”, “r/therapy”, “r/asktherapist” and “r/startups”, “r/smallbusiness”, “r/PTSD”, “r/CPTSD (Complex PTSD)” and “r/Entrepreneur” were gathered.

The identified subreddits were analyzed by drawing from keywords “entrepreneur”, “business”, “startup”, “entrepreneurship” and “start-up” firstly. But the related results are not that many. Therefore, I revised the search strategies to search key phrases “after depression”, “entrepreneurship gave me purpose”, “my healing journey”, “used to be depressed”, “finding meaning through work” and “Get better after trauma”. Data was collected through scraping posts and comments from selected subreddits using the Reddit API and RedditExtractoR. The scraped data was manually examined for the feasibility of the topic fitness, and content analysis was conducted to further analyze the themes and patterns, for highlighting those recurring topics and emerging trends fit with our research focus.

Only posts written like a personal narrative or long story that explicitly discuss connections between entrepreneurship and mental health / trauma recovery are filtered. For each post meeting criteria, I extracted the original post content, all comments and replies, and username (which will be anonymized during analysis). In total 16 stories were kept for deeper analysis.

As for the coding process, following suggestions from Gustavsen, Surbaugh and Emmons (2025), I use ChatGPT to assist the first level coding process to accelerate the coding process and save a substantial amount of time to read them for creating the second level codes and themes. Second level coding involves interpreting the first-level codes into broader conceptual categories and this step helps me to move from what was said to what it really means, related to my research question. Rather than listing them one by one, I began grouping them under analytical dimensions, such as “workplace trauma as catalyst”, “entrepreneurship as identity repair” or “community-based coping”.

After generating first level codes, I reviewed the patterns of them across cases and asked: do multiple codes speak to a shared underlying condition like stigma, mental health or trauma? Can these be grouped into a larger concept (like identity reconstruction from the literature)? Also, are they pointing to any kind of psychological process (like coping and meaning making)? For instance, for first level codes like “panic attacks”, “breakdowns” and “suicidal thoughts”, they were grouped under a second-level code “mental health crisis”. For codes like “left corporate job”, “got laid off” and “toxic boss” they can be synthesized as the theme “workplace trauma as catalyst”. For posts about using creativity to heal or start their businesses out of mental health problems, I created a higher order theme “entrepreneurship as healing and recovery”.

For validating the second-level themes, I constantly revisited the original excerpts to ensure that the themes can be grounded in the original data but not imposed externally. When I feel there is an overlap, I mainly differentiate them by grouping them into three types of codes, a symptom or outcome (like burnout), a motivation (like desire or autonomy), or a function (like coping).

RESULTS OF ANALYSIS

Workplace Trauma as Entrepreneurial Catalyst

Across multiple Reddit posts, traditional employment is often described as a breeding ground for psychological distress. Contributors recount/ experiences with exploitative leadership, repeated layoffs, and toxic environments. In one Reddit post titled "*Struggling with the trauma,*" the original poster reflects: "Every Monday I would meet with the CEO/CTO and essentially get blamed for the startup not working," underscoring how workplace blame culture can be psychologically devastating. For many, such experiences are not isolated but cumulative, forming a pattern of instability and betrayal that erodes trust in corporate systems. As another user wrote, "Why work at someone else's failing business when I can fail on my own?" This sentiment encapsulates how trauma from traditional employment can paradoxically motivate individuals to pursue entrepreneurial ventures—not from ambition, but from a need for self-preservation and autonomy.

Identity Reconstruction & Agency Reclamation

Redditors consistently framed entrepreneurship as a form of identity work. For those recovering from childhood trauma or PTSD, the rigidity and unpredictability of conventional work can mirror past abuse. One poster shared, "Every job just feels like a new version of my abusive home growing up," while others emphasized how business ownership offers a space to feel safe and in control. In these narratives, entrepreneurship becomes a medium through which individuals reclaim a sense of personal agency, challenging their learned helplessness and rebuilding trust in themselves. A particularly resonant quote states, "I want to make my own rules—if I fail, it's on me." This encapsulates the drive not just for independence, but for

meaningfully authored life paths, especially among those who have survived environments where control was stripped away.

Creative Work as Therapeutic Structure

The thread “Workplace burnout to coding my way out” illustrated a transformative account where depression served as the unlikely catalyst for creative entrepreneurial action. One user in the post shared: “Every line of code was a reason to get out of bed.” This type of narrative underscores the reparative function of structure, routine, and meaningful creation. Several contributors discussed how starting a business helped anchor their recovery from depression, anxiety, or addiction. Through entrepreneuring, they could redefine their identity in constructive ways, often reframing despair into craft. Sobriety also emerged as a theme; while some admitted that addiction once helped them survive the stress of business, many stated that recovery enhanced their self-awareness and boundary-setting skills—qualities essential for sustainable entrepreneurship.

The Paradox of Success and Emptiness

In some posts which mainly talks about their burnout after success, Redditors revealed that even achieving financial stability does not guarantee emotional healing. “I thought I’d be happy when I made it—now I feel nothing,” confessed one poster, showing a deep disillusionment with the myth of success. It points out that unless business ventures are aligned with personal values and psychological needs, external achievements may intensify internal voids. Others expressed how unchecked ambition, driven by unresolved trauma, led to further emotional exhaustion.

These stories caution against conflating performance with fulfillment and underscore the need to integrate personal well-being into business goals from the outset.

Community and Peer Support as Healing

In the process of reading, there is a pattern that Reddit itself becomes part of the healing process, as users find validation and solidarity in shared experiences. In “*Taking a break from startup land*,” community members offered affirming responses: “Startups are a marathon you don’t want to run with a broken ankle... take a break and you’ll come back stronger.” Others wrote, “Glad I’m not the only one—this gives me hope I’m not broken for wanting out.” These peer-based validations served multiple healing functions: reducing shame, reframing setbacks, and encouraging rest as a valid form of resilience. The participatory nature of the Reddit platform allows it to serve as an informal support group for trauma-experienced entrepreneurs.

Mission-Driven Ventures as Self and Social Healing

Several posts described how business ventures became extensions of the founders’ healing journey—particularly those that addressed mental health, addiction, or trauma. In one post, a user shared: “I wish someone would’ve told me how healing running my own business could be... Instead, everyone discouraged me because of my PTSD!” Another poster noted, “Working on this helps me as much as it helps others.” Their ventures have a blurred boundary between self-help and social impact, and the silver line between them, which is entrepreneurship transforms it to be a dual healing mechanism. These stories emphasize that aligning business goals with lived experience can provide both internal meaning and external contribution.

Resilience Through Reframing Failure

The fear of failure—both personal and professional—was prevalent. One user expressed: “My current fear is that while my peers are building careers I’m only setting myself up to be a failed business owner...” Others described business losses as triggering symptoms akin to PTSD. However, through community support, these experiences were often reframed: “A year on, I’m in a positive place... rebuilding my life.” Such narratives shift the meaning of failure from shame to growth, highlighting that trauma-informed entrepreneurship must include space for emotional recovery from loss.

Life Design and Autonomy

Finally, many posts have described designing a life to prioritize their own flexibility, family, and wellbeing. One user wrote, “I can have breakfast every morning with my fam and not have to leave until I decide.” Others reflected on the value of delegation, automation, and choosing clients: “Being an entrepreneur means everything is your responsibility... but also your freedom.” These posts echo a central insight: for trauma survivors, entrepreneurship is not just about escaping the past, but actively designing a future where work supports, rather than harms, their psychological health.

Figures 1 and 2 below present the thematic analysis of Reddit-based entrepreneurial narratives. Figure 1 displays the frequency distribution of themes identified in the coded posts, with "Workplace Trauma as Catalyst" emerging as the most prevalent pattern. Figure 2 breaks down these themes into first level and second-level codes, supported by direct user excerpts that illustrate how individuals experiencing psychological distress utilize entrepreneurship as a means of regaining control, processing trauma, and redefining their personal and professional identity.

Figure 4 Thematic Prevalence in Reddit-Based First Layer Analysis

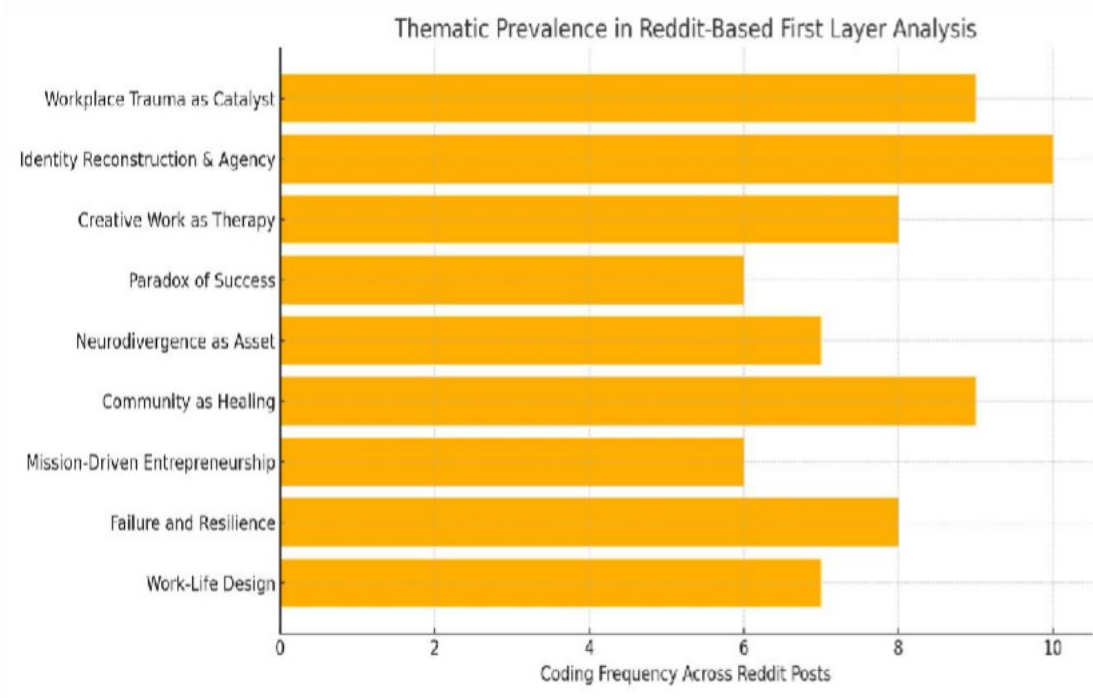


Figure 5: Reddit posts codes chart

Theme	1st-Level Code	2nd-Level Code	Representative Excerpt & Source
Workplace Trauma as Catalyst	Work Instability	Exploitative	“Every Monday I would meet with the CEO/CTO and essentially get blamed for the startup not working... I started developing issues like anxiety, mild depression and burnout, but I still worked through it.” (Reddit 14)
	Trauma	Workplaces	
	Betrayal & Disillusionment	Corporate Disillusionment	“Why work at someone else’s failing business when I can fail on my own.” (Reddit 13)
Identity Reconstruction	PTSD and Triggers	Abusive Workplace Memories	“Every job just feels like a new version of my abusive home growing up, while self-employment offers the possibility to finally breathe and not flinch when someone raises their voice.” (Reddit 6)

	Agency Reclamation	Need for Control	“I want to make my own rules — if I fail, it’s on me... life didn’t gift me anything and I had to prove myself over and over again.” (Reddit 13)
Creative Work as Therapy	Coding During Depression	Structure as Recovery	“Every line of code was a reason to get out of bed. I started learning to code during a depressive episode, and creating something gave me purpose again.” (Reddit 8)
	Sobriety and Business	Transformation & Healing	“Substance use was a shield against anxiety, but sobriety forced me to confront wounds. My business became a structure and symbol of transformation.” (Reddit 9)
Post-Success Emptiness	Disillusionment	Meaningless Achievement	“I thought I’d be happy when I made it — now I feel nothing. Success disconnected from purpose became just another psychological burden.” (Reddit 10)
Peer Support & Community	Validation & Normalization	Solidarity	“Glad I’m not the only one — this gives me hope I’m not broken for wanting out... The comments made me feel seen.” (Reddit 14)
	Recovery Stories	Collective Resilience	“A year on, I’m in a positive place, rebuilding my life, excited about the future... seek help if anyone is struggling.” (Reddit 12)
Purpose-Driven Healing	Trauma-Informed Ventures	Social Impact	“I wish someone would've told me how healing running my own businesses could be... Instead everyone discouraged me because of my PTSD!” (Reddit 15)

	Helping Others	Shared Healing	“Working on this helps me as much as them... Aligning my business with my mental health journey gave me a reason to keep going.” (Reddit 9)
Failure & Resilience	Business Loss	Fear of Inadequacy	“My current fear is that while my peers are building great careers I’m only setting myself up to be a failed business owner... It’s hard not to feel like a loser.” (Reddit 12)
	Recovery & Peer Support	Community Uplift	“Stay strong... trust me when I tell you, this too shall pass... We’re here for you.” (Reddit 12)
Life Design	Flexible Routines	Time Autonomy	“I can have breakfast every morning with my fam and not have to leave until I decide. I now build my schedule around what matters to me.” (Reddit 16)
	Self-Management	Freedom to Choose	“Clients too demanding? I fire them. Family member sick? I drop everything... That’s why I built my business this way.” (Reddit 16)

Second Phase Qualitative Analysis: Cases introduction

Drawing on the themes developed above, we initiated a second phase to our qualitative analysis. While the first-phase Reddit narratives provide raw, real-time, and emotionally vivid descriptions of entrepreneurial experiences following trauma, most of them are fragmented and brief, as for longitudinal details, there is not enough evidence to find. To address this point and deepen in elaboration of my research questions, the second-layer analysis draws from four well-documented entrepreneurial cases, each representing a distinct trauma context. They are childhood abuse, veteran trauma, depression and suicide recovery, and bipolar disorder (mental

health problem). These cases' analysis will further delve into the process of recovery by the way of entrepreneuring and create a healing environment for themselves.

This second phase allowed the research to build on and further explore the Reddit analysis themes. In this phase we adopted a multi-case design to offer insights into entrepreneuring as therapy in specific individuals lives.

The related literature is choosing cases mainly from these four types: survivors from abuse, veterans, refugees and victims from natural disasters. Given that our research is focusing on personal trauma survivors, I first used ChatGPT to help identify case studies and selected the most relevant four, that would best capture trauma and entrepreneurship. The selection of these case follows Yin's (2011) theoretical sampling rationale. Once identified, each case was further research in terms of searching for biographies, articles and web posts on each of the entrepreneurs.

Types of Traumas and Rationale for Case Selection

Trauma, in psychological literature, is not a monolithic experience but rather a spectrum of experiences that disrupt an individual's sense of safety, identity, and well-being. Kira et al. (2001) proposed a multidimensional model of trauma, categorizing it into distinct types such as Type I trauma (single catastrophic events), Type II trauma (chronic or repeated exposure), and Type III trauma (cumulative trauma), alongside identity-related trauma, developmental trauma, and secondary or vicarious trauma. These categories emphasize that trauma may stem not only from immediate threats (e.g., accidents, abuse) but also from prolonged systemic stressors or chronic adversity that shapes identity and life trajectories over time.

In this study, four trauma types were strategically selected for in-depth case analysis: Childhood abuse, Military-related trauma, Refugee displacement, and Chronic psychological

disorders (such as PTSD and depression). These categories were chosen because they represent diverse yet deeply impactful trauma trajectories that map onto Kira et al.'s typology and the previous literature. Veterans, abuse / mental problems experiencers, and social entrepreneurs (Caleb & Tunuade, 2023; Haynie & Shaheen, 2011; William & Shepherd, 2016) are three types of prevalent cases appearing in previous research.

Specifically, Childhood abuse reflects developmental and cumulative trauma, with long-term impacts on attachment, identity, and resilience. Military trauma (as seen in veterans) aligns with both identity-based trauma and Type I/II trauma, involving high-intensity events and ongoing reintegration stress. Refugee trauma illustrates systemic and cultural trauma, tied to dislocation, loss, and chronic uncertainty — a form of collective and identity trauma. Chronic psychological disorders represent internalized, long-term consequences of earlier trauma exposure, shaped by stigmatization and ongoing management of symptoms — aligning with Type II and existential trauma. These cases also reflect real-world relevance, as these trauma categories are prevalent among marginalized groups who often turn to self-employment as a pathway to reclaim control and rebuild identity.

Case Selection Rationale

Selecting appropriate cases is a foundational step in high-quality case study research (Yin, 2013; Eisenhardt, 2021). In this study, the logic combines Yin's (2013) theoretical replication — using multiple cases to confirm and contrast emerging theoretical patterns — with Eisenhardt's (2021) theoretical sampling, which prioritizes variety and revelatory potential when theory is emergent (Gehman et al., 2017). Each of the four cases was selected to illuminate distinct pathways through which trauma or mental health adversity can become a catalyst for entrepreneurial identity work, recovery, and narrative repair.

Based on purposeful sampling discussed from Patton (1990, 2002), the logic of choosing these cases is aiming for only selecting information-rich cases for study them in depth. The meaning of information-rich cases here is, one can learn the issues of central importance to the purpose of answering the research questions. Rather than empirical understanding, information-rich cases can yield in-depth insights (Patton, 2002; Suri, 2011).

Case A: Bob Parsons

Bob Parsons was selected as an exemplar of Type II trauma (Kira, 2001), representing repeated, cumulative traumatic experiences — namely childhood neglect and combat PTSD. His case illustrates how profound trauma may remain unresolved for decades, fueling extreme risk-taking and workaholism (Parsons, 2022). Parsons’s late-life embrace of psychedelic-assisted therapy and his narrative reframing in *Fire in the Hole* provide a critical literal replication of the idea that entrepreneurial success can both mask and enable eventual trauma integration (Yin, 2013). His context as a prominent tech entrepreneur also broadens the industrial scope of the study, showing how this mechanism manifests in a high-growth, financially driven domain (Shepherd et al., 2009).

Case B: Nick Hussey

Nick Hussey was chosen for theoretical replication and contrast. Unlike Parsons’s early trauma and later healing, Hussey’s story centers on mid-career breakdown under the pressures of running a creative consumer brand (Volpine). His case represents Type III cumulative stress trauma (Kira, 2001) and shows how severe depression and loss of a business can precipitate identity collapse, followed by a purposeful redesign of entrepreneurial practice (Frahm Jacket). His intentional use of brand narrative to open dialogues about mental health and masculinity

directly tests whether entrepreneurship can be consciously structured as a healing mechanism — offering contrast to Parsons’s initially unconscious, compulsive coping (Eisenhardt, 2021).

Case C: Sarah Wilson

Sarah Wilson’s case extends literal replication by showing how chronic anxiety and OCD can serve as long-term drivers for entrepreneurial experimentation. “I Quit Sugar” grows from her personal wellness "experiment" to an eight-figure business. But she decided to reverse back and exit at the peak. The purposive exit strategy makes her protect her mental health to a large extent. She wrote the book “First, We make the Beast Beautiful” and attend podcasts to advertise this book or reflect on her personal experiences, are the main sources of this case study. Her narrative aligns with the self-healing mechanisms and identity work (Gehman et al., 2017). The case reveals that identity reconstruction and venture scaling are continuously aligned and negotiated, as a good example to analyze under my research questions (Yin, 2013).

Case D: Jen Gotch

Jen Gotch was selected using Eisenhardt’s theoretical sampling for her clear representation of neurodivergence and creative identity in entrepreneurial practice. Living with bipolar disorder, ADHD, and anxiety, Gotch intentionally turned her brand, ban.do, into what she calls an “accidental mental health company.” This case provides theoretical variation by focusing on radical transparency, performative vulnerability, and the blurring of private distress and public brand identity. It complements the other cases by highlighting the relational dimension of entrepreneuring as collective sense-making, not just individual coping (Cosenz & Bivona, 2021; Gehman et al., 2017).

Together, these four cases satisfy the dual criteria of literal replication (similar mechanisms) and theoretical replication (different contexts and trauma types). This aligns with Yin’s emphasis

on triangulating evidence to confirm core patterns while pushing theoretical boundaries (Yin, 2013; Shepherd et al., 2009). Simultaneously, they reflect Eisenhardt's insight that sampling across variation in trauma type, industry, and recovery style strengthens the emergent theoretical contributions (Eisenhardt, 2021; Cosenz & Bivona, 2021).

Case A: Bob Parsons – PTSD and Psychedelic Healing through Entrepreneurship

Bob Parsons, the founder of GoDaddy and a U.S. Marine Corps veteran, experienced complex trauma stemming from his combat exposure during the Vietnam War and childhood adversity. He was awarded the Purple Heart after sustaining injuries in combat, but he also later disclosed that his early life was marked by severe emotional struggles that persisted into adulthood. Diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), Parsons spent decades battling the psychological aftermath of both his war service and his upbringing. His trajectory reflects what trauma scholars describe as complex or Type II trauma — meaning repeated, prolonged, and interconnected traumatic events that accumulate over time, leading to more severe and enduring psychological impacts than a single traumatic incident alone (Kira, 2001; Amstadter & Vernon, 2008).

Parsons' entry into entrepreneurship was initially driven by a search for financial autonomy and purpose. He founded GoDaddy in 1997, transforming it into a dominant force in the domain registration industry. Yet, it was only after selling GoDaddy and achieving financial security that Parsons began addressing his psychological wounds directly. In recent years, he publicly endorsed and engaged in psychedelic-assisted therapy, particularly using psilocybin and MDMA, which he credits with facilitating a profound transformation in his self-understanding and leadership approach. MDMA can temporarily reduce fear and defensiveness while increasing positive mood and empathy, which may help patients revisit and process traumatic memories

more openly in psychotherapy (Parrott, 2007). In interviews, Parsons links his healing journey directly to his evolving entrepreneurial identity, emphasizing how trauma recovery allowed him to become a more grounded, empathetic leader. This case exemplifies how entrepreneurial success can not only mask but eventually facilitate trauma healing through resource access, identity reconstruction, and psychological insight.

In Bob Parsons' *Fire in the Hole*, the early chapters vividly show the roots of Parsons' attachment wounds: a chaotic household dominated by an alcoholic, gambling father and a mother who suffered severe, untreated mental breakdowns. In his childhood basement, surrounded by toy soldiers and comic books, Parsons built fantasy refuges to cope with shame and neglect — a theme that reappears throughout the book as “Little Bob” versus “Big Bob.” As described in Chapters 1 and 2, these early safe spaces planted the seeds for the control and risk-taking that defined his later business ventures.

Parsons' time in Vietnam, recounted in Chapters 5–15, added acute trauma and survivor guilt to his already fragile identity. He writes in excruciating detail about the sudden deaths of squadmates, close brushes with landmines, and the grim realization that accepting death was sometimes the only way to keep moving. These near-death episodes became the psychological fuel for his later radical agency — a clear thread in Chapters 16–20 when he recounts his relentless work hours coding, building Parsons Technology, and later GoDaddy. His early entrepreneurial spirit, described in stories about lemonade stands and selling tropical fish (Chapter 3), shows how his drive to control his environment and outmaneuver chaos was set in motion long before he found his calling in tech.

What makes *Fire in the Hole* especially compelling is how Parsons interweaves his childhood humiliation, combat trauma, and moral code into a distinct business philosophy. Chapters 16–25

detail how his obsession with “my money, my rules” and refusal to take on partners were not just savvy business moves, but psychological armor against betrayal and instability, echoing his father’s broken promises and the unpredictability of combat. Loyalty and social capital emerge repeatedly: Parsons narrates how small acts of trust (like Jack Wilt’s loan) shaped his fierce dedication to repaying that trust, culminating in him making 36 employees millionaires when he sold GoDaddy.

The later chapters (31–33) reveal his effort to integrate these fragmented parts of self. Here, the book shows how psychedelic-assisted therapy allowed Parsons to revisit memories of his mother’s breakdowns and his lonely childhood, experiences he admits were harder to face than Vietnam itself. This late-life work bridges his inner child and hardened veteran entities. Overall, the narrative shows how his moral legacy is inseparable from his survivor guilt, by paying off debts others would default on, refusing to bankrupt creditors, and funneling millions into veterans’ causes and underdog communities.

In the podcast from the Dr. Phil Podcast, it dived into the extraordinary life of Bob Parsons. Parsons’ spoken words powerfully reaffirm how profound trauma shaped his lifelong coping mechanisms, risk-taking, and identity work. The transcript shows that what began as family neglect and combat PTSD spiraled into an obsession with control and hyper-productivity, which he re-narrates as a “success machine.” He finally embraced his therapy and integrates the wounded parts of self. His commitment to radical generosity and safe spaces for LGBTQ youth shows how survivor guilt transforms into moral legacy, turning private healing into collective empowerment. This case makes visible how entrepreneurship, for Parsons, is not merely economic but profoundly psychological: a living mechanism for agency, attachment repair, and generative meaning-making.

The coding process was adaptive to the nature of the data. I coded Bob's case at only one level to capture the theme, as the themes from his biography and podcast discussions are clear and understandable. However, for the other three cases, they do not have a publicly accessible biography, and their materials provide more emotional insight. A two-level coding structure is employed to ensure analytical rigor and clarity in their voices.

Figure 5: Bob Parsons Code Chart

Code	Description	Excerpt
Generational Trauma	Family legacy of alcoholism, suicide, gambling; father's betrayal and neglect.	<i>"My grandfather died by suicide. My dad blew every dollar on horses... We never had a Christmas tree that wasn't pawned the next day."</i> (Ch.1)
Childhood Emotional Neglect	Mother's untreated mental illness, violent episodes, lack of affection.	<i>"She would slam her head into the wall, rip her hair out... I stood there, a boy in my underwear, waiting to be yelled at for where my father was."</i> (Ch.1–2)
Coping Mechanisms & Fantasy	Use of comic books, toy soldiers, and a split "Little Bob" identity to survive shame and fear.	<i>"The only place I felt safe was in the basement with my soldiers. I could line them up, give them orders. They did what I told them. Unlike my family."</i> (Ch.1–2)
Safe Spaces & Loyalty to Peers	Finding safety with peer bonds, early friends, squad brothers.	<i>"In the Marines, for the first time I belonged to something. I would have died with them — and nearly did."</i> (Ch.5–10)
Acute Combat Trauma & Survivor Guilt	Graphic descriptions of combat: ambushes, landmines, near-death, loss of squadmates.	<i>"Ray's guts slipped through my arms like wet rope. I told him he'd be fine. He wasn't. I've never forgotten his eyes."</i> (Ch.11–15)

Work Obsession & Risk as Control	60-hour coding binges; ‘success machine’ as survival mechanism.	<i>“I worked night after night, rewriting code until it ran right. The work was my shield — it kept the nightmares away.” (Ch.16–20)</i>
Moral Code & Control	Radical honesty, paying debts, refusal to betray.	<i>“I paid my taxes — 2.3 billion. Could’ve used loopholes. Didn’t. That’s my father in me: the good part.” (Ch.21–25)</i>
Attachment Repair & Family Loyalty	Late-life reconnection with kids, dream of his mother’s hug.	<i>“In my dream, she hugged me. It fixed something inside me that had been broken for 70 years.” (Ch.31–33)</i>
Psychedelic-Assisted Therapy	Ayahuasca, psilocybin, and LSD to revisit childhood wounds.	<i>“It was harder to face my childhood than the war. The plant medicine showed me the child I’d left behind.” (Ch.31–33)</i>
Meaning-Making & Identity Integration	Final reflections on moral lessons, forgiveness, and what endures.	<i>“All you have is your word. Every experience, even the worst, is a gift if you make it one.” (Ch.31–33)</i>

Case B: Nick Hussey – Depression, Breakdown, and Purposeful Social Entrepreneurship

Nick Hussey, a UK-based entrepreneur, encountered a significant mental health crisis mid-career, experiencing a breakdown involving severe depression and existential disorientation. His experience, including cumulative effects of psychological stressors across multiple domains of his life, can usually be categorized as Type III trauma in Kira’s (2001). Hussey had been involved in high-stakes business environments and media production, but the relentless pressures led to his emotional collapse.

During recovery, Hussey reimagined his entrepreneurial direction by founding Frahm Jacket, a clothing brand that directly supports and collaborates with the UK mental health charity Mind. His business is both a commercial success and a novel platform for sparking conversations around mental health. Through branding, storytelling, and open disclosure of his own struggles,

Hussey uses his enterprise as a vehicle for social change and personal rehabilitation. His case demonstrates how entrepreneurship can be intentionally designed as a mechanism for recovery, identity renegotiation, and social contribution, turning trauma into a catalyst for advocacy and purpose.

Nick openly shares how deeply mental health is intertwined with life as an entrepreneur. In his candid story, he explains that while he's always seen himself as calm in obvious crises: "I can have a gun put to my head and feel weirdly calm" — there's another kind of panic that creeps in slowly when small worries stack up over time. He describes how on his son's eighth birthday, in the middle of lockdown, all the "layers of tiredness, stress and pressure" snapped like an overstretched elastic band. He remembers feeling tight-chested and dizzy while out for a family walk, saying, "I was fighting this intense need to get out of my own skin... and I passed out right there."

Ironically, the success of FRAHM — which was growing fast despite the global chaos — only added to that hidden strain. Nick admits, "It's a weird privilege to have a busy, growing business in a lockdown, but it was all on me," describing how he'd stay up at night buzzing with ideas yet feel "wired and brittle" the next day. He talks about how simple, healthy habits fell away as the pressure built: "When you stop riding your bike, stop lifting weights, stop sleeping well, you're asking for trouble."

Looking back, he now sees that during the worst days of his first business, he was probably experiencing panic attacks but mistook them for asthma. He confesses, "I find it embarrassing to talk about this — I hate going to the doctor for anything," yet he shares these details because he knows how common it is for men to carry that weight alone. For him, telling the truth about

these episodes is part of showing that founders don't have to hide mental strain behind a mask of optimism.

Recovering from this panic episode meant stripping life back to basics: getting back on his bike, sleeping more, lifting weights, being honest with family, and learning to pause. He urges others to watch for the signs — to see the “sliding scale of stress” before it tips into crisis. Nick's raw honesty, “Inside I'm going, ‘Christ, what am I going to do?’ because you can't say, ‘Yeah, it's going really badly.’ Who says that?” He gradually realizes that how easily success on the outside can hide a breaking point within. His story is a reminder that real resilience means recognizing when to step back, talk openly, and take care before the elastic finally snaps.

Hussey's story shows that the loss of a business is often experienced as the loss of self. Having staked so much of his identity on Volpine's success, he recounts feeling as though “my life would never be the same again” when he was told to close the company. His reflections show that his isolating shame and the willingness to blame himself repeatedly have been along with the failure: “I thought I'd never be happy again. I thought I'd just be gone. I was worthless. I'd fucked everyone's lives up.” In this sense, the crisis forced him to confront how deeply his sense of worth was bound to his venture's fate.

As Hussey's story goes on, the narrative transforms into a reflective account of recovery and redefine by entrepreneuring actions. A significant turning point in his journey came through conversations, first with a compassionate friend who recognized the seriousness of his depression, followed by discussions with a counselor. He emphasized the importance of open dialogue in reducing shame, describing conversation as a crucial intervention: “Talking saves people.” He adopts some strategies like frequent exercises, abstaining from alcohol, and setting boundaries around social media to restore his emotional balance. Importantly, Hussey also re-

engaged with his creative interests, revisiting past films, writing blog posts, and taking photographs, all of which played a role in reclaiming his identity beyond just being "the entrepreneur."

In founding FRAHM, Hussey consciously wove these lessons into a business model and brand message that honors the messy reality of life and mental health. The jackets are "tough beautiful," reflecting the paradox that life can be both brutal and hopeful. The pre-order business model not only reduces financial risk but also minimizes the stress and external pressure that contributed to his previous burnout. He positions FRAHM as a counter-narrative to hyper-masculine, invulnerable brand images, speaking instead to men who struggle with mental health but feel unable to talk about it. By openly sharing his own vulnerability and failures, Hussey reframes entrepreneurship not just as economic activity but as a form of recovery and advocacy.

After his first company collapsed, the founder describes how he "had a complete nervous breakdown and ended up being suicidal because too much of his world was based on that business," showing the deep mental health risk when a founder's identity depends entirely on their venture. Yet he recalls advice he received which was "Tell me what you do next because it's completely normal to fail", which reframes failure as a normal part of entrepreneurship and plants the idea that setbacks can become lessons instead of final defeat. Drawing from this, he says, "I need to start another business because I think I'm much better at it now and I want to use those lessons," revealing how the painful experience became motivation to rebuild and heal through new work. His mission expanded beyond himself: "Men are crap at mental health... I want to stealth gets men to save their lives by talking about mental health," showing that his second venture actively aims to help others, combining business with mental health advocacy. He insists, "We only make what we sell in advance... protects the quality and our brand

reputation,” demonstrating how his pre-order model directly applies lessons learned about sustainable growth and avoiding toxic business pressure. He supports this with his raw marketing style: “I just talk honestly about stuff... I hate toxic marketing,” and his commitment to trust and community is clear when he says, “Our live chat is all manned by our staff — human contact at all times.” He wraps this mindset by reminding others that “Most businesses fail, you must try things. Just make sure you learn from your mistakes,” showing that for him, failure is part of the path, not the end. This entire story shows how his entrepreneurial journey functions as both a tool for personal recovery and a way to build purpose, trust, and mental health support into every part of his business.

Figure 6: Nick Hussey Codes Chart

Theme	1st-Level Code	2nd-Level Code	Representative Excerpt & Source
Breakdown as Catalyst	Mental Health Crisis	Suicidal Ideation, Isolation	“I had a complete nervous breakdown and ended up being suicidal because too much of my personality in my world was based on that business... I didn’t tell my wife that I was suicidal for a year.” (<i>Apparel Entrepreneurship Podcast</i>)
		Isolation & Shame	“I didn’t say those words to anyone except a couple of professionals for a year... If I can’t say those things, what’s it like for much more withdrawn men?” (<i>Apparel Entrepreneurship Podcast</i>)
Identity Reconstruction	Detaching from Failure	Loss of Self, Self-Worth	“It was really horrific when we went bust... my whole world fell in on itself, including my health... I’d overcooked my personal involvement, my debt, everything.” (<i>Apparel Entrepreneurship Podcast</i>)

Recovery Mechanisms	Talking & Openness	Peer Support, Honesty	“I need to have a men’s brand that by stealth gets men to save their lives by talking about mental health... I decided it’s really important to just talk about it, even if it’s embarrassing.” (<i>My Panic Attack</i>)
	Self-Care & Simplicity	Nature Walks, Quitting Alcohol, Exercise	“I know from experience now that if I stop doing the things that keep me healthy mentally and physically — like walking, cycling, not drinking — everything starts to pile up and I break again.” (<i>My Panic Attack</i>)
Entrepreneurial Healing	Business Redesign	Pre-Order Model, Bounded Growth	“I do not want to build a billion dollar business... I don’t want to grow for growth’s sake... I’d rather build a treehouse and watch squirrels climb on it. The pre-order model means I don’t oversell and I keep the quality.” (<i>Apparel Entrepreneurship Podcast</i>)
	Symbolic Branding	“Tough Beautiful” Messaging	“Real life is tough and beautiful — so our jackets are too... we support mental health charities because real life can go really wrong, but it can also be really beautiful.” (<i>Apparel Entrepreneurship Podcast</i>)
Social Advocacy	Masculinity & Honesty	Anti-toxic Marketing, Charity Link	“Men need to know it’s normal to talk about this shit... there’s a false toxic marketing thing that I hate — the perfect man with abs and a bottle of Cristal — that’s not real life.” (<i>Apparel Entrepreneurship Podcast</i>)
Meaning-Making	Creative Continuity	Photography, Blogging, Legacy Work	“Rebuilding myself meant remembering the things that gave me joy before Volpine... I’ve always loved clothing, photography, telling stories — it’s all connected now with FRAHM.” (<i>Apparel Entrepreneurship Podcast</i>)

This code chart applies a two-level structure to explain both the broader themes and the detailed subcomponents within Nick Hussey’s entrepreneurial recovery narrative. The first-level codes capture overarching ideas such as Breakdown as Catalyst or Recovery Mechanisms, while the second-level codes specify how these themes manifest in concrete ways, for example,

through peer support or pre-order model. This structure aligns with how qualitative research recognizes pattern coding to pull together descriptive codes into more meaningful units (Punch, 2013; Elliott, 2018). In the chart for Nick Hussey, I include excerpts with richer context, which are directly linked to specific podcast episodes: FRAHM Origin Story, Apparel Entrepreneurship Podcast, and My Panic Attack. In this way, the chart shows how to combine multiple narrative details about business redesign and self-care aiming for his mental health recovery. Unlike the single layer chart for the first case (Bob Parsons), where each code stands alone, the chart for Nick Hussey is a two-level chart that lists the relationships between actions and feelings. Coding is not fixed but shaped by the materials drawn from and the case itself, ensuring the chart is connected to the data itself (Elliott, 2018).

The first level coding uses a descriptive way to summarize segments of data and provide a basis for the second level coding. The second level codes are more interpretive and focus on “pattern codes” (Punch, 2013). These codes are used to attach and give hints to the original data (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña 2014). I have tried to code all these texts (including all the transcripts from podcasts, passage from social media and the biographical book) into around 30 to 40 codes and then reduce the overlapped or similar ones to less than 20 codes (Creswell, 2015), for generating the main themes. Likewise, Richards (2015) suggests that all data will go through the coding process at least three times, the first time with descriptive coding (the first level) which provides all interesting and fun facts of the person; topic codes can be added as the second level codes, meaning that this higher-level codes are further labelled; as for the themes, also the last stage of coding, it will about the thinking process combining the previous two stages of coding, and generating an analytical outcome.

Case C: Sarah Wilson - Entrepreneurship as Mental Health Catalyst

Sarah Wilson represents a compelling case of how severe mental health challenges can serve as catalysts for entrepreneurial venture creation and social impact. Living with severe anxiety disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and bipolar disorder, Wilson feels like it was her instinct to act on changing her life by creating something, just for going out the box, and that was the beginning of “I Quit Sugar”, an eight-figure wellness enterprise. Her subsequent transition from commercial entrepreneur to activist-writer further shows how entrepreneurial identity can evolve through post-traumatic growth processes. Wilson is willing to see herself grow in the entrepreneurship lens and treat entrepreneuring as a therapeutic way to recover and reconstruct her identity.

Her personal history includes experiences with suicidal ideation, profound psychological distress, and a Hashimoto's disease diagnosis that compounded her mental health challenges. From page 74 in her book, "my relationships were always the first casualties of my anxious spirals", her anxiety invades into other angles of her life and creates a relationship strain. Except for these challenges, Wilson's compulsive motivation simultaneously boosts her productivity and her distress to create a dynamism and build up her own business. I Quit Sugar is Wilson's wellness experiment which evolves into a commercial venture and generates her eight-figure revenue. Her decision to voluntarily sell the business at its peak success marked a pivotal transition toward writing, activism, and global speaking engagements. As author of *First, We Make the Beast Beautiful* and host of the *Wild* podcast series, Wilson has repositioned herself as an advocate for reframing mental health challenges as sources of strength rather than limitation.

Wilson's entrepreneurial journey emerged from multiple crisis points that threatened both her psychological well-being and her capacity to function in traditional professional contexts. Her experience with suicidal ideation represented the most severe manifestation of her distress, with

Wilson describing how "I often wanted to disappear entirely — I'd fantasize about simply not existing" (Wilson, 2018, p. 21). These thoughts culminated in a visceral breakdown moment where she found herself lying on her bedroom floor, contemplating the end of her life and confronting the unsustainability of her existing lifestyle.

The impact of Wilson's mental health challenges extended beyond personal suffering to create what she describes as "a square peg in a round hole" existence. Her anxiety manifested as hyper-vigilance and control-seeking behaviors that made conventional employment and social relationships increasingly difficult to maintain.

For Wilson, she used a complex and multi-layered process to face her mental health challenges, she repositioned her distress as resources rather than a limitation.

Central to this transformation was her conscious reframing of anxiety from pathology to spiritual guide, describing how "I've come to see the beast as a spiritual guide — it's ugly, but it keeps me honest" (Wilson, 2018, p. 52). Wilson noted that "We must learn to dance with uncertainty, not fight it" (Wilson, 2018, p.156). She describes her own experience of how to reframe her previous life and leave enough spaces for accepting psychological mentoring. Wilson developed embodied practices such as walking barefoot in wet grass each morning, explaining that "Every morning I walk barefoot in wet grass — it's my reminder to stay connected to the present" (Wilson, 2018, p. 88). These micro-practices were supplemented by meditation, mindfulness work, nature immersion through forest therapy, and intentional exposure to discomfort as a growth mechanism.

Wilson's entrepreneurial response emerged from this identity reconstruction process as a means of aligning personal healing with collective impact. I Quit Sugar began as a personal wellness experiment that she scaled into a commercial venture (Wilson, 2015), creating what she

describes as a community of "inside people" who shared similar struggles. Her approach to business development prioritized purpose-driven models over pure profit maximization, including decisions to donate profits and maintain operations that supported rather than undermined her mental health.

Perhaps most significantly, Wilson developed what she terms a "reverse scaling" philosophy that challenged conventional entrepreneurial metrics. Her decision to sell her multimillion-dollar business reflected this commitment, with Wilson explaining that "I sold my multimillion-dollar sugar business because the scale was eroding my sanity" (Wilson, 2015, p. 174).

A strategic downsizing paves her a conscious choice to prioritize psychological well-being over commercial growth, designing business models that sustained rather than depleted her mental health resources. Wilson's transition from commercial entrepreneur to advocate and writer extended her healing process into public narrative sharing. Through her memoir, podcast appearances, TEDx presentations, and writing, she created platforms for vulnerability and collective sense-making. Her explicit focus on writing for "inside people" reflects her intention to build community around shared psychological experiences, noting that "I write for the inside people — the ones who know what it's like to feel apart and yet so deeply alive" (Wilson, 2018, p. 201).

At the personal level, her anxiety was successfully reframed from burden to creative force, enabling her to reconstruct her identity from victim of mental illness to advocate and healer. Sarah Wilson's case shows how mental health challenges can become a starting point for a purpose-driven business that also supports broader social well-being.

However, when the demands of scaling the business began to threaten her mental health, Wilson chose to sell it at its peak. This choice highlights an important insight: for some

entrepreneurs, stepping back or exiting entirely can protect their psychological well-being more than continued growth, which is confirmed here.

In Wilson's talk with Jesse Chappus in *The Jesse Chappus Show*, she discusses how to navigate the uncertainty. She links this with her bipolar disorder, OCD and her two suicidal ideations. The decision to leave the business was not a sign of failure but an intentional act of self-care and identity protection. This shift shows how an entrepreneurial identity can continue to evolve in ways that remain true to personal well-being. Sarah shares practical strategies such as embracing "enoughness" and living simply, practicing generosity as a rebellion against fear, anchoring in the present moment using physical rituals. Also find beauty in small acts and reconnect with awe. Sarah believes helping others, staying engaged, and serving bigger causes is the path out of collapse. She finds solace in community, activism, and being of use — these restore meaning in chaos.

Her later work also emphasizes how the benefits of entrepreneurship can reach beyond individual recovery by creating communities and conversations that support others facing similar challenges. In this way, her story reflects how entrepreneurial action can remain a source of purpose, agency, and collective care, even when the original venture has ended.

In the podcast from *Planet: Critical*, Sarah Wilson talked about her idea about collapse. Collapse is not something purely destructive but an opening, or an invitation for her to rethink how to live. Her personal experiences and global issues can be considered together to see why collapse can occur on many different levels, emotionally, psychologically, socially and even environmentally. These moments in essence are not crises but deserve to embrace and transform as a starting point. Sarah reflects on her burnout and anxiety experiences. Based on overconsumption and disconnection out of the internet, the sustainable bonds are gradually

disappearing. Sarah describes those moments that when she was unable to eat or leave her home, she didn't try to "fix" herself but instead, started questioning the expectation that led her there. At one point, she gave up her high-profile media career and sold most of her possessions to live minimally to connect with nature, changing her lifestyle and her mindset. The wake-up call here is the "collapse" and she discovered that collapse forces her to ask some deeper questions like what do we truly need? What are we rushing toward or what kind of world are we keeping or thinking when we refuse to stop?

Figure 7: Code Table for First We Make the Beast Beautiful (Sarah Wilson)

Theme	First-Level Code	Second-Level Code	Representative Excerpts	Analytical Note
Trauma & Distress as Catalyst	Breakdown & Crisis	Suicidal Ideation	<i>"I often wanted to disappear entirely — I'd fantasize about simply not existing."</i> (p. 21)	Describes the extremity of anxiety-driven despair as a turning point for self-exploration and later, social entrepreneurship.
	Personal Loss	Family & Relationship Strains	<i>"My relationships were always the first casualties of my anxious spirals."</i> (p. 74)	Reinforces that relational breakdowns intensified her need to find alternative coping and meaning structures.
Identity Reconstruction	Reframing Anxiety	Beast as Companion	<i>"I've come to see the beast as a spiritual guide — it's ugly, but it keeps me honest."</i> (p. 52)	Shows her conscious shift from pathology to spiritual metaphor, reframing anxiety as integral to her identity.
	Self-Ritualization	Daily Anchors & Small Practices	<i>"Every morning I walk barefoot in wet grass — it's my reminder to stay connected to the present."</i> (p. 88)	Small, embodied rituals serve as micro-recoveries and identity work.

Entrepreneurship as Healing.	Purpose-Driven Venture	Reverse Scaling	<i>“I sold my multimillion-dollar sugar business because the scale was eroding my sanity.”</i> (p. 174)	Highlights her choice to step away from hyper-growth in favor of balance, showing agency in redefining success.
	Community Connection	‘Inside People’	<i>“I write for the inside people — the ones who know what it’s like to feel apart and yet so deeply alive.”</i> (p. 201)	Her writing, books, and speaking create relational healing for readers facing similar struggles.
Spiritual & Philosophical Meaning	Seeking Simplicity	Pilgrimage, Nature, Minimalism	<i>“In Bhutan I learned about Gross National Happiness, and it changed how I measure my own life.”</i> (p. 134)	She explores global spiritual traditions, embedding them back into her personal and entrepreneurial life.
	Existential Reflection	Accepting Uncertainty	<i>“We must learn to dance with uncertainty, not fight it.”</i> (p. 156)	Anxiety becomes fuel for philosophical insight, not merely an obstacle.

Case D: Jen Gotch

Jen Gotch, founder of the lifestyle brand ban.do, illustrates how entrepreneurship can evolve as an unplanned yet powerful vehicle for mental health recovery and identity re-construction. Living with bipolar disorder and anxiety, Gotch initially channeled her emotional turbulence into designing cheerful, whimsical products that countered her inner darkness. Over time, her willingness to publicly share her mental health experiences transformed ban.do into what she calls an “accidental mental health company”, one that normalizes vulnerability and encourages community care. Through journals, planners, and digital spaces, ban.do reflects Gotch’s belief that creative entrepreneurship can double as self-therapy, offering structure, meaning, and a

platform for honest dialogue about psychological struggles that are often hidden. Her memoir and public talks reinforce how her personal healing and her company's identity became inseparable, showing how the creative process itself can become a source of resilience and social change.

Jen Gotch founded ban.do in 2008 as a small hair accessories company, but the brand unexpectedly evolved into a lifestyle label quickly, well-known for planners, gifts, and playful self-expression. She has said that her mental health problems shaped her need to create those bright and colorful things, helping her out while struggling with bipolar disorder, anxiety and frequent depression. In the process of getting debilitated, being creative and busy with her business makes her easier to process darkness.

So how she defines her business is a process of healing? Jen said her business is an “accidental mental health company” rooting from the relationship between [ban.do](https://www.ban.do) and customers. Since the customers resonate deeply with her struggles and over time, she gradually embedded the wish for mental wellness into those new products, marketing and community spaces. For instance, planners and journals with prompts about self-compassion, affirmations, and reminders to seek help (Gotch, 2020).

For Jen, ban.do was not just a business, it became an extension of her personal therapy and identity work. She has written in her book “The Upside of Being Down” that creating the brand helped her reclaim agency over her mental health narrative and normalize conversations that once caused her shame. In interviews, she often emphasizes how the business gave structure and purpose to periods that otherwise felt chaotic due to mood swings.

Jen Gotch's story as told on the Second Life Podcast shows how a deeply personal struggle with anxiety and self-doubt became the unlikely foundation for building Ban.do, a playful,

nostalgia-infused lifestyle brand. Originally a food and prop stylist, Jen’s career unfolded through a series of creative experiments and chance encounters that allowed her to transform her natural restlessness and improvisational spirit into a business. Rather than planning in details, she improvises her way from handmade floral halos to a multi-million-dollar brand. Gotch’s journey is remarkable for how she openly integrates her mental health story with her entrepreneurial identity. She also hosts a mental health podcast, “Jen Gotch is OK...Sometimes”, revealing how she uses her “[ban.do](#)” to re-state vulnerability and imperfection. Gotch illustrates how creative work can function as both an emotional outlet and a mechanism for connecting people with shared struggles. Her narrative underscores the power of ‘accidental entrepreneurship’ where a founder’s personal challenges and unconventional choices become central to the brand’s cultural resonance and to her own therapeutic journey.

In her widely shared Medium essay “How Being Open About Mental Health Transformed My Company”, Gotch reflects candidly on her journey from co-founding Ban.do as a cheerful lifestyle brand to recognize her openness about living with anxiety and bipolar disorder, reshaped both her personal mission and the company’s DNA (Hillary Kerrr, 2018).

For Gotch, she posted and revealed her own panic attacks and moments of self-doubt, becoming a part of her company’s value and the brand’s public persona. The radical opening motion helped her to dismantle the stigma and attracted thousands of followers and customers, who also see themselves reflecting in her story. Community resonance like being approached by her fans also shows the story-telling’s power. She has kept on seeking therapists' help and practice to trust herself, reject perfectionism, and make use of entrepreneurial behaviors to heal and connect with society. Medium’s essay and her memoir “The Upside of Being Down” both

point out that mental health struggles can be reframed as a shared core value to fuel the brand and connect people to build up a community.

Jen Gotch shares her personal approach to wellness and mental health, including self-care, sleep, diet, and mental clarity in the interview with “LivestrongWoman”. She has experienced multiple emotional challenges like divorce and mental health problems. Switching to seeking comfort from exercise and public speaking (like power poses, especially starfish poses) (LivestrongWoman, 2018, Part 1, Part 2). As for her exercise routine, she enjoys LEKfit's "Bounce" workouts — cardio and strength training on a mini trampoline. She actively shares her thoughts on the psychological effect to her coworkers. From Almost 30 Podcast’s interview, Jen Gotch talked about her mental health journey complementing and deepening her published book. Unlike other reflections in her memoir, this conversation is marked about how she navigates her daily realities of bipolar disorder and anxiety (and the possible ADHD symptoms) while leading her brand. This episode further unfolded that she has made use of humor as a tool to go through stigma, sharing those moments of self-doubt, to let more listeners see what is behind the brand’s curated aesthetic. Importantly, Gotch also discussed how her messy emotions that she felt disqualifying herself as a female entrepreneur, helped shape the company’s culture, which allows employees to bring their imperfect sides to the workplace. She also described the process of creating her own emotional rating system that helps her translate her emotional states into more constructive actions in work (Almost 30 Podcast, 2020).

Figure 8: Jen Gotch Codes Chart

Themes	First-Level Code	Second-Level Code	Representative Excerpt	Interpretive Note
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Trauma & Mental Health Struggles as Entrepreneurial Catalyst	Mental Health Struggles	Bipolar Disorder & Anxiety	“I grew up with undiagnosed bipolar disorder, anxiety, and ADHD.” (The Upside of Being Down, Podcast Ep. 309)	Shows early personal struggle that later becomes a source of creative energy and narrative honesty.
	Stigma & Disclosure	Raw Self-Disclosure	“Posting raw updates about panic attacks, depressive episodes, and moments of self-doubt...” (Medium essay)	Highlights how spontaneous self-sharing transformed personal pain into connection.
Narrative Identity & Self-Reconstruction	Identity Work	Accidental Mental Health Company	“Ban.do is what I call an ‘accidental mental health company.’” (Medium essay, Podcast)	Shows how her story reshaped the brand’s mission from cheerful lifestyle to radical honesty about mental health.
	Therapeutic Process	Brand as Self-Therapy	“Creating the brand helped me reclaim agency over my mental health narrative.” (Memoir)	The venture becomes a site for ongoing therapeutic identity work, not just economic action.
Rituals & Practical Tools for Coping	Daily Rituals	Emotional Rating System	“She describes the creation of her Emotional Rating System to translate moods into action.” (Podcast Ep. 309)	Practical self-monitoring tool reflects the fusion of mental health management with daily work life.
	Play & Humor	Crying at Work	“She recounts crying at work and normalizing it as part of emotional safety.” (Podcast Ep. 309, Part 1)	Embeds vulnerability in workplace culture — a micro-ritual of openness.
	Self-Care Practices	Sleep, Food, Fitness	“Sleep is non-negotiable. I keep bedtime and wake up consistent even on weekends.” (Healthy Living Hacks, Part 1 & 2)	Ordinary wellness actions ritualized to anchor mental stability — evidence of bricolage coping mechanisms.
Community Connection & Collective Resonance	Relational Healing	Customer Resonance	“Being approached by fans moved to tears by her vulnerability...” (Medium essay)	Demonstrates how radical honesty forges an affective bond between founder and community.

	Collective Dialogue	Social Media Vulnerability	“Being candid on Instagram makes ban.do more human and relatable.” (Podcast & Medium)	Turns a private burden into a public conversation, echoing therapeutic sharing loops.
Redefining Entrepreneurial Success	Leadership Culture	Imperfection as Strength	“Emotional messiness that once felt disqualifying as a leader has shaped a radically transparent culture.” (Podcast Ep. 309)	Reframes vulnerability as an asset that strengthens brand authenticity and team trust.
	Realistic Advice	‘Don’t Do It, It’s Hard’	“Her main advice is not to start a business unless you can’t ignore the calling.” (Healthy Living Hacks)	Highlights how mental health awareness reshapes how she talks about startup myths — less glamorized, more honest.

Figure 7: Shared Themes Across First and Second Layer

Shared Theme	Explanation
Trauma as Catalyst	Across both layers, trauma (e.g., abusive jobs, PTSD, identity crises) is what initiates the entrepreneurial journey.
Need for Autonomy/Agency	Individuals seek control over their work/life after losing it in traditional structures or during personal crises.
Identity Reconstruction	Entrepreneurship becomes a process of redefining oneself, reclaiming dignity, and healing from past roles.
Mental Health Management	Participants actively use business routines and flexible work to manage ADHD, depression, anxiety, etc.
Creative Work as Healing	Both layers highlight the therapeutic value of creative or values-driven businesses.
Purpose-Driven Motivation	Trauma survivors often launch ventures that are mission-oriented, often helping others with similar struggles.

Align Two Layers Together

Drawing from Doucet and Mauthner's (2008) discussion on qualitative data reflexivity and interpretation, our analysis involves repeated readings of the textual data to carefully discern latent meanings and connections. There are two stages in my plan for coding and analysis. As for the first stage, I will do the theme analysis as the first round of coding. I implement an iterative coding process, allowing constant comparison across different posts and themes. Following

Meier and Wegener's (2017) methodological suggestions, I ensure transparency in our analytical procedures by documenting the coding decisions and periodically revising and refining codes based on emerging theoretical insights.

Across the posts, a powerful pattern emerges people use entrepreneurial work not just as an economic strategy, but as an everyday mechanism to negotiate trauma, regain agency, and reconstruct identity after psychological setbacks. Some posts reveal how trauma or mental health breakdowns catalyze venture creation directly. For example, one founder in r/Entrepreneur describes how hitting a “deep depression” and feeling worthless sparked a self-taught coding journey: “Every line of code was a reason to get out of bed.” This echoes Nick Hussey’s case from the first layer, but here the ritual of skill acquisition — coding — becomes a grassroots form of daily healing.

The posts about financial crisis and suicidal ideation, such as the raw confession on r/smallbusiness (“I can’t see a way out”), expand the first-layer theme that entrepreneurial identity can amplify personal risk when it becomes too tightly bound to self-worth. In both the Hussey case and the Reddit layer, the narrative of “talking saves people” is visible: the OP’s plea for connection — “Maybe someone out there knows what this feels like” — demonstrates how community threads work as informal lifelines, mirroring the narrative repair processes described by founders like Sarah Wilson or Jen Gotch.

Other posts show how trauma and recovery processes unfold in non-linear ways. A r/PTSD thread on “I wish someone would’ve told me how healing actually works” illustrates how confronting suppressed wounds can feel worse before it gets better, requiring people to “sit with” old pain. The idea that healing is an ongoing negotiation of identity is also visible in the r/CPTSD discussion, where repeated toxic workplace experiences push trauma survivors toward

entrepreneurship as an environment they can design for emotional safety: “Every job feels like my abusive home. If I work for myself, I can finally breathe.” This mirrors the first-layer theme of “entrepreneurship as environment design” — an insight also evident in Hussey’s FRAHM business, which intentionally avoids stressors that previously led to collapse.

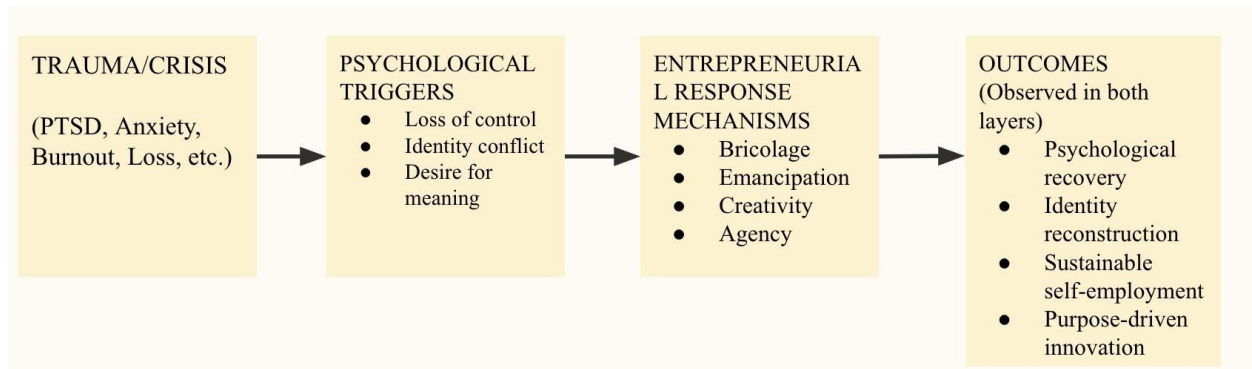
Threads about sobriety, like “Sober entrepreneurs — how did it change your journey?”, reveal how giving up numbing behaviors like alcohol strips away old coping mechanisms, forcing founders to face the raw stress and unresolved wounds that can come with running a business: “Once I got sober, all the stuff I’d been ignoring came back up.” Here, entrepreneurship and sobriety become parallel rituals for restoring structure and self-accountability.

Community validation repeatedly surfaces as a vital tool for reframing shame. Posts on “Why did you start a business?” and “What pushed you to finally take the leap?” show how betrayal, toxic bosses, and burnout spur people to reclaim autonomy: “Getting cheated by a partner pissed me off enough to do it right alone.” These stories resonate with Jen Gotch’s framing of her company as an “accidental mental health company” — the insight that creative work, when openly shared, can normalize emotional struggle.

Paradoxically, some founders discover that success itself can feel hollow without narrative alignment. The post “I’m more successful than ever and yet I’m depressed” echoes Wilson’s decision to “reverse scale” I Quit Sugar. It shows how growth without values or community connection can amplify emptiness: “I thought I’d be happy when I made it — now I feel nothing.”

Finally, stories about neurodivergent founders, ADHD, and PTSD highlight how reframing so-called “deficits” as creative drivers depends on supportive structures. One founder write: “My impulsivity used to ruin me — now it helps me pivot fast.”

Figure 9: Model of Entrepreneurship as Therapy



LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

A limitation of this thesis is that the analysis does not utilize advanced features such as sentiment analysis or model visualizations that NVivo can offer (Oliveira et al., 2016). By focusing on manual coding and thematic mapping in MAXQDA, there is a possibility that some nuanced emotional cues or relational patterns could be missed. Future research could complement this approach by combining deeper automated tools, expanding the methodological triangulation, and cross-validating findings across different CAQDAS platforms (Schönfelder, 2011). Another point that needs more attention is, consistent with interpretive case study research (Yin, 2013), the findings are theoretically rather than statistically generalizable. The founder cases and Reddit posts were selected for theoretical relevance (Eisenhardt, 2021), which means the results reflect context-bound meanings rather than universal patterns.

Several future research directions emerge from this study’s layered design and findings. First, future work could apply the identity recovery through entrepreneurship framework to larger,

demographically diverse samples. While this thesis drew from Western founders and English-speaking Reddit users, expanding to different regions could explore whether these therapeutic processes vary by cultural norms, stigma levels, or institutional support.

Second, researchers could build longitudinal case studies tracking trauma-affected entrepreneurs over time to better understand when and how key inflection points—such as business failure, pivoting, or community engagement—reshape identity work. In this thesis, both Nick Hussey and Reddit posters emphasized iterative self-discovery and post-crisis turning points, which would benefit from time-based exploration.

Third, mixed-methods work could quantify key propositions: for instance, whether perceived post-traumatic growth predicts venture persistence, or how bricolage mediates the link between trauma exposure and founder resilience. This could complement the qualitative depth of this study and improve generalizability.

Fourth, future researchers could examine digital communities like Reddit as incubators of collective meaning-making. By mapping interactions and language use over time, scholars could study how entrepreneurs validate trauma experiences, exchange coping strategies, and reinforce identity claims—offering a more dynamic understanding of how digital discourse shapes entrepreneurial behavior.

Lastly, further investigation could explore the policy and systems implications of this thesis. How might mental health organizations partner with entrepreneurship training programs to co-develop trauma-aware curricula? What role can governments and NGOs play in supporting business creation as a recovery strategy for veterans, abuse survivors, or the formerly incarcerated?

THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

This thesis advances theory at the intersection of trauma recovery, identity work, and entrepreneurship by reframing entrepreneuring as a process of both practical resourcefulness and symbolic identity reconstruction. Extending from COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989; 2012) and linking to bricolage (Baker & Nelson, 2005) and entrepreneurial emancipation (Rindova, Barry, & Ketchen, 2009), it shows how founders transform resource constraints and traumatic experiences into opportunities for post-traumatic growth (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004; Shepherd & Williams, 2014). The detailed analysis of those four cases unfolding the process of resource investment for those who have already experienced significant loss in their life. Entrepreneuring is a process to invest their resources aiming for acquiring more and new resources.

The Reddit posts offer a “crowdsourced” validation of these insights. Themes like self-worth recovery, burnout re-entry, peer support, and boundary-driven business models recur across anonymous narratives. The Reddit layer provides the initial conceptual foundation for this study, revealing how everyday individuals narrate entrepreneurship as a response to mental health struggles, trauma, and identity challenges. These non-elite, real-time accounts foreground recurring grassroots themes—such as burnout recovery, boundary-setting, self-worth reconstruction, and peer validation.

Meanwhile, this thesis extends current understanding of the relationship between trauma and entrepreneurship by developing a nuanced conceptualization of entrepreneuring as identity work. Specifically, the cases of Nick Hussey and Bob Parsons demonstrate how different trauma types (e.g., Type II trauma in childhood and combat-related PTSD) produce deeply personal motivations for venture creation. Their stories highlight a non-linear path from breakdown to recovery, where business ownership becomes a site of emotional processing, symbolic control, and personal redemption. These patterns build on and extend the frameworks of Tedeschi and

Calhoun (2004) and Shepherd & Williams (2020) by embedding entrepreneurial labor within psychological recovery processes.

Methodologically, this study contributes to research design by applying a sequential, two-layer approach that integrates in-depth founder case studies with discourse analysis of peer interactions on Reddit. This strategy aligns with Yin's (2013) principle of theoretical replication in case research and answers Eisenhardt's (2021) call for rich theory-building through constant comparison and diverse sampling. By showing how the emergent codebook holds across personal narratives and everyday online conversations, the thesis highlights how identity work, agency, and meaning-making manifest in real entrepreneurial contexts. Building on this, the second layer of analysis is composed of four in-depth founder case studies that serve to extend the emergent codes with more contextualized narratives. These elite founder stories, such as Nick Hussey and Bob Parsons, support the themes seen in Reddit stories and demonstrate how this type of entrepreneur evolves over time. In this way, the theory development becomes richer, both bottom-up and empirically deeper, aligning with Eisenhardt's (2021) emphasis on combining grounded insight with theoretical pieces.

Furthermore, by situating bricolage and emancipation as dual mechanisms of recovery and identity re-authoring, the thesis deepens our understanding of under-resourced entrepreneurs (Miller & Le Breton-Miller, 2017) as active meaning-makers rather than passive survivors. This insight bridges literature on post-traumatic growth (Joseph & Linley, 2008) with the practice-based view of entrepreneurship as everyday action and identity work.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

Practically, the thesis aims for providing insights for educators, incubators and mental health professionals in the field of entrepreneurship. First, it shows that creating a venture is not just an economic act but also a therapeutic process, especially for individuals recovering from personal trauma. For instance, after experiencing a mental breakdown from his previous startup, Nick Hussey links his mental health needs to how he structured FRAHM Jacket. The brand's tagline is "Tough Beautiful" to reflect his own emotional journey, acknowledging that life is hard but full of meaning. He adopted the pre-order model to reduce his stress and avoid potential financial risk, to ensure he would not feel overwhelmed by unsold inventory or expectations from investors. Both his business and brand design are tools for him to recover.

Second, Reddit posts reveal their unmet emotional needs among early-stage entrepreneurs, especially mental health needs (Louie, 2016). Like Louie stated, the culture of entrepreneurship makes founders prone to only show their strength and confidence but hide their fragile side out of the taboo. More examples start to describe their mental health struggles during the process of starting their businesses (Bruder, 2014; Louie, 2016). And these posts from Reddit are detailed scenarios about their thinking process. In the process of analyzing, I found that many users are discussing their burnout and anxiety around self-worth. These insights suggest that it is necessary to extend entrepreneurial support systems to other angles, but not limited to incubators, accelerators or startup cafes (Feldman, Siegel & Wright, 2019), or adding the mental health related part into these supportive organizations and stop avoiding talking about mental problems (Gish et al., 2022). To actualize these, institutions are crucial to make it happen. In addition, the research highlights the potential of online communities like Reddit as informal spaces for peer-to-peer learning and solidarity, pointing to opportunities for mental health advocates and

community leaders to amplify positive coping narratives and resource-sharing in entrepreneurial spaces.

Third, the findings offer a playbook for designing ventures. Themes like bounded growth, low-pressure work models, marketing in community and founder's vulnerability can guide incubators and accelerators to support marginalized or trauma-affected people. Rather than pushing them to scale their ideas, these people may prioritize emotional health and social meaning, and these require a different lens to view entrepreneurial success.

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Contributions of Authors

This thesis is an original, single-authored work by Wen Ma. I conceived the research questions, designed the review and analytic strategy, collected and curated the literature and data, conducted all analyses, created all tables/figures, and wrote the full manuscript. Dr. Nathan S. Greidanus served as supervisor and provided scholarly guidance and feedback. Dr. Chi Liao and Dr. Lukas Neville provided committee feedback during proposal, milestone, and defense stages. Their roles were advisory; they did not contribute as authors to the thesis.