TRAUMA & ENTREPRENEURSHIP: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

TRAUMA & ENTREPRENEURSHIP: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES ACROSS THREE CONTEXTS

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Lay Abstract

Trauma can shape how people and communities engage in entrepreneurship, influencing their motivations, actions, and well-being. This thesis explores how trauma can both hinder and inspire entrepreneurial efforts through three connected studies. The first study looks at how a university responded to the societal trauma of the COVID-19 pandemic by creating a virtual program to help underserved entrepreneurs worldwide, showing how organizations can adapt and support social good. The second study presents a framework to support refugee entrepreneurs by addressing their trauma and psychological needs, offering practical guidance for creating tailored programs. The third study focuses on sex workers in Nairobi, Kenya, who use entrepreneurship to overcome stigma, systemic challenges, and various traumas. These studies reveal how individuals and communities can turn adversity into innovation, resilience, and social progress, providing new ways to support healing, empowerment, and economic inclusion through entrepreneurship.

Abstract

Trauma, whether experienced individually or collectively, can profoundly influence entrepreneurial motivation, behavior, and well-being. Through three interrelated papers, this dissertation examines how trauma can simultaneously constrain and catalyze entrepreneurial action. The first paper investigates how a large public research university responded to the cascading collective traumas of the COVID-19 pandemic by embracing intrapreneurial thinking. By launching a virtual incubator to support marginalized entrepreneurs worldwide, the institution not only addressed societal needs but also bolstered its adaptability, legitimacy, and social impact. The second paper introduces a trauma-informed framework for refugee entrepreneurship support, grounded in principles of trauma-informed care to address traumas often experienced by refugees. By centering psychological well-being and trauma-informed interventions, this framework offers practical guidance for tailoring entrepreneurship programs to the unique needs of refugee entrepreneurs. The third paper employs Freire's critical consciousness theory to explore the entrepreneurial endeavors of bar hostesses (i.e., sex workers) in Nairobi, Kenya. We observe that despite confronting overlapping traumas – stigmatization, COVID-19 disruptions, and systemic marginalization – they exercise entrepreneurial autonomy and collective emancipation. Their experiences underscore how dialogue, critical reflection and action, and empowering entrepreneurship education can spur resilience, community-building, and social change.

Taken together, these three studies highlight trauma's dual capacity to hinder and inspire innovation and social impact. By illuminating social intrapreneurship, trauma-informed care, and critical consciousness, this dissertation provides new insights into how individuals and communities facing profound adversity and trauma can leverage entrepreneurship for transformative healing, empowerment, and inclusive economic development.

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List of all Abbreviations and Symbols

9/11 - Commonly referring to the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in the United States

BnBs - Bed and Breakfasts

CBEs - Community-Based Enterprises

COVID-19 - Coronavirus Disease 2019

D.C. - District of Columbia

DSM - Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders

DSM-5 - Fifth Edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders

DSM-III - Third Edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders

DSM-IV - Fourth Edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders

ESO - Entrepreneurial Support Organizations

GBV - Gender-Based Violence

KSH - Kenyan Shillings

LGBTQI - Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and Intersex

MBTR-R - Mindfulness-Based Trauma Recovery for Refugees

MOOCs - Massive Open Online Courses

NGO - Non-Governmental Organization

PTSD - Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

SACCO - Savings and Credit Cooperative Organization

SAMHSA - Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

SSHRC - Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council

STIs - Sexually Transmitted Infections

UNHCR - United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

VI - Virtual Incubator

Declaration of Academic Achievement

This thesis includes three multi-authored papers presented in Chapters 3, 4, and 5. As required by McMaster University guidelines, this preface documents the contributions of each author and explains when the work was conducted. Furthermore, it justifies why my original contributions should be included in the main body of this thesis.

Chapter 3 (the first paper): Promoting academic social intrapreneurship: Developing an international virtual incubator and fostering social impact

Authors and Their Roles based on the Contributor Roles Taxonomy (CRediT) system:

- **Javid Nafari:** *Conceptualization, Methodology, Validation, Investigation, Data curation, Formal analysis, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Project Administration.*
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- **Ana Cristina O. Siqueira:** *Writing – review & editing, Investigation, Formal analysis.*

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When the Work Was Conducted: Data collection, analysis, and writing for this paper began in 2020 and concluded in 2023.

Justification for Inclusion in Thesis: I led the majority of the research tasks for this paper – designing and implementing the methodology, collecting and analyzing data, and writing the initial and subsequent drafts of the manuscript. I led the author team's efforts in conceptualizing the

project and managing its progress. The insights developed here are central to my thesis's broader investigation of entrepreneurship.

Chapter 4 (the second paper): A Trauma-Informed Approach: Temporal Reintegration, Identity Reconstruction and Preventing Retraumatization in Refugee Entrepreneurship Support

Authors and Their Roles based on the Contributor Roles Taxonomy (CRediT) system:

- **Javid Nafari:** *Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.*
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trauma-informed frameworks in refugee entrepreneurship. The insights developed here are central to my thesis's broader investigation of entrepreneurship.

Chapter 5 (the third paper): Entrepreneurial Emancipation and Autonomy Through a Freirean Lens: Case of Bar Hostesses in Kenya

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Justification for Inclusion in Thesis: My primary roles included co-designing and co-conducting the investigation (including data collection and curation), leading the formal data analysis, and drafting the core sections of the paper. These tasks anchor the discussion on emancipatory entrepreneurship within my dissertation's conceptual framework. Hence, this paper is integral to my thesis and showcases my original analytical and theoretical contributions to this scholarly domain.

Chapter 1

Introduction

The pervasive nature of trauma necessitates a comprehensive understanding of its impact across individual and collective levels (Huang et al., 2014; Silver, Holman, & Garfin, 2021; Doucet & Rovers, 2010). On an individual level, trauma is a personal response to overwhelming experiences shaped by one's vulnerabilities, coping mechanisms, and cultural background. It can result from a single incident or accumulate over time through continuous exposure to stressors like chronic adversity or discrimination, affecting mental, emotional, physical, or social health (Bonanno & Mancini, 2012; Center for Substance Abuse Treatment, 2014; Huang et al., 2014; Papadopoulos, 2021; Van der Kolk, 2003). While trauma often leads to debilitating mental health and psychological conditions at the individual level (Center for Substance Abuse Treatment, 2014), its reach extends far beyond, permeating communities and leaving a legacy of psychological, social, and economic consequences (Burke, 2012; Silver et al., 2021). These ripple effects reshape identities, disrupt functions, and challenge resilience on a broad scale.

Collective trauma disrupts shared meaning, fractures trust, and undermines community bonds (Hirschberger, 2018) while also fueling persistent fears, anxiety, and posttraumatic stress symptoms that can reverberate across generations as inherited emotional wounds (Hirschberger, 2018; Updegraff, Silver, & Holman, 2008). These traumatic experiences reshape social and moral values and can lead to identity confusion (Tcholakian, Khapova, & Van De Loo, 2023). This can be further compounded by generational trauma, where the psychological impacts of traumatic events, such as war atrocities or systemic oppression, are passed down through families and communities, shaping the social, emotional, and economic challenges faced by subsequent generations (Doucet & Rovers, 2010; Stamm & Stamm, 2013). When individuals and groups cannot make sense of trauma, they become increasingly vulnerable to chronic fear and maladjustment, as unintegrated events conflict with core beliefs about safety and justice

(Hirschberger, 2018; Updegraff et al., 2008). Ultimately, unresolved collective trauma erodes social cohesion and perpetuates distress, whereas meaningful acknowledgment, reconciliation, and targeted interventions can help break harmful cycles and foster resilience (Hirschberger, 2018; Jorden, Matheson, & Anisman, 2009; Somasundaram, 2010; Updegraff et al., 2008).

Thus, trauma, whether experienced individually or collectively, refers to a profound disruption caused by adverse events that overwhelm the ability to cope, leading to enduring challenges in functioning and well-being (Hirschberger, 2018; Doucet & Rovers, 2010; Stamm & Stamm, 2013; Van der Kolk, 2003). Examining trauma through individual and collective lenses is crucial for understanding its comprehensive impact and developing effective interventions that promote healing and resilience at all levels.

One critical area where these impacts are particularly pronounced, yet often overlooked, is entrepreneurship[1]. Entrepreneurial action frequently arises as both a response to and a means of navigating trauma, especially in contexts marked by chronic adversity, such as refugee camps or communities affected by economic crises (Harima & Plak, 2024; Shepherd & Williams, 2020). In these environments, trauma intertwines with entrepreneurial efforts as individuals, organizations, and communities seek to reestablish control, identity, and community in the aftermath of disruptive events (Shepherd et al., 2020; Harima & Plak, 2024; Osiyevskyy et al., 2020).

Understanding this intersection is essential for recognizing how entrepreneurship can serve as a tool for both economic survival and psychological coping, offering new avenues for resilience and transformation. Trauma can profoundly shape entrepreneurial motivation, behavior, and well-

[1] Entrepreneurship can be defined as the process of creating new organizations through the acquisition and integration of resources to exploit opportunities and generate value. This involves activities such as mobilizing resources, developing new ventures, and bringing together opportunities with resources to establish a business that contributes to economic or social value (Gartner, 1990).

being in ways that go beyond traditional economic and strategic factors. For vulnerable populations, such as refugees or individuals with adverse childhood experiences, trauma often brings psychological, social, and institutional barriers, including emotional distress, social disconnection, and reduced access to resources (Shepherd et al., 2020; Yeshi et al., 2022; Yu et al., 2022). These barriers can affect key entrepreneurial traits like resilience, decision-making, and emotional well-being, complicating the entrepreneurial journey (Shepherd & Williams, 2020; Harima & Plak, 2024). However, trauma can also act as a catalyst for entrepreneurial success. Individuals who have faced persistent adversity often demonstrate an ability to leverage entrepreneurial action to build resilience, not only overcoming challenges but thriving in adverse conditions (Klyver et al., 2022; Shepherd et al., 2020). By studying the intersection of individual trauma and entrepreneurship, we can deepen our understanding of how traumatic experiences, while challenging, can also catalyze innovation, resilience, and growth.

Collective trauma can have profound negative consequences for communities (Hirschberger, 2018; Tcholakian et al., 2023; Updegraff et al., 2008). Despite these negative impacts, it can also spur communities to respond in positive and entrepreneurial ways. For instance, Goswami and colleagues (2023) showcase that Indigenous entrepreneurs in Canada utilize their ventures to restore cultural pride, challenge stereotypes, and foster healing within their communities. These entrepreneurial activities integrate traditional practices and heritage, addressing intergenerational trauma while rebuilding trust and identity. Another study in Africa showcases that community-based enterprises (CBEs) led by families or women have emerged as a response to historical traumas like the slave trade (Uzuegbunam, Kapletia, & Ituma, 2025). By emphasizing collaboration and shared responsibilities, these CBEs reconfigure trust, promote

community-oriented entrepreneurship, and aim to mitigate the adverse effects of historical mistrust.

Despite increasing acknowledgment of adversity's role in entrepreneurship, substantial gaps remain in the literature regarding the influence of individual trauma on entrepreneurial endeavors (Shantz & McMullen, 2024). Existing research tends to focus on general adversity and resilience, often neglecting the intricate psychological and emotional effects that trauma exerts on entrepreneurs (Doern & Goss, 2014; Muñoz et al., 2023). This oversight leads to a limited understanding of entrepreneurial motivations and decision-making processes, as trauma can both hinder and propel entrepreneurial activity (Nguyen & Tran, 2024; Fodor & Pintea, 2017). Moreover, the dual nature of trauma – as both a barrier and a catalyst – is inadequately explored, resulting in an incomplete view of resilience that overlooks the unique challenges and strengths of traumatized individuals (Yeshi et al., 2022; Dashtipour & Rumens, 2017).

The lack of a holistic approach that integrates trauma into the broader context of entrepreneurship contributes to insufficient support systems tailored to the specific needs of those affected by trauma (Harima et al., 2019; Impact Hub, 2022; Shantz & McMullen, 2024). This gap not only perpetuates a narrow perspective, excluding diverse experiences from the discourse but also hinders the development of more effective and inclusive support mechanisms. Addressing these deficiencies is essential for fostering a comprehensive understanding of entrepreneurship that fully embraces the complex interplay between individual trauma and entrepreneurial success (Yeshi et al., 2022; Nguyen & Tran, 2024; Shantz & McMullen, 2024).

Furthermore, despite the acknowledged significance of intrapreneurship in driving innovation and competitiveness, existing literature has substantial gaps concerning its relationship with trauma at the individual or collective levels (Blanka, 2019; Hernández-Perlines et al., 2022;

Neessen et al., 2019). Research predominantly focuses on stable or growth-oriented environments, scarcely examining how traumatic events – such as financial collapse, scandals, or pandemics – impact intrapreneurial activities (Blanka, 2019; Cadar & Badulescu, 2015). The potential disruption of supportive organizational structures essential for intrapreneurship, including management support, resource availability, and conducive cultures, remains underexplored (Baruah & Ward, 2015; Neessen et al., 2019). In addition, the notion that trauma, and crises in general, might act as catalysts for intrapreneurial behavior, prompting employees to innovate to overcome challenges, has not been sufficiently investigated (Blanka, 2019; Hernández-Perlines et al., 2022). There is a notable absence of strategic frameworks or empirical studies guiding organizations on leveraging intrapreneurship during and after traumatic events (Baruah & Ward, 2015; Blanka, 2019). Additionally, the literature lacks insight into how organizational cultures and structures should transform post-trauma to foster or restore intrapreneurial activity (Blanka, 2019; Neessen et al., 2019). Addressing these gaps is crucial for better understanding intrapreneurship's role in organizational resilience and recovery.

Thus, understanding trauma as both an obstacle and a catalyst is vital when exploring its complex relationship with entrepreneurship. Trauma can impose significant challenges, causing distress and dysfunction for individuals and communities alike. Yet, it can also foster resilience, spur innovation, and lead to transformative outcomes. This dual perspective addresses a critical gap in current entrepreneurship research, which often highlights resilience without fully acknowledging the vulnerabilities and complexities that trauma entails. Thus, this dissertation will explore the dual role of trauma in entrepreneurship by examining it across three distinct yet interrelated papers.

The first paper (Chapter 3) explores how a large public research university, forced into a period of reflection on its identity and purpose by the cascading collective traumas of the COVID-19 pandemic, embraced intrapreneurship as a strategic response. The case in this study centers on a socially oriented intrapreneurial initiative by a faculty member who developed a virtual incubator to empower marginalized entrepreneurs worldwide, which helped the institution enhance its internal adaptability and increase legitimacy while making a significant societal impact. This case demonstrates that a decentralized and flexible approach to fostering intrapreneurship within a university can lead to substantial outcomes, even when those results are not explicitly planned or directed by the institution itself. The intrapreneurial venture's success highlights the effectiveness of embracing unconventional solutions to tackle complex, "wicked problems" problems (Head and Alford, 2015) caused by internal and external traumas. Notably, this case study shows how institutions can transform collective traumas into an opportunity for resilience and positive societal change.

The second paper (Chapter 4) is a conceptual exploration of the experiences of refugee trauma where a trauma-informed framework for refugee entrepreneurship support services is introduced – addressing the unique psychological challenges they face, such as temporal disintegration, identity dissolution, and the risk of retraumatization. By integrating these elements and drawing on trauma-informed care principles (Huang et al., 2014), the framework offers strategies to help entrepreneurship service providers understand and address the effects of refugee trauma. The proposed framework centers on three key elements: temporal reorientation, identity reconstruction, and preventing retraumatization. This framework contributes to the literature by bridging entrepreneurship studies and trauma-informed care, enabling a deeper comprehension of how trauma influences entrepreneurial behavior and outcomes. The primary goal of this paper is

to establish a foundational approach that can guide future research and practice at the intersection of trauma and entrepreneurship.

This third paper (Chapter 5) adopts Freire's (1970) critical consciousness theory to examine how a group of bar hostesses (i.e., sex workers) in Nairobi, Kenya, navigated significant personal and collective traumas – stemming from the overlapping effects of their work in the sex industry, COVID-19, and their broader life histories – by exercising entrepreneurial autonomy and emancipation. The bar hostesses participated in a virtual entrepreneurship training program, where they developed new ventures while continuing to engage in sex work. Despite confronting ongoing traumatic experiences, stigma, and entrenched structural barriers, they showcase entrepreneurial autonomy at the individual and emancipatory entrepreneuring at the collective level. By focusing on entrepreneurship as a vehicle for both economic empowerment and collective healing, this study highlights how entrepreneurial activities and community building can offer pathways toward resilience among marginalized groups experiencing complex, cascading traumas. In doing so, it underscores the broader potential of entrepreneurship as a platform for personal agency and communal solidarity within contexts marked by layered histories of exclusion and trauma.

Collectively, these three studies illuminate the multifaceted relationship between trauma and entrepreneurship, showing that trauma can simultaneously constrain and spark innovation. The university's intrapreneurial endeavor illustrates how institutions can leverage collective trauma as an impetus for adaptive, socially oriented initiatives. The trauma-informed framework for supporting refugee entrepreneurs underscores the importance of recognizing the psychological dimensions of displacement and highlights how targeted support can empower refugees to rebuild their lives through entrepreneurship. Finally, the experiences of bar hostesses in Nairobi reveal how entrepreneurial autonomy and emancipation, bolstered by critical consciousness, can catalyze

both personal and communal resilience even amid entrenched individual and collective traumas. Together, these investigations affirm that acknowledging trauma's duality – and harnessing its capacity to inspire ingenious adaptation – can guide the design of more inclusive, empowering, and transformative entrepreneurial ecosystems for individuals and communities confronting traumas.

In the following chapters, I will begin by establishing the context and background of the thesis, starting with a discussion of the etymology and historical evolution of the term "trauma." I will explore its transformations and shifting conceptualizations, ultimately offering a definition of trauma and contrasting it with the widely used term "adversity" in the entrepreneurship literature. Next, I will define collective trauma, examine its triggers and impacts, and share insights on how communities respond to collective trauma. Then, in chapter 3, I will introduce the context for the first paper - published in the *Technovation* journal in 2024 – and present the full published paper. Chapter 4 will start with a preamble to the second paper, followed by its latest submitted version for round three of peer-review for a special issue at *International Small Business Journal*. I will then present the context of the third paper in the preamble section of Chapter 5 before providing the submitted manuscript to the *Academy of Management Conference 2025 (Entrepreneurship Division)*. Lastly, in the discussion section, I will synthesize the contributions of the three papers and the thesis as a whole.

Chapter 2

Trauma: Etymology, History & Definition

The word trauma originates from the Greek *τραῦμα*[2], which means "wound" or "injury," and was initially used to describe physical harm inflicted on the body (Papadopoulos, 2018, 2021). In its earliest usage, trauma was understood purely as a physical affliction, emphasizing the tangible, observable consequences of an injury. The related Greek verb *τίτρωσκω*[3], which means "to pierce" or "to wound," reinforced this notion of trauma as a physical penetration or injury (Papadopoulos, 2018, 2021). This concept remained dominant in early medical and literary texts, where trauma referred exclusively to visible, external wounds or bodily damage caused by violent forces or accidents.

However, a deeper exploration of the term's etymology reveals that the Greek verb *τείρω*[4], meaning "to rub," also played an influential role in shaping the modern understanding of trauma. The act of "rubbing" could imply both "rubbing in" and "rubbing off" (Papadopoulos, 2021). This metaphorical shift expanded the definition of trauma beyond its original physical context. "*Rubbing in*" reflects the modern conception of trauma as something that deeply impacts an individual, embedding itself in their psychological and emotional framework, much like how an external force may leave a permanent scar on the body. "*Rubbing off*," on the other hand, introduces the notion of transformation or change through traumatic experiences, where the individual emerges with a renewed or altered sense of self (Papadopoulos, 2018, 2021). This duality underscores trauma not just as a source of harm but as a process that refines or changes one's identity, bridging the gap between physical injury and emotional or psychological wounds. Over time, this evolving interpretation of trauma paved the way for its eventual use in psychological contexts, where the invisible wounds of the mind and emotions began to take precedence.

[2] Pronounced as "TRAH-vmah"
[3] Pronounced as "TEE-troh-sko"
[4] Pronounced as "TEI-roh"

Historically, the concept of trauma has undergone profound changes, particularly from its origins as a medical term to its present-day psychological and emotional connotations. For centuries, the word trauma was used primarily in reference to physical injuries. As far back as the works of Homer, trauma was associated with warriors wounded in battle, reflecting its primary meaning as bodily harm (Papadopoulos, 2018, 2021). Classical literature and early medical texts consistently focused on the physical aspects of trauma, often overlooking or minimizing its emotional and psychological dimensions.

The 19th century marked a turning point in trauma history, with industrialization and railway travel leading to an increase in traumatic injuries. The term "railway spine" emerged to describe survivors of train accidents who experienced psychological symptoms without physical injuries, highlighting that trauma could have mental effects even without visible harm (Braga et al., 2008; Papadopoulos, 2021). This laid the foundation for a deeper understanding of trauma. Around the same time, French neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot expanded the concept of trauma beyond physical injuries. His work with patients who exhibited psychological symptoms following accidents or violent experiences led to terms like "traumatic neurosis" and showed that trauma could cause emotional and psychological suffering. Charcot's ideas influenced early trauma theory, paving the way for future thinkers like Pierre Janet and Sigmund Freud (Papadopoulos, 2021; Van der Kolk et al., 1994).

Freud's work in the late 19th century was crucial in shaping modern views on trauma. He explored how traumatic events left lasting psychological effects, even when not consciously recognized (Braga et al., 2008; Van der Kolk et al., 1994). Freud introduced the concept of "Nachträglichkeit" (deferred action), showing how trauma's impact might surface later in life. During World War I, the term "shell shock" described soldiers' psychological distress. Initially

thought to result from physical brain injuries, it was later understood as psychological, helping reduce the stigma around mental health issues and broadening the recognition of trauma as a mental condition (Papadopoulos, 2021; Van der Kolk et al., 1994).

The formal recognition of psychological trauma culminated in 1980, when Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) was included in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-III). PTSD acknowledged that individuals exposed to overwhelming events – whether combat, accidents, or personal losses – could experience long-term psychological consequences (Moskowitz et al., 2018; Van der Kolk et al., 1994). This marked a significant turning point in the understanding of trauma, as it legitimized the psychological and emotional scars caused by traumatic events. The inclusion of PTSD in the DSM also encouraged further research into the physiological and neurological effects of trauma, leading to modern studies on brain structure, stress responses, and emotional regulation in trauma survivors (Braga et al., 2008; Moskowitz et al., 2018).

2.1 Individual Trauma

Trauma is a concept that has been widely explored and debated across various disciplines, particularly in psychology, psychiatry, and social sciences. Despite its frequent use in both clinical and everyday contexts, defining trauma proves to be complex and multifaceted. The term "trauma" is commonly used to describe emotionally distressing events; however, there is no single, universally accepted definition that encapsulates the breadth of experiences that can be considered traumatic (Van der Kolk, 2003; Dalenberg et al., 2017). This chapter will explore the evolution of trauma definitions, the subjective nature of traumatic experiences, and the long-lasting impacts on individuals, with a focus on how these definitions contribute to understanding trauma within both personal and broader societal contexts.

2.1.1 Conceptual Origins of Trauma Definitions

The origins of trauma definitions stem from various psychological traditions, each contributing unique insights into how trauma is understood. The psychodynamic tradition, rooted in the work of Sigmund and Anna Freud, posits that trauma occurs when an individual experiences stimulation that exceeds their ability to cope. This perspective highlights the subjective nature of trauma, emphasizing that individual vulnerabilities and available support systems influence the impact of an event (Van der Kolk, 2003; Dalenberg et al., 2017). Thus, trauma is not just about the event itself but also how the individual experiences and interprets it.

A more biological approach to trauma focuses on the stress response system. This perspective underlines the physiological responses to stress, such as the "fight-flight-freeze" mechanism, suggesting that biological predispositions can make some individuals more vulnerable to traumatic stress (Van der Kolk, 2003). From this angle, trauma is seen not only as a psychological phenomenon but also as a biological process.

Behaviorist approaches to trauma focus on observable behaviors and classical conditioning. In this framework, trauma is understood as a learned response, where neutral stimuli become associated with fear or anxiety due to negative experiences. This behaviorist model has been influential in developing empirically based treatments, such as exposure therapy, for trauma-related conditions like phobias (Dalenberg et al., 2017).

2.1.2 Trauma and the DSM: An Evolving Definition

The formal definition of trauma has undergone significant changes, particularly with the development of the Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) diagnosis in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM). Initially introduced in the DSM-III (1980), trauma was described as a stressor "outside the range of usual human experience" that would cause distress

in almost anyone (Dalenberg et al., 2017). This definition, however, proved problematic due to its ambiguity—what constitutes "usual human experience" is highly subjective, and many common events may not always cause distress in everyone.

By the time of DSM-IV (1994), the definition of trauma had evolved to include both the type of event and the emotional reaction, specifically fear, helplessness, or horror. While this revision aimed to provide more clarity, it also faced challenges, as some traumatic responses involved emotions other than fear, helplessness, or horror (Dalenberg et al., 2017). DSM-5 (2013) eventually removed the emotional reaction criterion, acknowledging that trauma could arise from indirect exposure (such as through professional duties) and that repeated or cumulative trauma could be as significant as a single event (Dalenberg et al., 2017).

2.1.3 The Subjective Experience of Trauma

Another key challenge in defining trauma is the subjective nature of traumatic experiences. What one individual experiences as traumatic may not be perceived the same way by another person. According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), trauma involves an event or series of events that are experienced as physically or emotionally harmful or life-threatening, resulting in lasting adverse effects on an individual's functioning and well-being (Huang et al., 2014). This definition emphasizes that trauma is not solely about the external event but also about how an individual experiences and interprets that event.

Several factors influence how trauma is experienced, including cultural beliefs, social support systems, and developmental stages. For instance, a person from a culture that subjugates women may experience domestic violence differently than someone from a more egalitarian society. Similarly, an individual with a strong support system may cope with trauma more

effectively than someone who is isolated (Huang et al., 2014). These considerations underscore the importance of taking a holistic view of trauma, one that incorporates not only the event but also the individual's context and subjective meaning-making processes.

2.1.4 Expanding the Definition of Trauma

While standardized criteria for trauma are necessary for clinical diagnosis, many researchers argue that the meaning individuals assign to traumatic events plays a critical role in determining the event's impact. Trauma can fundamentally disrupt a person's worldview, shattering their beliefs about safety, trust, and relationships (Dalenberg et al., 2017). For instance, interpersonal trauma, such as abuse by a trusted individual, can lead to feelings of betrayal and isolation, which significantly influence the development of post-traumatic stress and related disorders.

While diagnostic manuals and clinical definitions attempt to delineate trauma through event-based criteria, many scholars advocate for a broader, more inclusive understanding. For example, Gradus and Galea (2022) argue that the narrow focus on a perceived threat of death or physical harm limits the understanding of trauma, especially among marginalized groups. Racial discrimination, financial hardship, and environmental trauma have been recognized as significant sources of psychological distress that may not involve direct physical harm but can nonetheless have profound mental health impacts (Gradus & Galea, 2022).

For example, covert racism or the experience of eviction can lead to trauma-like psychological distress, particularly among marginalized populations. This broader understanding of trauma also encompasses the effects of climate change, which can cause PTSD-like symptoms through natural disasters or indirectly by threatening community stability and security (Gradus & Galea, 2022). These perspectives challenge the traditional trauma definition by arguing that

psychological trauma should not be limited to events involving a perceived threat of death but should also include the sociocultural and contextual factors, chronic stressors, and systemic inequalities that shape trauma responses.

Thus, by drawing from the extant literature and debates on trauma, in this dissertation, individual trauma will be defined holistically in a way that its multifaceted nature and the complex interplay of objective events, subjective experience, and ongoing stressors are captured:

> *Individual Trauma is an individual's subjective response to experiences that overwhelm their ability to cope, leading to enduring psychological, emotional, physical, social, or spiritual consequences. Shaped by personal perception—affected by vulnerabilities, coping mechanisms, and cultural background—trauma can arise from single incidents or accumulate through chronic stressors. Its effects may manifest immediately or later, impacting emotional regulation, behavior, relationships, and overall well-being. Social, cultural, and historical contexts, along with available support systems, play crucial roles in determining how trauma is experienced and its long-term impact.*

2.1.5 Adversity vs. Trauma

In the entrepreneurship literature, trauma is almost never discussed in the nuanced way that it is explored in this thesis. While recent discussions have begun to engage with the concept of "adversity" in ways that edge closer to the psychological, emotional, and long-term impacts of overwhelming experiences, they still fall short of capturing the full complexity of trauma as it is defined in this thesis.

Adversity in entrepreneurship research refers to external, objective hardships or challenges, such as poverty, displacement, and legal, social, or economic difficulties, particularly affecting marginalized entrepreneurs. It reflects systemic barriers and prolonged external difficulties, often

arising from legal, social, and economic constraints in host countries (Shepherd et al., 2020). Adversity emphasizes environmental and circumstantial difficulties rather than internal emotional responses, and while it does not necessarily lead to trauma, it can challenge one's capacity to function and thrive, requiring resilience to overcome. The impact of adversity varies depending on how individuals internalize and react to these ongoing hardships (Yeshi et al., 2022; Holland & Shepherd, 2013).

On the other hand, individual trauma, as defined in this thesis, is a psychological, emotional, and physiological response to experiences that overwhelm an individual's ability to cope. It is a subjective experience, meaning that what constitutes trauma can vary significantly depending on the individual's perception, vulnerabilities, and cultural context. Trauma may stem from a single event or prolonged exposure to stress, but it is characterized by its overwhelming nature, which surpasses an individual's capacity for psychological and emotional regulation.

One key distinction between trauma and adversity lies in their degree of subjectivity. Trauma is inherently subjective (Huang et al., 2014) and is shaped by an individual's personal experience and perception of an overwhelming event. The same event may be traumatic for some but not for others, as personal, cultural, and contextual factors influence trauma. It often disrupts emotional regulation and can lead to long-term psychological and emotional consequences (Braga et al., 2008). In contrast, adversity is more objective and external. It refers to tangible challenges or stressors, such as financial hardship, social stigma, or institutional limitations, that impact individuals regardless of their perception, although responses may vary (Shepherd et al., 2020; Renko et al., 2021). Adversity emphasizes external pressures, particularly in challenging environments like those faced by entrepreneurs (Shepherd et al., 2020).

Cultural and contextual factors deeply influence trauma. The way individuals process and cope with trauma depends on their cultural background, social networks, and available support systems (Gradus & Galea, 2022). This makes trauma a more complex and individualized phenomenon, particularly among refugee populations, where cultural displacement and identity loss can exacerbate its psychological effects. Adversity, though also context-dependent, is primarily treated as an environmental factor. It encompasses conditions that challenge individuals, such as economic downturns, political instability, or social exclusion (Stephan et al., 2023). While the experience of adversity may vary based on cultural context, it is generally viewed as an external condition that impacts individuals regardless of their internal emotional state.

Furthermore, trauma has a profound and lasting impact on emotional and psychological well-being, social relationships, and physical health (Gradus & Galea, 2022; Huang et al., 2014). It can arise from acute incidents like accidents or assaults or from chronic stressors such as prolonged exposure to violence or discrimination, and its effects may manifest immediately or later in life. While adversity is often challenging, it does not always result in trauma. Adversity refers to difficult conditions, but not all adversity overwhelms an individual's capacity to cope (Shepherd et al., 2020). In some cases, moderate adversity can foster positive outcomes, such as developing resilience and adaptive coping strategies (Yu et al., 2022).

Within entrepreneurship, adversity is typically framed around situational challenges like financial loss or market instability, testing an entrepreneur’s resilience and persistence (Shepherd et al., 2020; Stephan et al., 2023). However, entrepreneurial literature often focuses heavily on overcoming adversity, sometimes overlooking the dual perspective of trauma literature, which balances vulnerability and resilience. Trauma is understood as a subjective and overwhelming experience that, while leading to long-term psychological impacts, can also provide pathways to

growth and resilience. In contrast, entrepreneurship literature emphasizes resilience in the face of adversity (Shepherd et al., 2020; Renko et al., 2021), often downplaying the vulnerability and personal costs that can accompany these experiences.

2.2 Collective Trauma

Collective trauma is the impact of a traumatic experience on large groups of people, communities, or entire societies, understood as the wounding and injury to the social fabric of a community. It not only causes distress and negative consequences for individuals but can also transform the fundamental structure of a community or society (Hirschberger, 2018; Páez, Basabe, Ubillos, & González-Castro, 2007; Updegraff et al., 2008). Unlike individual traumas, collective traumas are events or circumstances experienced, directly or indirectly, by an entire community, nation, or cultural group (Lerner, 2019; Saul, 2022). Examples of collective trauma include terrorist attacks, natural disasters, genocides, and prolonged social and economic adversities such as oppression or extreme poverty (Saul, 2022; Tcholakian et al., 2019).

Recent scholarship expands the understanding of collective trauma by illustrating how material conditions, such as poverty, interact with psychological and sociocultural factors (Lerner, 2019). Poverty, especially when rooted in historical injustices such as colonialism or systematic inequality, can itself become a form of collective trauma: it perpetuates vulnerabilities and fosters ongoing hardship that reinforces traumatic memories (Hudson, 2016; Lerner, 2019). This interplay underscores the importance of recognizing that collective trauma does not arise from a single event alone; it can be embedded in economic structures that maintain or exacerbate suffering over time (Lerner, 2019; Saul, 2022).

Poverty can act as a repository for collective trauma, especially when linked to historical injustices like colonialism (Hudson, 2016; Lerner, 2019). Continuous deprivation not only

engenders a sense of fear and social exclusion but also transmits emotional and intellectual repercussions across generations. Such poverty can become woven into national identities, shaping how states respond to international economic structures. Even when material damage from a traumatic event is eventually repaired, a structural sense of absence may persist (Hudson, 2016; Lerner, 2019). This is often an anxiety-laden recognition that a community or society has been deprived of potential progress had the traumatic disruption not occurred. Collective trauma can erode trust in the very institutions designed to maintain social and economic stability (Lerner, 2019). When entire groups feel betrayed by institutions – whether because of perceived negligence or direct harm – their willingness to cooperate, participate, or invest in these systems can diminish significantly (Lerner, 2019).

Furthermore, collective trauma involves a wide-reaching psychological effect that extends beyond the epicenter of catastrophic events (Páez et al., 2007; Updegraff et al., 2008). For instance, the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the United States were not limited to those immediately affected in New York or Washington, D.C., but also had nationwide and even global reverberations in the form of heightened fear, anxiety, and a sense of vulnerability (Updegraff et al., 2008). These incidents often symbolize threats to fundamental assumptions about safety, predictability, and personal, community, or national identity (Lerner, 2019). This symbolic nature means that even those who did not directly witness or endure the immediate crisis might still experience distress, as it challenges their sense of security and belonging (Updegraff et al., 2008; Saul, 2022).

Another defining aspect of collective trauma is its ability to create a sense of a shared, communal experience (Saul, 2022). People may empathize with victims and fear for the safety of themselves and their loved ones, leading to collective mourning or anxiety (Updegraff et al., 2008). Collective trauma disrupts basic assumptions about a benevolent or predictable world, often

shattering existing frameworks of meaning (Saul, 2022; Tcholakian et al., 2019). In this way, collective trauma entails both an emotional and existential rupture, wherein the collective is forced to reconcile traumatizing realities with prior belief systems (Lerner, 2019).

2.2.1 Consequences of Collective Trauma

Collective trauma experienced by a community, nation, or group can have a profound and multifaceted impact on both individuals and the collective as a whole. Scholars have identified a range of consequences that emerge in the wake of collective traumas – consequences that can manifest immediately or reverberate across generations (Hirschberger, 2018; Páez et al., 2007; Perry, 2012; Tcholakian et al., 2023; Updegraff et al., 2008). One of the most immediate outcomes of collective trauma is the disruption of meaning (Hirschberger, 2018; Páez et al., 2007). These events can shatter a group's fundamental sense of security by revealing the darker aspects of human nature and sowing mistrust within the group. As a result, people may experience a crisis of meaning, struggling to comprehend the traumatic events and their larger implications (Hirschberger, 2018; Perry, 2012). On an individual level, those affected often report heightened psychological distress; second and third-generation survivors may inherit collective fear, vulnerability, and diminished national pride (Hirschberger, 2018; Tcholakian et al., 2023). Furthermore, hypervigilance – a persistent, high-alert state – can hinder a group's ability to perceive positive signals from others, reinforcing a perception of isolation and self-reliance (Hirschberger, 2018).

Many individuals experience posttraumatic stress (PTS) symptoms following collective traumas, even without direct exposure to the event (Páez et al., 2007; Updegraff et al., 2008). For example, in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, nearly half of Americans reported PTS symptoms. Ongoing concerns for personal and familial safety, along with anger and political

intolerance, may exacerbate psychosocial distress. Paradoxically, some individuals who search for meaning in the traumatic event may experience increased emotional turmoil if their attempts to make sense of what happened remain unsuccessful (Updegraff et al., 2008).

Research highlights the transgenerational nature of collective trauma: stories, commemorations, and rituals transmit the memory of traumatic events across multiple generations (Páez et al., 2007; Perry, 2012; Tcholakian et al., 2023). These "memories without experience" can significantly shape descendants' identities, self-concepts, and moral orientations. Through inherited narratives, people may come to view their family's and group's histories as an integral part of their worldview (Tcholakian et al., 2023). This sense of embeddedness can function positively by fostering a strong link to cultural heritage, yet it can also perpetuate wounds and emotional burdens when the trauma remains unresolved or inadequately addressed.

Not all consequences of collective trauma are detrimental. The same processes that disrupt meaning can also prompt a collective search for new interpretations and narratives. Groups may develop a stronger sense of cohesion and identity in the aftermath of tragedy, partly as a psychological defence against existential fears (Hirschberger, 2018). This sense of unity can serve as a foundation for solidarity, fueling efforts to protect and preserve group values (Hirschberger, 2018; Páez et al., 2007). Groups often construct narratives that emphasize their collective resilience and the continuity between past, present, and future. These emerging narratives can bolster group identity and reaffirm the group's importance, providing members with a greater sense of purpose and efficacy (Hirschberger, 2018; Perry, 2012). This meaning-making process can spur both resilience and growth as communities work to rehabilitate, adapt, and transform after the trauma.

2.2.2 Individual and Community Responses to Collective Trauma

Collective trauma often leaves deep psychological, social, and cultural imprints that reverberate across generations. These imprints can influence how individuals construct their identities, how communities organize themselves, and how leaders mobilize collective action. Research demonstrates that whether arising from dictatorship, systemic discrimination, genocide, or other large-scale shocks, trauma provokes a range of responses at both the individual and collective levels (Green Rioja, 2021; Tcholakian et al., 2019).

One common response is reconnecting with cultural rituals and artifacts. As noted by Tcholakian et al. (2019), individuals and communities use linguistic, religious, and other traditional customs to "relive the past, connect with the deceased, activate a belonging to a cultural group, and confirm their social identity" (p. 7). These rituals may include music, dance, spiritual ceremonies, or storytelling that simultaneously honor ancestors and keep painful histories alive in collective memory. Green Rioja (2021) similarly emphasizes how music and muralism in Chile served as expressions of collective memory and historical trauma, thus reinvigorating a sense of shared identity during the 2019 uprising. Through these communal artifacts and practices, trauma survivors and descendants can cultivate empathy and resilience, as well as maintain a palpable connection to their history (Tcholakian et al., 2019).

A second form of collective response involves community events and commemorations. Public acts of remembrance – such as anniversaries, monuments, or vigils – can "reactivate the emotions and anxieties of group members related to their perpetrators" (Tcholakian et al., 2019, p. 8). Nonetheless, these events also facilitate healing by acknowledging shared pain and transforming it into a mobilizing force for political or social change. For instance, Chilean neighborhood assemblies that emerged during the 2019 protests created safe spaces for sharing

personal testimonies of violence and repression; these gatherings drew parallels to the Popular Unity period of the early 1970s, building on a tradition of "popular power" (poder popular) to envision new societal possibilities (Green Rioja, 2021). In a similar vein, Goswami et al. (2023) document how Indigenous entrepreneurs hold community workshops and awareness campaigns as part of their business activities, thereby honouring their community's intergenerational trauma while simultaneously striving to disrupt oppressive mainstream norms.

Narratives, both spoken and unspoken, represent another key mechanism for transmitting and responding to collective trauma. Tcholakian et al. (2019) highlight how families pass down stories, values, and even silences that shape descendants' sense of identity and purpose, influencing their leadership styles and life choices. Emotions linked to past atrocities can be unconsciously transferred to subsequent generations, prompting individuals – particularly those who are third- or fourth-generation descendants – to develop heightened empathy and perseverance (Tcholakian et al., 2019). This dynamic is evident among communities grappling with historical injustices, such as the descendants of enslaved Africans who continue to confront structural barriers and societal discrimination (Walker, 2009; Zajonc, 2002). Although Zajonc's (2002) analysis focuses primarily on the economic legacy of slavery, the study underscores how historical trauma hampers Black entrepreneurship through enduring credit constraints, reduced human capital, and intergenerational disenfranchisement – outcomes that are intimately connected to painful family histories of oppression.

Collective trauma responses also manifest through grassroots movements, particularly when marginalized voices come to the fore. Green Rioja (2021) shows how Chile's feminist movement played a pivotal role in breaking the silence around patriarchal violence and past political repression, thereby transforming "pain into political action" (p. 9). By speaking openly

about gendered injustice, feminists reshaped collective narratives and created a language of resistance that encompassed broader histories of violence. Their activism illustrates how trauma survivors can leverage community organizing and political engagement to demand structural changes. Likewise, the COVID-19 pandemic has stressed the vulnerability of informal sector workers, revealing how collective trauma may deepen existing inequalities if not addressed through robust support and policy measures (Nkansah-Dwamena & Fevrier, 2024).

2.2.3 Entrepreneurial Responses to Collective Trauma

Beyond rituals and commemorations and community, grassroots, and family-level mechanisms, entrepreneurship emerges as a critical site for both coping and transformation. Entrepreneurship can serve as a powerful mechanism for addressing the social, cultural, and psychological impacts of collective trauma. Across diverse historical and contemporary settings, entrepreneurs often respond to crises by establishing new frameworks, institutions, and practices that foster resilience, cohesion, and healing. This section synthesizes insights from multiple studies to illustrate how entrepreneurial action intersects with collective trauma, highlighting the ways in which institutional, community-based, and individual-level initiatives can reshape societies burdened by historical or ongoing crises.

2.2.3.1 Indigenous Entrepreneurship and Cultural Resilience

Parallel processes of leveraging entrepreneurship to cope with collective trauma can be observed among Indigenous communities, such as Métis and First Nations people in Canada. For these communities, entrepreneurship goes beyond economic pursuits and functions as a path to cultural restoration, identity assertion, and healing (Goswami, 2021). Entrepreneurs use their businesses to showcase Indigenous heritage – through traditional crafts, language revitalization, or cultural services – thus reclaiming practices eroded by colonialism and discrimination. In doing

so, they challenge mainstream narratives of Indigenous passivity and marginalization and instead position themselves as agents of survivance (Goswami, 2021).

Moreover, community-focused entrepreneurship helps Indigenous entrepreneurs confront intergenerational trauma. By integrating community work and creating platforms for social reform, entrepreneurs foster emotional well-being that, in turn, supports broader institutional disruption (Goswami et al., 2023). Through micro-level emotion work, Indigenous business owners develop psychological resources that fuel advocacy, education, and the dismantling of discriminatory frameworks around entrepreneurship itself (Goswami et al., 2023).

2.2.3.2 Institutional Entrepreneurship and Collective Crises

Research on ancient Israel demonstrates how institutional entrepreneurs leveraged times of crisis – such as exile or the destruction of central religious and political institutions – to create durable cultural, normative, and symbolic structures (Abrutyn, 2016). These institutional entrepreneurs included religious leaders, scribes, and political figures who interpreted collective traumas and reframed them as opportunities to redefine societal values and norms. By establishing "portable" institutions such as textual authority (e.g., Deuteronomy) or by introducing new rituals and centralized worship practices, these institutional entrepreneurs mitigated existential threats and preserved a shared identity across physical displacement (Abrutyn, 2016).

More broadly, institutional entrepreneurship has been linked to sociocultural evolution, demonstrating that crises – whether they involve a breakdown of trust, failures in centralized power, or disruptions in shared meaning – open spaces for change and innovation (Abrutyn et al., 2016). In such moments, entrepreneurs construct new normative, symbolic, and organizational frameworks while questioning preexisting ones. They reconfigure institutional spheres and mobilize both material and symbolic resources to align communities around new forms of

governance, belief, or practice (Abrutyn et al., 2016). These efforts, in turn, transform societal meaning and reality, enabling communities to endure, or even thrive, amid upheaval.

2.2.3.3 The Legacy of Slavery and Entrepreneurial Barriers

Although not always framed explicitly in terms of "collective trauma," the legacy of slavery can be understood as a deeply rooted historical shock that continues to restrict and shape the development of Black-owned businesses (Walker, 2009; Zajonc, 2002). Factors such as credit constraints, human capital disparities, and generational discrimination are all linked to this traumatic history. Systemic barriers – descended from enslavement and perpetuated through racially oppressive institutions – create obstacles to capital, education, and the accumulation of entrepreneurial experience (Walker, 2009; Zajonc, 2002). These constraints reflect an enduring trauma that undercuts the capacity of Black entrepreneurs to thrive.

Empirical findings reveal that regions with a higher concentration of slavery in 1840 exhibit a significant reduction in both the number and performance of Black-owned businesses today (Walker, 2009; Zajonc, 2002). The intergenerational discrimination, disenfranchisement, and constrained access to resources signify how historical trauma can impair community and entrepreneurial development.

Chapter 3

Promoting academic social intrapreneurship: Developing an international virtual incubator and fostering social impact

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3. Preamble:

This section illustrates the context within which the case study presented in the paper takes place – the collective trauma of COVID-19 alongside cascading crises experienced by universities and their stakeholders.

The COVID-19 pandemic can be understood as a collective trauma as it triggered widespread disruption and distress across global populations and was characterized by chronic uncertainty and ongoing fear. This collective trauma emerged from the convergence of multiple factors – an invisible and lethal threat, forced isolation, an uncertain future, and sustained confrontation with mortality – that affected entire populations simultaneously (Kalsched, 2021; Stanley, Zanin, Avalos, Tracy, & Town, 2021; Silver et al., 2021). Unlike more localized crises, COVID-19 traversed national borders and established a near-universal sense of vulnerability, fear, and loss (Kalsched, 2021; Silver et al., 2021).

One critical aspect of COVID-19 as a collective trauma lies in the intense and ongoing nature of the pandemic. As Stanley et al. (2021) highlight, past traumatic events such as natural disasters or terrorist attacks often have more discrete time frames, whereas COVID-19 persisted for an extended duration on a global scale. This reality contributed to heightened stress and prolonged uncertainty, leaving individuals with limited opportunities to recover before confronting new waves of infections, social restrictions, and economic hardships.

In addition to its temporal scope, COVID-19 was an “invisible enemy” that prompted pervasive fear and uncertainty (Kalsched, 2021). For many who had experienced previous abuse or neglect, the sense of helplessness triggered by the pandemic resurrected traumatic memories, further compounding psychological distress. The fear generated by this unseen threat frequently

hijacked the human imagination, giving rise to "dark imaginings," illusory formulations, and conspiracy theories as people struggled to make sense of their circumstances (Kalsched, 2021).

Moreover, the social isolation and mandated quarantines necessary for public health protection compounded the collective trauma. The disruption of daily routines and the sudden loss of physical proximity to friends, family, and colleagues strained mental health worldwide (Kalsched, 2021). These experiences magnified feelings of loneliness and anxiety and hindered critical forms of social support. The discursive dimension of collective trauma also merits attention: Stanley et al. (2021) demonstrate that people's shared conversations and co-constructed metaphors shaped their understanding and processing of pandemic-related fear, grief, and anger. Metaphorical languages – such as animal or colour metaphors – enabled individuals to articulate the emotional weight of the pandemic, accessing deeper affective layers that might otherwise remain unspoken.

COVID-19 became a cascading collective trauma as other crises unfolded in parallel with the pandemic, intensifying the overall impact. According to Silver et al. (2021), the year 2020 witnessed a confluence of the COVID-19 crisis, an economic recession, race-driven social unrest, and weather-related disasters, all of which compounded existing vulnerabilities in marginalized communities. The chronic and ambiguous nature of these overlapping crises, combined with extensive media coverage, elevated stress levels and contributed to chronic exposure to traumatic events (Silver et al., 2021).

Ultimately, the pandemic demonstrated how collective trauma reverberates across multiple domains, from individual mental health to broader socio-political structures. The forced confrontation with death, existential uncertainties, and social inequalities ignited strong emotional responses that, when left unaddressed, could result in lasting psychological harm (Kalsched, 2021;

Stanley et al., 2021; Silver et al., 2021). Through the lens of collective trauma, COVID-19 underscored the vulnerability of individuals and societies alike while highlighting the pressing need for global cooperation, social support systems, and equitable responses to crisis.

The cascading collective traumas of COVID-19 were compounded by multiple crises that universities and their stakeholders faced. The financial impacts of COVID-19 on universities were profound, affecting both revenue streams and operational costs. A sharp reduction in international student enrollments, public funding, and auxiliary services led to significant revenue losses across the higher education sector. International student fees, a critical income source, plummeted as travel restrictions and reduced family incomes caused a steep drop in enrollments. Universities, especially those heavily reliant on tuition, faced an "existential crisis," with large U.S. institutions projecting losses between $400 million and $1 billion (Ramlo, 2021). Australian universities were similarly affected, facing the possibility of a $16 billion revenue loss by 2023 due to declining international student numbers (Doidge & Doyle, 2022). In Fall 2020, U.S. universities experienced a 43% drop in new international students and a 16% overall decline in international enrollment (Nakra, 2021).

In addition to the downturn in tuition revenue, universities faced significant reductions in auxiliary services such as housing, dining, and athletics, as on-campus activities were severely curtailed. These services, typically contributing between 5% and 30% of university revenue, were particularly hard hit (Ramlo, 2021). The overall projected revenue loss for U.S. higher education institutions from 2020 to 2025 was estimated at $70 to $115 billion, with auxiliary revenues alone, primarily from housing and dining services, expected to decline by as much as $40.6 billion due to campus closures and reduced occupancy (Kelchen et al., 2021).

In response to these financial challenges, universities implemented budget cuts, which included faculty and staff layoffs, furloughs, and departmental restructuring (Ramlo, 2021). These cuts were often accompanied by reductions in state and local appropriations, with an estimated reduction of between $17 billion and $30 billion in funding (Kelchen et al., 2021). The pandemic also intensified competition for public funding, as governments faced declining tax revenues and increasing healthcare costs, potentially leading to reduced allocations for higher education (Nakra, 2021). This was further complicated by reduced research funding as companies reevaluated their investments in research collaborations during the pandemic (Estermann et al., 2020).

Another significant financial strain came from the operational costs associated with the shift to online learning. Universities were required to invest heavily in digital infrastructure to support remote instruction, adding to their financial burdens (Estermann et al., 2020). While tuition revenue from online courses remained relatively stable, the loss of revenue from auxiliary services and increased operational costs for online education added to the financial strain. In addition, universities were forced to make cuts to essential programs, particularly in the liberal arts, as they reassessed their business models to prioritize more market-driven courses with higher returns (Vujnovic & Foster, 2022).

These measures not only intensified the financial challenges but also raised concerns about the future role and mission of universities, as institutions increasingly prioritized profitability over educational and societal goals, with this shift further reinforcing existing inequalities and eroding the academic community's trust in leadership (Auerbach et al., 2022).

Beyond financial challenges, the pandemic disrupted the social fabric of universities, exacerbating feelings of isolation among faculty, staff, and students. The abrupt shift to remote learning and work environments diminished opportunities for face-to-face interaction, weakening

the sense of community that is integral to the university experience (Eringfeld, 2021). The absence of physical spaces for socialization and academic exchange contributed to a breakdown in collegiality and interpersonal relationships. Andersen (2022) describes how faculty members, in particular, reported feelings of isolation and cynicism as the shift to remote work environments undermined the shared sense of purpose and connection that typically exists within academic institutions.

This social disconnection was further compounded by leadership decisions made without faculty input, such as budget cuts and layoffs. Faculty members felt excluded from key decision-making processes, leading to a breakdown in trust between administration and staff (Vujnovic & Foster, 2022). This erosion of trust deepened the trauma experienced by faculty, as they questioned the transparency and motivations of university leadership. As noted by Peetz et al. (2022), where collective bargaining and union involvement were absent, such as in Australian universities, stress and job dissatisfaction increased significantly among staff, further straining the academic community.

The psychological toll of the pandemic on faculty and staff has been profound, with many reporting high levels of stress, burnout, and a diminished sense of belonging. These emotional impacts are likely to persist long after the pandemic, especially if institutions fail to take proactive steps to address the trauma experienced during this period (Andersen, 2022). The unresolved psychological distress may hinder efforts to rebuild trust, restore social cohesion, and foster resilience within the university community (Silver et al., 2021). Moreover, the long-term implications for students, many of whom struggled with social isolation and disengagement from online learning, must not be overlooked. The shift to online education, while necessary, often lacked the interactive and immersive qualities of in-person learning, leading to concerns about the

commodification of education and the reduction of the university experience to a transactional exchange (Eringfeld, 2021). This marketization of higher education, accelerated by the pandemic, threatens to further erode the communal aspects of university life, which are essential for intellectual and personal growth.

The pandemic also revealed a significant non-financial impact on universities: systemic inertia and a widespread reluctance to embrace transformative change (Sterling, 2021). While many institutions quickly adapted to online learning and addressed immediate logistical concerns, they struggled to implement deeper, more meaningful educational reforms. The core structures and operational frameworks of higher education largely remained untouched, highlighting the entrenched nature of long-standing practices, institutional cultures, and governance models that have resisted substantial change (Sterling, 2021). However, this period of unprecedented disruption also prompted universities to reflect on their core values, beliefs, and practices (Mascolo, 2020). Forced to confront assumptions about the value of in-person learning, the balance between academic goals and market-driven objectives, and their role in fostering both intellectual and personal growth, institutions began to reassess their fundamental missions. This reflective process underscored the need for universities to rethink not only their pedagogical approaches but also their broader purposes, ensuring resilience in the face of future challenges while staying true to their foundational principles (Mascolo, 2020).

Moreover, the pandemic brought the staff and faculty face-to-face with the life/death paradox (Bland, 2020). The sudden awareness of human vulnerability and mortality prompted both institutions and individuals to confront their own impermanence. This existential reflection forced university staff and faculty to reevaluate the ways in which they support the well-being of their communities (Bland, 2020). As spaces where intellectual and personal growth are nurtured,

universities were suddenly thrust into an environment where the fragility of life became a central concern. This confrontation with mortality invited deeper considerations about the role of higher education not only in fostering knowledge but also in preparing individuals to engage with the realities of life and death.

Building on these insights, the first paper in this thesis examines how a large public research university confronted the collective trauma of the COVID-19 pandemic and its subsequent crises by embracing intrapreneurial activities. Through the innovative efforts of a faculty member who developed a virtual incubator to empower marginalized entrepreneurs worldwide, the institution not only enhanced its internal adaptability but also made a significant societal impact. This case demonstrates that adopting decentralized and flexible approaches to foster innovation within a university can lead to substantial outcomes, even when these results are not explicitly planned or directed by the institution itself. The success of this intrapreneurial venture underscores the effectiveness of unconventional solutions in addressing complex, entrenched problems caused by internal and external traumas. Ultimately, this case study illustrates how universities can transform collective traumas into opportunities for resilience and positive societal change.

Promoting Academic Social Intrapreneurship: Developing an International Virtual Incubator and Fostering Social Impact

Abstract

This research examines the evolving role of universities as agents of social and economic change, particularly through academic social intrapreneurship implemented digitally. Utilizing an in-depth case study of an international virtual incubator that emerged from a large public research university's internal "COVID-19 Research Fund," we study a shift beyond economic motivations, highlighting the importance of universities' non-pecuniary contributions to society. The study unveils a unique model of academic intrapreneurship that integrates research, entrepreneurship, digitization, and social responsibility. We employ a descriptive case study method to examine the virtual incubator's emergence, processes and activities, exploring how digitally implemented academic social intrapreneurship can address global concerns. The findings highlight the significance of achieving legitimacy at multiple levels and adopting a decentralized approach to innovation, indicating effective means for engaging diverse stakeholders and addressing local and global issues. The findings suggest that digital social intrapreneurship is a potential avenue for universities to enhance societal contributions. We present theoretical insights and actionable advice for universities, academic intrapreneurs, and virtual incubators, emphasizing the importance of promoting academic social intrapreneurship for a positive societal impact. The paper concludes by advocating for the role of universities in fostering transformative cross-disciplinary collaborations and expanding their societal engagement in the digital era.

Keywords: social intrapreneurship; academic intrapreneurship; digitization; virtual incubator; marginalized entrepreneurs; multi-level legitimacy.

3.1 Introduction

Universities have increasingly been asked to assume an entrepreneurial role in modern economies, providing an avenue for commercialization, social development and the utilization of new knowledge (Etzkowitz & Leydesdorff, 1995; Etzkowitz et al., 2018; Guerrero & Urbano, 2012; Guerrero et al., 2016). The role of universities in advancing technology has a long history; as in the USA, land grant colleges had a tradition of commercializing technology, primarily addressing issues related to the agricultural and technological challenges of expanding and growing the economy in North America. In many cases, rural scientists helped their communities to solve local public works challenges, enhancing their capacity for self-action (Boyte, 2015). However, grand global challenges, such as those brought about by climate change, demographic movements, and income inequality, have not traditionally been in their purview, suggesting the need for new intrapreneurial models (Boyte, 2015).

The concept of universities' third mission has historically emphasized their role in contributing to society beyond mere economic impact (Compagnucci & Spigarelli, 2020). This perspective, rooted in a tradition of societal and social engagement, views universities as institutions not solely driven by financial returns but as key actors in cultural, social, and community development (Gulbrandsen & Slipersaeter, 2007; Montesinos et al., 2008; Compagnucci & Spigarelli, 2020). However, despite this longstanding recognition of the Third Mission as a conduit for societal advancement, there is an increasing awareness that such declarations may not always translate into concrete actions or significant societal accomplishments (Bornmann, 2013; Ozanne et al., 2017). The rhetoric of community engagement and societal contribution often masks a lack of tangible impact, raising questions about the effectiveness of these initiatives in driving real change.

Although much of the university innovation literature revolves around economic outputs of one sort or another (Etzkowitz et al., 2018), we maintain that the role of innovation, as applied in a university setting, should go well beyond economic motivations to provide social returns to the communities which underwrite them – and in which they are embedded.

Historically, universities were places to search for 'truth' and for intellectuals to convene to advance civilization – not primarily utilized as an economic tool (Alemu, 2018). In this paper, we advocate for the non-pecuniary aspects of university intrapreneurship and move closer to what some scholars believe the Third Mission of the university entails, which is contributing to innovation and social change and addressing issues relevant to society (Pinheiro et al., 2017; Vargiu, 2014; Compagnucci, & Spigarelli, 2020). We examine the university intrapreneurial promotion of social entrepreneurship, the innovative use and combination of resources to pursue opportunities for catalyzing social change or addressing social needs (Mair & Marti, 2006)

Although social intrapreneurship shows potential, it remains relatively underexplored in academic research (Kuratko et al., 2017). Social intrapreneurship in university settings presents challenges. Studies emphasize the necessity of managerial backing, developing a comprehensive entrepreneurship framework across the university, fostering an intrapreneurial mindset, and offering incentives to intrapreneurs to effectively promote intrapreneurship in academic institutions (Blanka, 2019). Few of these aspects of intrapreneurial activity relate to normative models of research, publication, tenure and promotion at universities worldwide.

In this study, we aim to contribute to the existing knowledge by shedding light on the understudied phenomenon of social intrapreneurship, specifically within academia, focusing on a case study of a digital social intrapreneurial venture established through an internal university funding opportunity. Thus, we will examine university-level processes that support both social

intrapreneurship and facilitate diffusing that knowledge to solve contemporary 'wicked problems' (Head & Alford, 2015). Utilizing the descriptive case study method, this study investigates the role of an internal research funding opportunity, hereafter referred to as the "COVID-19 Research Fund", offered at a large research university in Canada, hereafter referred to as "*The University*", as well as the evolution and activities of a *Virtual Incubator* supported through the internal funding, hereafter referred to as "*VI*." Consequently, in this study, we focus on the following research question:

RQ: How might universities innovate by using digital social intrapreneurship to address global concerns and constraints?

To effectively respond to the research question, we believe it important to engage with the concept of multi-level legitimacy. This concept underscores the importance of considering varying levels of influence and impact, from local communities to global networks (Bitektine & Haack, 2015). Our investigation will reveal that addressing such a multifaceted issue requires a perspective that transcends singular levels of operation. Our study exemplifies this through the multi-tiered approach of the *VI*, which originates from *The University*'s COVID-19 Research Fund. The *VI*'s model demonstrates how universities might innovate and establish a global presence by recognizing and adhering to the nuances of legitimacy at various levels. We observe that a decentralized approach to innovation may be more effective than a centralized one. This allows for engagement and legitimization across diverse stakeholders, a necessary step for universities aiming to make a global impact and help solve contemporary 'wicked problems' (Head & Alford, 2015).

We noted that digital social intrapreneurship may be one of the solutions universities can use to maximize societal contributions by unlocking untapped potential. This potential depends on

interdisciplinary, decentralized, and multi-level collaborations, an area where universities possess unparalleled capacity but are often confined within rigid disciplinary boundaries. By promoting an environment where digital social intrapreneurship can occur, universities might facilitate transformative cross-disciplinary exchanges.

In the subsequent sections, we delve into the theoretical underpinnings of entrepreneurial universities, multi-level legitimacy, and the evolving landscape of digital social intrapreneurship. We then proceed to analyze the case of the large research university in Canada and the *VI*. This case analysis serves as a foundation to provide theoretical contributions and practical recommendations for universities, academic intrapreneurs, and VIs. Our discussion reflects on this research's implications, contributions, and limitations, offering insights into fostering academic social intrapreneurship and its potential for positive societal impact within university settings.

3.2 Theoretical Background

3.2.1 Entrepreneurial Universities

The response of universities to changing environmental factors has been marked by two academic revolutions, as characterized by Etzkowitz (2003). The first revolution, taking place in the late 19th century, introduced research alongside teaching following the Humboldt model (Östling, 2018). More recently, the second revolution involved the integration of economic and enterprise development into teaching and research, spurred by factors such as the significance of a knowledge economy, government funding declines, increased demands for accountability, and commercializing research (Todorovic et al., 2011; Audretsch, 2013). This has led to a third mission, depicted as “a contribution to society” (Urdari et al., 2017), and the adoption of the entrepreneurial university concept.

The third mission of universities highlights their role in societal and social engagement beyond mere pecuniary contributions, viewing them as key players in cultural, social, and community development (Gulbrandsen & Slipersaeter, 2007; Montesinos et al., 2008). Historically, the third mission involves activities extending university influence into the non-academic world, focusing on generating, applying, and exploiting knowledge for community benefit (Compagnucci & Spigarelli, 2020). However, the rhetoric of community engagement sometimes masks a lack of tangible impact, highlighting a gap between aspiration and achievement in university initiatives (Bornmann, 2013; Ozanne et al., 2017; McCowan, 2016; Meek & Gianiodis, 2023; De Silva et al., 2021; Lumpkin & Bacq, 2019). This discrepancy underscores the need for a more critical and pragmatic approach to the third mission, ensuring that universities' societal engagements are not just well-intentioned but also effective and impactful.

Consequently, university management shifted from a traditional bottom-up approach to a top-down emphasis in this third mission, focusing on providing high-value, application-oriented research. The primary goal appears to be the creation of economic opportunities for entrepreneurial activities, reflecting the university's responsibility to diversify revenue and contain costs (Sternberg, 2014; Audretsch, 2014). The commercialization objective is demonstrated by the establishment of university technology transfer offices, increased patenting by university scientists, and the creation of university-industry centers. This trend is rooted in the belief that scientists should contribute practical, market-valued solutions. We now observe a heightened expectation for universities to contribute to scientific discovery, solve problems, create new ventures, and aid regional economic development (Patton & Kenney, 2010; Audretsch, 2013, 2014; Gianiodis & Meek, 2020). The resulting body of research documents the growth and development of university-based entrepreneurship and commercialization (Hayter et al., 2018) through

traditional technology commercialization channels and behaviors like forming spin-offs (Siegel & Wright, 2015) impacting universities, scientists, industry partners, and regional entrepreneurial ecosystems (Bengoa et al., 2021; Fini et al., 2020; Audretsch, 2013).

Despite the potential advantages of university-led entrepreneurship and commercialization, the benefits are often confined to a select group of private entities rather than widely shared (Meek & Gianiodis, 2023). Many patented inventions hold little industrial value, as they are not commercially mature or well-protected and fail to generate significant royalties (Welsh et al., 2008). Further, science-based university spin-offs face challenges, including high levels of uncertainty, commercialization costs, and long periods between the invention and generation of revenue (Thomas et al., 2020; Maine & Seegopaul, 2016; Welsh et al., 2008). Most fail within a decade (Dimov & De Clerq, 2006; Fini et al., 2018), and studies indicate they generally exhibit lower growth rates in sales, net cash flows, and employment, and are less likely to make a profit compared to independent start-ups (Ortín-Ángel & Vendrell-Herrero, 2014).

Although the COVID-19 pandemic prompted organizations to repurpose their intangible capabilities towards initiatives that generate added value (Cherrington et al., 2021), the current entrepreneurial university model remains largely fixated on high financial returns. This often leads to a neglect of opportunities within marginalized communities and populations (Meek & Gianiodis, 2023), with frequent disregard for societal actors and institutions, resulting in adverse outcomes (Shepherd, 2019). In assessing success, universities tend to prioritize commercialization processes and metrics that focus on monetary gains, overlooking non-monetary outcomes such as civic wealth, healthier communities, and quality of life (De Silva et al., 2021; Lumpkin & Bacq, 2019).

On the bright side, recent shifts in science policies encourage academic engagement in research with positive societal impact, reflecting an emphasis on social values and responsible research (Mazzucato, 2018). These changes are particularly relevant given the "wicked" societal challenges intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic, which are politically contested, institutionally complex, and highly uncertain (Reale, 2021). Such problems often require innovative solutions, such as intrapreneurship, that are either underestimated or beyond the scope of the current entrepreneurial university model.

Research indicates that intrapreneurship is key in responding swiftly and creatively to internal and external changes, especially during times of uncertainty, thereby playing a fundamental role in an organization's survival and success (Klofsten et al., 2021). Intrapreneurship emerges from the need to develop sustainable approaches to innovation, facilitating adaptive responses to dynamic external environments and enhancing overall performance (Covin & Slevin, 2017; Huang et al., 2021). The interest in intrapreneurship is rooted in its ability to foster innovative practices and ensure long-term business sustainability, with evidence showing that its development within organizations can lead to greater adaptability and sustainability (Huang et al., 2021).

Organizational culture is fundamental in fostering intrapreneurship, with particular emphasis on risk-tolerant and innovation cultures that thrive on trial and error, continuous improvement, and experimentation (Kirby, 2006; Baruah & Ward, 2015; Reibenspiess et al., 2022; Blanka, 2019; Globocnik & Salomo, 2015). This approach necessitates supportive management that actively promotes intrapreneurial activities, offers suitable opportunities, and recognizes the contributions of intrapreneurs through rewards (Urbano et al., 2013; Baruah & Ward, 2015; Kirby, 2006). Resources also play a vital role, including financial, physical, technological, and intellectual

capital (Neessen et al., 2019). In particular, financial incentives such as grants and funding have been shown to significantly influence employees' intrapreneurial attitudes (Muizniece,2021).

Against this backdrop, we argue that intrapreneurship, with a particular focus on social intrapreneurship, is crucial for universities in their efforts to confront and mitigate "wicked" societal challenges.

3.2.2 Social Intrapreneurship in the Academic Context

Social intrapreneurship involves entrepreneurial endeavors within established organizations across private, public, and non-profit sectors aimed at resolving social issues (Austin et al., 2006; Ambos & Tatarinov, 2022). Despite its potential to enable entrepreneurial employees to use organizational resources for large-scale social change, this phenomenon has received relatively little scholarly attention (McGaw & Malinsky, 2020).

Addressing global concerns and constraints with social intrapreneurship represents a strategic response to universities' evolving roles and expectations (Rippa & Secundo, 2019; Pinchot, 1985; Parris & McInnis-Bowers, 2017). It enables universities to merge commercial innovation with a commitment to social welfare, addressing the limitations of traditional entrepreneurial models in higher education. Engaging in social intrapreneurship allows universities to pursue economic viability and simultaneously societal well-being, aligning with the diverse demands of stakeholders both locally and globally. This balance can enhance the university's legitimacy by contributing practical, sustainable solutions to complex societal problems (Rippa & Secundo, 2019; Pinchot, 1985).

Social entrepreneurs are frequently tasked with solving “wicked problems” whose solutions defy the kinds of linear systems-level thinking often developed and promoted by universities (Rittel & Webber, 1973). The ambiguous nature of these problems calls for an

interdisciplinary approach, something that the structure of the modern research university is poorly designed to facilitate. One theoretical perspective seeks to develop a structured multi-dimensional system for supporting collective intelligence platforms towards the emergence of innovative solutions (Elia & Margherita, 2018). Doing so would certainly fall within the traditional capability set of the contemporary university, with its focus on analytical decision-making. Although we are not theoretically opposed to such efforts, we are aware of their complexity, expense (in both time and financial costs) and the organizational constraints in developing cross-platform collaborations.

In the model examined in this paper, we study the introduction of an open-ended incentive system focusing on an array of possible solutions, allowing networks to emerge organically from the problem and incentive set. We believe this model adds an applied perspective toward establishing innovative networks that can yield advantageous and ingenious outcomes. Designing competitive individual incentives represents an important contribution to alternative 'messy' processes leading to solutions for wicked problems (Ney & Verweij, 2015).

We propose that social intrapreneurship redefines the role of universities, positioning them not only as knowledge disseminators but also as proactive agents of societal change. By incorporating social intrapreneurship into their framework, universities may adaptively respond to changing societal needs and expectations, maintaining relevance and legitimacy in a complex, interconnected world (Parris & McInnis-Bowers, 2017). Social intrapreneurship within universities, therefore, may act as a link, connecting traditional academic roles with the imperative for innovative, socially conscious solutions to global challenges.

Digital transformations can work as either cost-efficient catalysts or lubricants to address these challenges. Digital social intrapreneurship, in particular, can harness technology for effective

and innovative solutions, aligning with current local and global standards and expectations, in part due to its extensive reach and relatively low cost (Ghatak et al., 2023; Prodanov, 2018).

3.2.3 Digital Social Intrapreneurship in the Academic Context

Digital technologies present opportunities for innovation within various sectors, including academic institutions (Ghatak et al., 2023; Prodanov, 2018). While much empirical research on digital entrepreneurship has been concentrated on business settings, the swift development of digital technologies has become a significant aspect of academic entrepreneurship, leading to the establishment of a separate research field known as digital academic entrepreneurship (Rippa & Secundo, 2019; Toniolo et al., 2020). In this context, it can be defined as an internal form of entrepreneurship where members of an organization create innovations by engaging in new activities using digital technologies that deviate from traditional ones (Vassilakopoulou & Grisot, 2020). Applying these principles in the academic context presents a novel and transformative field of study.

The impact of digital technologies on academic entrepreneurship, hastened by the COVID-19 pandemic, is particularly noteworthy (Purbasari et al., 2021). It transformed collaborations with industry, patent applications, the establishment of spin-offs, entrepreneurial education for highly skilled individuals, technology transfer, and business incubation (Van der Aalst et al., 2020; Secundo et al., 2020) as well as focusing on social values (Rippa & Secundo, 2019) thus increasing legitimacy.

Because they often operate in new conceptual spaces, gaining legitimacy is critical for social intrapreneurs (Ruebottom, 2013), especially those involved in digital initiatives within academic contexts (Stensaker et al., 2019). The importance of legitimacy for social intrapreneurs stems from their need to align with organizational norms and values, address the unique challenges

of their hybrid organizational form, and manage the intricacies of social involvement and stakeholder trust (Smith et al., 2013; Bolzani et al., 2020). For digital social intrapreneurs in academic settings, these challenges are further compounded by the need to navigate the complex interplay of academia's traditional structures and the innovative nature of digital entrepreneurship.

3.2.4 The Role of Legitimacy

The evolving roles of universities highlight the need to gain and maintain legitimacy across various levels to enable local and global impact. This concept of legitimacy is seen as a social judgment by different stakeholders within an organizational field (Rueede & Kreutzer, 2015; Suchman, 1995). It involves internal stakeholders, like staff and leadership, and external ones, such as service users, governments, municipalities, quasi-government organizations, grant agencies, industries, and NGOs (Drori & Honig, 2013). These groups confer legitimacy, impacting the university's effectiveness and survival in a competitive academic landscape.

Universities must navigate through differing standards of legitimacy, acknowledging that it is not a monolithic concept (Lamin & Zaheer, 2012). They need to develop stakeholder-specific legitimation strategies, proactively seeking legitimacy among their diverse stakeholder groups. This approach is essential not just for initial acceptance but also for sustained effectiveness in the increasingly competitive academic environment (Tallberg & Zürn, 2019; Buchanan & Keohane, 2006; Bell & Lewis, 2023; Rueede & Kreutzer, 2015; Lamin & Zaheer, 2012).

Legitimacy at different levels can enable universities to attract vital resources and forge essential partnerships (McNall et al., 2009; Dellmuth et al., 2019; Bitektine & Haack, 2015). For instance, legitimacy in local spheres aids in community engagement and support, while international legitimacy opens doors to global networks and collaborations. The need for universities to navigate the mix of mechanisms to address these diverse legitimacy challenges is

crucial (Fisher et al., 2017; Leardini et al., 2019). This task involves balancing representativeness and competencies within leadership, decentralizing the innovation process, and catering to the expectations and norms of stakeholders at each level (Bitektine & Haack, 2015; Powell & Grodal, 2006; Fisher et al., 2017).

With the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, the university found itself (as with most universities) facing an existential challenge. Formerly based on classroom attendance and a campus lifestyle, the university had to rapidly transform itself into a virtual educational institution nearly overnight. This was not its expertise, was outside its reputational corridors, and was not linked with its institutional strategy or mission statement. Effectively, this resulted in a legitimacy crisis (Reus-Smit, 2007; Massey, 2001), which could not be resolved through conventional solutions, often limited to tools based on external communication (Peng et al., 2021).

Legitimacy is intimately linked with the ability of universities to access and mobilize intellectual and knowledge resources, which are essential for their organizational survival and impact (Lenz & Viola, 2017). This aspect is particularly pertinent in the context of global impact, where legitimacy can be a driving force behind impactful initiatives. Notably, legitimacy at the macro level can often bolster legitimacy at the micro level and vice versa, highlighting this concept's interconnectedness and multifaceted nature (Holbig, 2011). Active engagement with stakeholders and leveraging legitimacy at different levels (i.e., faculty members, service users, community members, NGOs, municipalities, governmental institutions, and quasi-governmental institutions) are thus key strategies for universities aiming to make a significant local and global impact. In summary, the challenges of gaining legitimacy at multiple levels is intricate, requiring universities to adeptly manage governance mechanisms, navigate imprinted logics, and engage with institutional arguments.

In an academic context, legitimacy involves not just the acceptance and support within the institution but also recognition and endorsement from the broader academic and entrepreneurial communities (Ibáñez et al., 2021; Cinar, 2019). This dual requirement for internal and external legitimacy can place unique demands on digital social intrapreneurs within academia. Internally, they will be required to demonstrate that their initiatives align with the university's mission and values; externally, they need to establish credibility in the fast-evolving digital domain (Kistruck & Beamish, 2010). They must ensure that their projects contribute to the institution's stability and align with its broader objectives (Bitektine & Haack, 2015; Kistruck & Beamish, 2010). This alignment is particularly challenging in the academic context, where the traditional emphasis on research and education may conflict with the entrepreneurial and innovative nature of digital social intrapreneurship.

Digital social intrapreneurs build legitimacy not only for innovative and effective use of technology but also for contributing to societal well-being and adhering to ethical standards (Geradts & Alt, 2022; Kistruck & Beamish, 2010). This multifaceted legitimacy is vital for securing resources, gaining support, and establishing long-term sustainability (Bolzani et al., 2020; Bitektine & Haack, 2015). Furthermore, the legitimacy of digital social intrapreneurs in academic settings is influenced by their ability to create value that extends beyond the university's walls. They must balance addressing social and environmental challenges with the academic mission, ensuring their initiatives contribute to both societal well-being and the advancement of knowledge (Kistruck & Beamish, 2010; Ibáñez et al., 2021; Sanzo-Pérez et al., 2021).

In summary, for digital social intrapreneurs in academic contexts, gaining legitimacy is a complex process that involves aligning with institutional norms and values, addressing the hybrid nature of their initiatives, managing social involvement issues, building trust with stakeholders,

and navigating the multifaceted aspects of legitimacy. Successfully achieving legitimacy is crucial for the sustainability and impact of their initiatives within and beyond the academic environment.

In this section, we traversed the evolution of universities towards embracing entrepreneurial roles, with a specific focus on integrating social intrapreneurship and its digital manifestations within the academic context. This exploration has underscored the transformative potential of academic social intrapreneurship implemented digitally in addressing global concerns while highlighting the critical role of legitimacy in ensuring the effectiveness and sustainability of these initiatives. However, there is a scarcity of empirical research on how universities can strategically leverage digital technologies and intrapreneurial practices to innovate and address complex societal challenges. The literature reveals a need for more nuanced insights into how universities can navigate and attain legitimacy in their digitally implemented social intrapreneurship endeavors, balancing innovation and adherence to their traditional educational and research missions. Addressing these gaps requires a focused investigation into the mechanisms, processes, and outcomes of digital social intrapreneurship in the academic setting, aiming to provide a comprehensive framework that guides universities in harnessing digital innovation for social good.

Consequently, by delving into the following case study, we seek to fill these gaps by exploring how universities might innovate through digitally implemented academic social intrapreneurship to respond effectively to global challenges. This would thereby contribute to the academic discourse and offer practical implications for higher education institutions globally.

3.3 Case selection and Review

Case studies allow for the integration and interpretation of data from both primary and secondary sources, facilitating the generation of valuable insights (Siggelkow, 2007; Rashid et al.,

2019). Intrapreneurial activities, by their very nature, are marked by their rarity and distinctive impact. A deliberate selection was made, which provided an in-depth exploration of a targeted case study (Siggelkow, 2007) that embodies the intricacies and potentials of the academic social intrapreneurship model, leveraging digital technologies.

This case study centers on the *VI*, a product of *The University*'s dedicated "COVID-19 Research Fund." Any case study is inherently limited by its unique context and may lead to concerns about the generalizability of the findings. While we are cautious in drawing broad conclusions from this single case, we believe that *The University*, being a research-intensive public institution, reflects similar institutional environments in other universities. However, further research will be necessary to validate this perspective.

During the global pandemic, universities played an indispensable role in leveraging their resources to tackle the challenges posed by COVID-19. *The University*'s response, by creating the "COVID-19 Research Fund", embodies a vital synthesis of academic know-how, resources, and societal commitment in the fight against a worldwide crisis. The findings may offer valuable insights for academic institutions aiming to implement social intrapreneurial approaches and guide their strategies for aligning academic research with initiatives for societal impact.

We chose the *VI*, a digital social intrapreneurial project, as our case study because it highlights the unique environment created by the global pandemic. This situation spurred exclusive research grant opportunities and promoted collaboration, interaction, and receptivity to innovative methods, often favoring digital media. Our selected case study of the *VI* reveals unique aspects of social intrapreneurship in academia and also provides insight into practical applications and strategic planning for educational institutions worldwide.

3.3.1 Data Collection

Data was gathered through a comprehensive and multi-faceted approach. One primary source of data included the experiences of active members (i.e., the co-founders and the lead research assistant) of the *VI*, who played crucial roles in its inception and development. These experiences provided valuable insights into the incubator's conceptualization, objectives, strategies, and challenges. Another primary source consisted of interviews conducted by the researchers at the *VI* with participants of the incubator program. Each participant in the incubator was interviewed before and after the *VI* program. We obtained transcripts of 24 participants who had done both the pre-incubator and the post-incubator interviews (48 interviews in total), providing a reliable basis for comparing the effects of the program soon after the end of the training. The participants were from 5 different communities in four countries, namely Brazilian immigrant female entrepreneurs in the USA (5 participants), female entrepreneurs in Canada (4 participants), female high-tech entrepreneurs in Brazil (5 participants), female sex workers in Kenya (7 participants), and female refugee entrepreneurs in Kenya (3 participants). These participants were identified and recruited for the *VI* through NGOs in the participants' respective countries. Each participant was already a client of the NGO and had received various other services from it before joining the *VI*. The pre-interviews were not conducted as a means to accept or reject any of the participants.

In addition to the interviews, another significant source of data was the first-hand observations made by the researchers, who played active roles within the *VI*. This direct involvement allowed for a deeper understanding of the incubator's characteristics, achievements, and dynamics. Furthermore, a wide range of documents was collected and analyzed to complement the insights gained from interviews and observations. These documents encompass grant

applications, research ethics applications, course materials used in the incubator's programs, meeting notes, and accounts of interactions between the incubator and university, NGOs, and other community stakeholders.

Data was also sourced from *The University*'s official media outlets to gain a broader context of the *VI*'s integration within the academic institution. The data shed light on public announcements related to the incubator and the "COVID-19 Research Fund". Additionally, annual reports on research centers and institutes at *The University* provided valuable data on the incubator's progress, achievements, and contributions to *The University*'s research landscape. Finally, *The University*'s strategic plan documents were utilized to understand how the *VI* and the "COVID-19 Research Fund" aligned with the institution's overarching goals and objectives.

3.3.2 The University's Institutional Priorities

According to its "Institutional Priorities and Strategic Framework 2021-2024", *The University*'s strategic plan is structured around five key priorities. They are "Inclusive Excellence, Engaging Local, National, Indigenous, and Global Communities, Teaching and Learning, Operational Excellence, and Research and Scholarship." The mission statement and vision emphasize a commitment to knowledge discovery, innovation, excellence, inclusiveness, and societal impact. While there is a focus on research, creativity, and innovation, the priority does not inherently indicate a preference for knowledge commercialization over social value creation. The Research and Scholarship priority's specific objectives are global leadership and impact, economic prosperity, social innovation, collaboration and partnership. While the priority includes aspects that can contribute to knowledge commercialization, it is not preferred to social value creation. The objective of the "Engaging Local, National, Indigenous, and Global Communities" priority is to develop partnerships, foster community-based research, enhance educational offerings, promote

positive global citizenship, and collaborate with various communities for mutual benefit. This priority underscores *The University*'s commitment to promoting societal well-being and addressing important global issues. *The University* is also guided by its "Brighter World" vision statement, asserting its commitment to social welfare and addressing societal challenges by focusing on research that advances the betterment of the global community.

3.3.3 COVID-19 Research Fund

Early in 2020, through discussions among *The University's* President and Vice-Presidents, the "COVID-19 Research Fund" was developed to support a broad range of research that would benefit society in dealing with pandemics in the immediate and long term. To ensure funding of a diverse range of research undertaken across *The University*, two streams supporting discoveries and advances led by *The University's* researchers were developed, offering nearly $3 million – provided by *The University* and donors - toward 36 projects. Information about this funding competition was shared with the Associate Deans of Research of the Faculties and with *The University's* faculty members and alums. The text of the two research stream calls is provided in the appendix. Stream 1, amounting to over $1.8 million, financed 18 projects aimed at generating immediate impacts, encompassing vaccine development, therapeutics, effective treatments, and innovative technologies related to COVID-19. Stream 2, backed by a $1 million investment, supported 18 projects focusing on longer-term effects, addressing the repercussions of COVID-19 on local and global populations and economies.

The projects funded in Stream 1 were more focused on knowledge and research commercialization, implementing specific solutions to fight COVID-19. These projects emphasized direct medical, technological, or scientific interventions, which might lead to commercial applications in healthcare settings or for public use.

The projects in Stream 2 were focused on addressing local and global societal concerns, aiming to mitigate the broader impacts of the pandemic on society and various communities. These projects emphasized understanding the pandemic's social, economic, and psychological impacts, focusing on specific communities or societal issues. They were more exploratory and analytical, with a view to informing policy and understanding societal dynamics.

3.3.4 The VI: Establishment & Achievements

Dr. X[5], a faculty member at *The University*, and Dr. Y, a colleague at a large public university in the Northeast of the USA, had identified that women's businesses were uniquely vulnerable to the COVID-19 pandemic. To address this issue, Dr. X applied for and was awarded the "Stream 2" grant from the "COVID-19 Research Fund," through which Dr. X and Dr. Y co-founded the *VI* in July 2020.

The *VI* was established as an action-research-based incubator focusing on community-based sustainable entrepreneurs and entrepreneurial ventures founded by equity-deserving or marginalized individuals (e.g., underprivileged, minority, immigrant, refugee, and disabled entrepreneurs in developed and developing countries). The *VI's* goal is to empower marginalized entrepreneurs to create and develop small businesses and overcome challenges and disruptions precipitated by crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, recessions, and forced migrations while contributing to their communities in a socially inclusive and environmentally sustainable manner. The *VI* has been able to establish a model that is virtual in all aspects. Partnership development, community engagement, cohort recruitment, course development and delivery, training and

[5] Names withheld to preserve anonymity.

mentoring, team meetings, and research data collection are only some aspects of the *VI* that have fully adopted the virtual landscape.

The *VI* espouses the philosophy of experiential learning, utilizing a flipped classroom[6] that includes simulations, dialogue-based learning modules, and customized mini-case studies. Entrepreneurs in various countries access the *VI*'s digital materials via a website and attend online co-creation entrepreneurial training sessions with a community orientation in cohorts to improve their economic conditions while contributing to their communities in a sustainable manner. In terms of the digital nature of experiential learning, the program supported the delivery of smartphones to the participants and included working sessions regarding how to navigate the digital environment provided by smartphones. Participants were encouraged to interact with each other over a platform and discuss and evaluate their business experiments and techniques together. This developed a community-oriented approach to digital interaction that persisted well after the program was completed.

Before commencing the pilot program, The *VI* team, consisting of Dr. X, Dr. Y, and a doctoral student, began developing the course content. Drs. X and Y recorded lectures based on their published research and background in entrepreneurship and created worksheets for each lecture. Later, undergraduate students were hired to develop case studies relevant to that environment (e.g., small businesses pivoting in response to COVID-19).

***Partnerships with NGOs and Community Organizations*:** The *VI* piloted its first incubator program for immigrant women in the Northeastern US in early fall 2020, leveraging a strategic partnership formed through Dr. Y's community connections with a US-based NGO. This

[6] an instructional strategy and a type of blended learning, which aims to increase student engagement and learning by having pupils complete readings at home and work together during class time. In this case, all classes were produced in video to be watched independently.

collaboration was influenced by the incubator's alignment with the NGO's mission, the founders' academic credentials, and support from a well-respected university. Customization of training materials to meet participants' needs was a key promise that facilitated the partnership.

Subsequently, in late fall 2020, The *VI* expanded its efforts by partnering with a reputable Canadian NGO to run its second program. The partnership was secured through a detailed proposal that communicated the incubator's vision, mission, and the tangible benefits of the collaboration. This proposal, along with The *VI*'s commitment to adapt to the NGO's needs and the utilization of the founders' research, convinced the NGO of the value of partnering despite running their own development program. This approach highlighted the incubator's adaptability and its strategy of forming trust-based, mission-aligned partnerships to expand its reach and impact. After running two programs, the *VI* was able to establish and retain partnerships with eight partner organizations: one university in Brazil and seven NGOs in the US, Canada, Poland, and Kenya. To date, the *VI* has engaged thirteen incubator cohorts around the world.

Moreover, the *VI* established a "mastermind program" where participants from the US and Canada cohorts were invited for an online networking session to exchange ideas and discuss their success and challenges in running their businesses. This program was deemed beneficial for both the participants, in terms of networking and expanding horizons, and the VI, in terms of connecting communities worldwide. For future implementation of such programs, it will be important to consider services that accommodate multiple languages.

Dr. X observed that some NGOs viewed initiatives such as the *VI,* coming from an academic context, as knowing little about their communities and being unable to provide appropriate services. Conversations between the *VI* and partner NGOs utilized rhetorical strategies to gain the trust of the NGO partners. For instance, Dr. X repeatedly iterated that the NGOs were

the experts, and the *VI* team required their knowledge and expertise to provide the best possible services to the NGO's community. Another strategy was their stated dedication to customizing their training materials based on what the NGO and their participants believed to be relevant and relatable to their communities. The previous experiences of the *VI*, demonstrated through its impact on the participants, their businesses, and their communities is another factor contributing to the *VI*'s ability to establish new and retain current partnerships.

The *VI* relies on the NGOs to connect with the members of their community to identify those they believe will benefit most from the program. Their contact information is then released to the *VI*, and they are then contacted for an initial introductory meeting, followed up by an interview[7]. The *VI* interviews the participants before the program to clarify the vision and expected outcomes of the program and, most importantly, to understand the participant's background (e.g., educational, business, cultural), immediate business training needs, entrepreneurial aspirations, and learning objectives. Evidence showcases that the *VI* has used the learnings from the pre-incubator interviews to customize its training content (e.g., developing cases based on businesses operating in each cohort's national/local/cultural context, customizing the language of delivery based on participants' English language proficiency, developing audio-visual content for participants who have difficulties reading text).

The *VI* provides financial support to participants who face challenges regarding access to cell phones or purchasing cell data. Catering to the participants' needs and requirements has enabled the *VI* to garner trust within the participant and NGO communities; this is supported by the continued participation of marginalized entrepreneurs from the same communities in the

[7] All interviewing is conducted following protocol developed with the Ethics Review Board of the University

incubator program, the new and continued relationship with NGOs and other organizations, the participants' experiences shared through the interviews, and authors' direct observations. Another factor is that marginalized entrepreneurs, notably refugees or immigrants, often face security and privacy challenges. The *VI* has taken steps to address these challenges by allowing entrepreneurs to engage without the risks linked to physical presence, thus ensuring participation without jeopardizing personal safety. Importantly, *VI*'s platform is hosted on separate servers to offer an added layer of protection.

***Funding The VI*:** Since its establishment, the *VI* has acquired internal and external funding and grants amounting to US $1 million. The initial internal grant from the "COVID-19 Research Fund" can be seen as a signal by *The University* that Dr. X and Dr. Y's project fit *The University*'s institutional logic and expectations in terms of addressing local and global concerns, offering an important measure of internal legitimacy. This initial funding enabled the *VI* to pilot and then develop a novel model of virtual incubation for marginalized entrepreneurs, leading the co-founders to apply for further grants. Dr. X acquired grants from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) of Canada on two separate occasions in 2021, from the Government of Canada's New Frontiers in Research Fund in 2023, and the International Development Research Centre (i.e., a Canadian federal Crown corporation) in 2023.

Reviewing the grant applications showcases how the *VI* has legitimized itself in the eyes of these quasi-government organizations. The grant applications reveal that the *VI* has explored interdisciplinary avenues to expand its services and increase its local and global impact. One project was aimed at assisting elderpreneurs, focusing on the specific requirements of both rural and suburban areas, while another was to launch and evaluate the impact of a virtual community currency, leveraging the Computer Science faculty's expertise – one faculty specializes in

blockchains and the other in mechanized mathematics – at *The University*. Successful grants for the *VI* led to the establishment of a new Research Centre at *The University's* campus, incorporating 20 academic experts from 10 different countries. These academic experts reside in a variety of faculties, including Engineering, Social Sciences, Humanities, Sociology, Health and Aging, and Geography & Earth Sciences. This new Centre will foster community entrepreneurial development, benefiting *The University*'s institutional priorities.

***Engaging The University's community*:** Further exploration of the grant applications, as well as *The University* press releases, reveal how the *VI* has been able to address the expectations of both *The University* and the grant agencies by incorporating undergraduate, graduate, and post-doc students into its operations. This became an important element of the initiative, resulting in a team of 30 undergraduate and post-doc students from different departments at *The University* actively contributing to the *VI*'s operations.

The *VI*'s track record in acquiring grants, building partnerships with community organizations and making a positive impact locally and globally has enabled *The University* to negotiate its competing, overlapping, and at times contradicting institutional logics. For instance, the *VI* has demonstrated its achievements through research workshops and presentations instigated by *The University*. Thus, *The University* has been able to showcase to its immediate community how its support of the *VI* has resulted in the engagement of the student and faculty communities in research and addressing local and global concerns. This allows *The University* to reiterate the rhetoric in its "Institutional Priorities and Strategic Framework 2021-2024" through press releases about the *VI* and the Research Centre, which now encompasses the incubator, thereby generating external legitimacy for both the *VI* and *The University*. The *VI*'s focus on supporting marginalized groups and sustainable community development has been emphasized to highlight *The University*'s

commitment to inclusive excellence and engaging with diverse communities. The press releases showcase the integration of research and teaching in the *VI*'s activities, mirroring *The University*'s emphasis on research and scholarship. Furthermore, the *VI*'s collaborative approach with NGOs and community stakeholders reflects *The University*'s strategic focus on operational excellence and societal impact.

***Impact on Participants and Their Communities*:** A holistic approach was employed to analyze the *VI* participants' interview data. This method was chosen to gain a deeper understanding of the interviewees' experiences, especially regarding the impact of *VI* on their businesses and communities. The objective was to capture the richness and complexity of the participants' stories, focusing on understanding their experiences in depth and recognizing the nuances that could be overlooked with more reductionist analytical techniques. Insights emerged organically from this process without forcing the data into predetermined frameworks. We do not seek to establish direct cause-and-effect relationships about the *VI*'s impact. Rather, we offer a narrative exploration of individual experiences.

Initial research captured narratives that illustrate how the *VI* program has helped individuals shift from initial uncertainty to developing clear, actionable business strategies with an emphasis on long-term sustainability, community engagement, and social responsibility. Participants from multiple cohorts showcased an enhancement in business acumen and reported pivoting their strategies based on market needs, creating more structured business plans, and better forecasting and preparing for future business challenges. They also reported experiencing growth in confidence and self-efficacy after their training. Many participants reported employing practical tools such as record-keeping and the strategic use of social media for marketing purposes, which they mentioned as reasons for having more confidence in their abilities to run their business.

For example, one participant from Canada transitioned from operational focus to strategic thinking, which was marked by advancements in her business approach. Post-incubator, she demonstrated a nuanced understanding of market needs and client segmentation, diversifying her services to meet varied demands. Financially, she shifted to proactive planning, exploring diverse funding sources and budget management. She adopted structured, consistent engagement strategies in marketing, enhancing client interaction. Notably, she expanded her networking and collaborative efforts, aligning with her vision for long-term growth, including plans for international expansion. Moreover, a Kenyan participant's transformation into a confident entrepreneur is evident in her post-incubator interview and how she has effectively applied their learnings from the program, giving her more confidence in managing her business. Additionally, her problem-solving approach, evidenced by her use of case studies from the training to tackle real-world business challenges, further underscores her increased self-assurance. Her ability to network and build relationships within her field, both through the *VI* and independently, further indicates her confidence in her entrepreneurial journey. Yet another Kenyan participant reported gaining business communication skills, enabling her to interact more confidently and effectively with clients. She referenced that the training provided her with social media marketing knowledge, helping her promote her art business online. Also, networking opportunities during the training expanded her professional relationships and led to potential partnerships, reinforcing her belief in her abilities.

Numerous participants from multiple cohorts showcased a transition from a phase of exploration or uncertainty to having a clear vision and actionable strategies for their businesses. This clarity often involved fine-tuning their business models and focusing on specific market segments.

The shift to being community-oriented and socially or environmentally responsible was also evident in many participants after the incubator, who began to place a stronger emphasis on how their businesses could contribute to and interact with their communities. One of the Kenyan participants indicated she learned the importance of networking and community building, leading her to form relationships that extended beyond business settings. Her involvement in forming a Saving and Credit Cooperative Organization (SACCO) with fellow community members highlights her dedication to community-based financial solutions and mutual support. Further, a participant from Canada mentioned how the training enhanced her understanding of the integral role her business plays within her community. A key focus was placed on environmental consciousness, positioning her brand as an advocate for eco-friendly practices, which resonated well with consumer values.

Recognizing the unique needs of specific groups, one Kenyan participant tailored her lodging business as a safe space for sex workers from the LGBTQ community to take shelter when threatened by violence, demonstrating a deep commitment to addressing community challenges. Networking opportunities from the training also enabled her to collaborate with other entrepreneurs from the program, fostering community engagement and support.

Another participant from Kenya experienced personal and community growth following the training. Despite facing challenges like a lack of equipment, her entrepreneurial spirit was bolstered by the training, which enabled her to diversify her income sources and better support her large family. She also became a source of inspiration and guidance within her community, particularly among fellow sex workers, by sharing her knowledge and encouraging others to start their own businesses. Importantly, the training had an inter-generational impact: one of her

daughters, inspired by what she learned from her mother's experience in the incubator, started her own business.

Cost-Efficiency and Resource Allocation: The *VI*'s model has enabled the team, as well as the NGOs, to run the incubator program with marginal costs consisting only of student support in course customization and delivery, approximately $150 per person for a six- or twelve-week course. Traditional incubators often impose financial burdens on entrepreneurs, necessitating relocations or commutes that might be unattainable for marginalized entrepreneurs facing economic constraints. Many incubator budgets exceed US $1 million annually but only support a small sub-section of high-growth potential businesses. *The VI*'s model is inexpensive, far-reaching, and heterogeneous, allowing stakeholders to direct their limited resources toward addressing local and global concerns.

Knowledge Dissemination: *The VI* team, led by Drs. X and Y have widely shared their findings through academic and open-access materials, aligning research with service. They have contributed to three book chapters, published five peer-reviewed articles, presented six conference papers, and participated in various conference meetings and presentations. Dr. X has also presented at three sponsored events, delivered two keynote speeches in Spain, the UK, and Poland, and co-organized an EU-sponsored conference in Italy on migrant entrepreneurship[8].

The *VI's* track record suggests that the venture aims to revolutionize traditional incubation by eliminating geographical limitations. Unlike conventional models confined to physical locations and typically focusing on high-growth firms, its objective is to help marginalized entrepreneurs overcome barriers like distance, family obligations, and legal complexities while fostering cross-cultural idea exchanges. The *VI* model supports marginalized communities while

[8] Direct references to papers, speeches, and conferences have been withheld to preserve anonymity.

retaining partnerships with community organizations, leveraging the legitimacy it has obtained from grant agencies and within *The University*.

3.4 Case Analysis

The case of the *VI* and *The University* presents an illustrative example of pragmatic legitimacy in action. Pragmatic legitimacy refers to a form of legitimacy that organizations seek to gain from their external environment, including stakeholders, by demonstrating their ability to provide practical and valuable solutions or services (Suchman, 1995). In other words, organizations aim to be seen as legitimate not only because they comply with formal rules and regulations but also because they are effective and meet the needs of their stakeholders in a meaningful way. The *VI*, by prioritizing community-based sustainable entrepreneurs, particularly those from marginalized groups such as underprivileged, minority, immigrant, refugee, and disabled entrepreneurs, squarely addresses the substantive needs of a specific stakeholder group. Additionally, by involving NGOs in decision-making, especially in customizing training materials, the *VI* exemplifies pragmatic legitimacy. This inclusivity not only demonstrates responsiveness to stakeholder interests but also a commitment to their larger objectives.

The University, in parallel, aligns its strategic plan with overarching societal needs, as reflected in its emphasis on "Inclusive Excellence" and engagement with diverse communities. This strategic alignment signals *The University*'s adherence to pragmatic legitimacy principles, meeting the broader community's substantive needs. *The University*'s support of the *VI*, through the COVID-19 Research Fund, further underscores its commitment to pragmatic legitimacy. This support is not just symbolic but also instrumental in delivering practical benefits to society, aligning with the interpretation of pragmatic legitimacy as the capacity of an organization to bring practical advantages to its constituents (Díez-Martín et al., 2013; Suchman, 1995).

The relationship between the *VI* and *The University* also supports the concept of consequential legitimacy (Suchman, 1991; Powell & DiMaggio, 2012). Consequential legitimacy assesses organizations based on their achievements and effectiveness, especially in sectors where outcomes can not be explicitly measured and evaluated. The *VI* exemplifies consequential legitimacy through several key aspects. Firstly, it has made strides in empowering marginalized entrepreneurs. The incubator has had a seemingly tangible and positive impact on individual participants and their communities by equipping them with the necessary strategies and skills to develop their businesses. This outcome underscores the effectiveness of the incubator in fulfilling its mission. Moreover, the incubator's ability to forge and retain partnerships and expand its influence globally is a testament to its operational efficacy.

Similarly, *The University* demonstrates consequential legitimacy through its strategic alignment with institutional goals. Its support for the *VI* is reflective of a broader commitment to inclusive excellence and societal impact. This alignment between the outcomes achieved by the *VI* and *The University*'s strategic priorities signals *The University*'s ability in realizing its institutional objectives, a crucial measure within the scope of consequential legitimacy. *The University*'s engagement with its academic community, particularly through the involvement of students and faculty in the *VI*'s operations, aligns with its focus on integrating research and practical education. This showcases The University's commitment to providing real-world learning experiences and signifies its effectiveness in educational delivery, a key aspect of consequential legitimacy. Furthermore, *The University*'s ability to obtain external recognition and grants for supporting initiatives like the *VI* underscores its consequential legitimacy.

3.4.1 Multi-level Legitimation Work by The University and the VI

To understand how universities might innovate through academic social intrapreneurship implemented digitally to address global concerns and constraints, it is important to analyze how *The University* has effectively established and retained legitimacy at multiple levels through its association with the *VI*. This study demonstrates the theoretical frameworks of multi-level legitimacy, particularly as articulated by Bitektine and Haack (2015) and others (Suchman, 1995; Greenwood et al., 2017; Scott, 2008). This section delves into this intricate interplay.

The University's strategic plan, with a focus on "Inclusive Excellence" and "Engaging Local, National, Indigenous, and Global Communities," is a testament to its commitment – at least at face value – to societal impact and inclusive growth. This strategic orientation finds a synergistic partner in the *VI*'s mission, which is geared towards empowering marginalized entrepreneurs and fostering global partnerships. This congruence embodies macro-level validity influencing perceptions at individual and group levels (Bitektine & Haack, 2015). It showcases how organizational actions, aligned with broader institutional logics, can enhance legitimacy (Suchman, 1995).

The concept of internal legitimacy within *The University*, particularly in the context of its alignment with the *VI*, is a multifaceted and important aspect of its institutional dynamics. This alignment demonstrates *The University*'s commitment to meaningful and socially impactful work, enhancing its internal legitimacy among students and faculty. This phenomenon resonates with Bitektine and Haack's (2015) theory, which emphasizes the influence of macro-level validity on micro-level judgments. Internally, this perception is vital as it can cultivate an environment of trust and belief in *The University*'s objectives. The substantial funding and consistent support for the *VI* by *The University* are not just financial investments but also symbolic gestures that signal a

commitment to innovation and social responsibility. These actions align with the institution's priorities and contribute to the process of institutionalization (Suddaby et al., 2017). The practices and missions of entities like the *VI* can gradually become embedded within *The University*'s fabric, gaining a status of taken-for-granted-ness (Greenwood et al., 2017; Scott, 2008).

Moreover, the consensus among students and faculty at *The University* signifies a strong alignment with the institution's mission and strategic goals. The concept of consensus (Haack et al., 2021; Bundy & Pfarrer, 2015) pertains to the degree of agreement within a reference group on the legitimacy of an entity's actions or characteristics in a social context. Therefore, this alignment might be crucial for maintaining a cohesive and motivated academic community, fostering a sense of shared purpose and sustaining organizational stability. In summary, the performance and learning experiences of the *VI* appear to not only resonate with the values and aspirations of *The University*'s internal stakeholders but also reinforce their belief in the legitimacy and appropriateness of *The University*'s trajectory.

Externally, the initiatives of the *VI* serve as evidence of *The University*'s adherence to its strategic priorities, notably in global community engagement and inclusive excellence. This external legitimacy can be important in attracting partnerships, funding, and recognition, which are essential for fulfilling a university's strategic goals and reinforcing its macro-level validity (Greenwood et al., 2017). Moreover, the recognition of the *VI*'s performance and experience by global partners and other institutions reflects a broader consensus on the legitimacy of *The University*'s approach to entrepreneurship and community engagement. The ability to garner support and acknowledgment from diverse external stakeholders indicates the institution's competence in navigating the complex landscape of multi-level legitimacy.

The relationship between *The University* and the *VI* illustrates a feedback loop in the context of multi-level legitimacy. The learning experiences at the micro-level, constituted by individual projects and initiatives of the *VI*, contribute to and are magnified by the macro-level legitimacy of *The University*. This dynamic interplay is a hallmark of the multi-level view of legitimacy, where micro-level accomplishments reinforce and are bolstered by macro-level validity (Bitektine & Haack, 2015).

Thus, the VI's learning experiences—from empowering marginalized entrepreneurs to forming global partnerships—contribute to a broader institutional narrative that *The University* is a forward-thinking, socially responsive institution. This narrative aligns with Scott's (2008) assertions on institutional legitimacy, where the actions and successes of an entity like the *VI* reinforce the legitimacy of the parent institution in the eyes of internal and external stakeholders. It manifests the institution's values and commitments, solidifying its position and role in addressing societal challenges.

Examining the relationship between *The University* and the *VI* offers a case study in understanding embedded agency and its influence on institutional change (Holm, 1995; Bitektine & Haack, 2015). The *VI*, deeply entrenched within *The University*'s institutional structure, emerges as a dynamic agent of change, challenging and redefining the established norms of entrepreneurship support and community engagement. Embedded agency explores the paradox of how actors, despite being conditioned and constrained by their institutional environments, possess the capacity to initiate change within those same environments (Holm, 1995). Functioning under *The University*'s auspices, the *VI* transcends the role of a passive adherent to existing norms. Instead, it ventures to subvert and redefine these norms through its innovative approach to entrepreneurship and community support.

Central to the *VI*'s strategy is its deviation from traditional models of entrepreneurship support, which typically emphasize physical infrastructure and localized services. Contrary to this, the *VI* adopted a completely virtual digital platform, eliminating geographical barriers and democratizing access to resources and knowledge for a global audience, especially marginalized entrepreneurs. This approach not only contests traditional norms but also mirrors the ongoing digital transformation in education and business sectors, indicating a shift towards more inclusive and accessible practices.

The case of the *VI* aligns with Bitektine and Haack's (2015) perspective on how micro-level initiatives influence and reshape macro-level institutional structures and norms. By implementing its innovative approach and demonstrating tangible positive impacts, the *VI* legitimizes its methods and helps *The University* actively support a non-commercialized and unique social intrapreneurial endeavour, thereby influencing *The University*'s broader institutional policies and practices. We illustrate how embedded entities within larger institutions can drive institutional evolution, serving as catalysts for change (Holm, 1995; Bitektine & Haack, 2015).

3.4.2 Legitimizing The VI:

The *VI*'s journey in establishing and maintaining its legitimacy is a multifaceted narrative, illustrating the complex interplay between strategic cooperation, internal and external legitimacy, mutually compatible values, positive signalling, resource transfer, and strategic partnerships. At its core, the incubator's approach to strategic cooperation and legitimating ties underpins its performance and learning experiences (Deephouse & Suchman, 2008; Bitektine, 2011; Baum & Oliver, 1991). These legitimating partnerships, especially with NGOs, universities, and funding bodies, extend beyond mere operational support. They enhance credibility and value in the eyes of stakeholders, symbolizing the incubator's reliability and commitment to social entrepreneurship.

These collaborations are not just functional; they serve as endorsements, signalling the incubator's value and credibility to the external world (Tost, 2011).

This external validation intertwines closely with the incubator's internal legitimacy (Drori & Honig, 2013). Internally, the incubator's dedication to empowering marginalized entrepreneurs and focusing on sustainable community development forms the bedrock of its ethos. This internal coherence, reflected in its commitment to its mission, harmonizes with the external legitimacy it garners. The support from entities like *The University*, endorsements from grant agencies, and partnerships with educational institutions affirm its alignment with external stakeholder values. This synergy between what the incubator embodies internally and how it is perceived externally bolsters its credibility and appeal in the social entrepreneurship sector.

Central to this narrative is the principle of mutually compatible values and norms (Kumar & Das, 2007; Tost, 2011). The incubator's collaborations are grounded in shared commitments to social entrepreneurship and sustainable development. This alignment transcends transactional relationships, fostering meaningful and impactful collaborations. These joint efforts amplify the overall impact by focusing on marginalized entrepreneurs, enhancing operational efficiency and societal benefits. From a legitimizing standpoint, the incubator's achievements serve as a form of positive signalling to key stakeholders (Drori & Honig, 2013; Dacin et al., 2007). This signalling reinforces the organization's capability and reliability, which are essential in establishing credibility. The reciprocal exchange of resources further cements this trust (Gulati & Higgins, 2003). The *VI*'s innovative model and the partners' contribution of funding and expertise are not merely transactional but are rooted in a shared goal of social impact. This exchange is a testament to the trust and cooperation between the incubator and its partners, amplifying both credibility and value.

Strategic partnerships play a crucial role in accessing resources and enhancing legitimacy (Baum & Oliver, 1991; Dacin et al., 2007; Weidner et al., 2019). These alliances provide not just funding and expertise but also essential networks. For the *VI*, such partnerships are instrumental in overcoming resource constraints and aligning its objectives with broader institutional logics. This adaptability and relevance in aligning goals with those of its partners not only showcase the incubator's legitimacy but also strengthen its position in the social entrepreneurship ecosystem.

In summary, the *VI*'s legitimacy is a tapestry woven from strategic cooperation, internal and external validation, shared values, positive signalling, resource exchange, and strategic partnerships, each integral to its success and credibility in the realm of social entrepreneurship.

3.4.3 Role of the "Digital" in Intrapreneurship

The digital approach was a critical aspect of enhancing legitimacy both for the *VI* and its activities and for *The University*, facilitating their ability to address local and global concerns. The *VI*'s digital framework provides accessible, flexible, and tailored support to individual entrepreneurs, benefiting marginalized groups who often face barriers in traditional physical incubation services (Neessen et al., 2019). This digital platform democratizes access to resources, training, and networks, legitimizing the incubator's role in fostering inclusive entrepreneurship. Leveraging digital technology, the *VI* offers personalized support to marginalized entrepreneurs, meeting their unique needs embedded in their communities (Muizniece, 2021). The individual success stories can be construed as a testament to *The University*'s commitment to inclusive excellence and social responsibility, thus enhancing its micro-level legitimacy (Klofsten et al., 2021).

At the macro level, the *VI* aligns with broader trends in digital transformation and innovation, enhancing *The University*'s legitimacy among academic peers, funding bodies, and

global partners (Rippa & Secundo, 2019; Vassilakopoulou & Grisot, 2020). This alignment demonstrates *The University*'s capacity to generate social impact through innovative digital means. The *VI*'s global reach and diverse participant base exemplify the macro-level impact of digital platforms, positioning *The University* as an institution attempting to address global concerns through digital means (Greenwood et al., 2017; Scott, 2008). Locally, the *VI* addresses community needs by empowering local entrepreneurs and gaining legitimacy within its immediate geographical context (Deephouse & Suchman, 2008; Bitektine, 2011). Globally, its virtual nature transcends geographical boundaries, enabling collaboration with international partners and participation in global networks (Klofsten et al., 2021; Nowak & Grantham, 2000). This dual approach enhances *The University*'s legitimacy both locally and globally, signalling its commitment to global citizenship and interconnectedness.

Internally, the *VI*'s digital approach resonates with *The University*'s strategic priorities of inclusive excellence and community engagement. This alignment strengthens its internal legitimacy, gaining support from faculty, students, and administration. Externally, the digital approach attracts diverse partnerships and funding, demonstrating social impacts in cost-efficient ways and thus enhancing credibility in the wider entrepreneurial and academic community.

In the realm of innovation and technology adoption, *The University*'s continuing support of the *VI* signals a conscious choice to embrace digital transformation for societal benefit, thus strengthening its perceived position as an innovator in the academic domain (Vassilakopoulou & Grisot, 2020; Van der Aalst et al., 2020).

Finally, the *VI*'s digital nature was shown to be effective in promoting access and inclusivity, reducing barriers to entrepreneurship resources, especially for marginalized communities. This approach aligns with broader societal expectations of higher education's role in

promoting social equity (Zedtwitz, 2003). The efficiency and scalability offered by digital platforms make the *VI* a cost-effective and adaptable solution to entrepreneurship support, which is crucial in addressing global challenges and changing needs (Neessen et al., 2019).

The *VI* and *The University*'s approach, as depicted in the case analysis, offer valuable insights into how universities can transition from a purely entrepreneurial model, leaning into the potential of academic social intrapreneurship implemented digitally to address complex societal challenges in contemporary times effectively.

3.5 Practical Recommendations

In the era of digital transformation and global interconnectivity, universities are uniquely positioned to address both local and global challenges. The case of the *VI* offers a new strategic model for universities striving to enhance their societal impact and relevance. One recommendation based on this case study is the integration of digital platforms to extend the university's reach and inclusivity. In line with Rippa and Secundo's (2019) findings, leveraging technology can democratize access to resources, particularly benefiting marginalized groups. This approach can include the implementation of user-friendly and accessible online education, utilizing VIs and digital resource centers. Unlike the effort to produce massive open online courses (MOOCs), this model focuses on experiential non-formal learning (Debarliev et al., 2022). While the direct impact of digital integration is hard to quantify, this study provides face-value evidence that it contributes to the broader goal of inclusive excellence (Vassilakopoulou & Grisot, 2020).

The formation of strategic partnerships stands out as a crucial factor for universities in amplifying their capacity to tackle societal issues. As exemplified by the VI, collaboration and partnerships with community organizations might not only extend resources and expertise but also enhance the university's credibility (Baum & Oliver, 1991; Dacin et al., 2007). These partnerships,

aligned with the university's mission and strategic goals, promise collaborative research, new educational programs, and community engagement. The expected outcomes of such collaborations are not just limited to enhanced credibility and resource sharing but also provide enriching practical experiences for students and faculty.

In the face of 'wicked problems' and their global challenges, universities are tasked with contributing to their immediate communities while maintaining a global perspective. The *VI*'s approach, balancing local and global issues, can be a model to be emulated or adapted to different academic contexts. Universities might benefit from designing initiatives that are locally relevant yet scalable to address global challenges. While the direct impacts of such a balanced approach are difficult to predict, it is expected to enhance the university's reputation as an institution that is both globally aware and locally engaged. These strategies, derived from the case analysis of the *VI*, provide an adaptable roadmap for universities. By leveraging digital platforms for greater inclusivity, cultivating strategic partnerships, and balancing local and global engagement, universities might enhance their societal relevance and efficacy.

Evolving challenges and societal needs, particularly in marginalized communities, call for a flexible and responsive approach to social intrapreneurship (Neessen et al., 2019). Social intrapreneurs should focus on developing operational models that are not only capable of adapting to changing circumstances and needs but also are respectful of indigenous requirements (Koehne et al., 2022). This includes collaborating on equal terms, staying informed about the communities they serve and being open to evolving their strategies as required. The incorporation of digital solutions as part of this flexibility can be crucial, as it enables a broader and more inclusive reach. Digital flexibility can lead to more resilient and responsive social entrepreneurship initiatives that are better equipped to meet the unique needs of their target communities.

This study showed that establishing and maintaining internal and external legitimacy within and beyond the academic institution is critical for social intrapreneurs (Bitektine & Haack, 2015; Suchman, 1995). Social intrapreneurs will benefit from engaging in efforts to align their initiatives with their institution's strategic goals and values, effectively communicating their objectives and impacts. This involves not only building a strong narrative around their social venture but also forging strategic partnerships to enhance legitimacy.

These recommendations for social intrapreneurs in academia underscore the importance of leveraging academic resources, adopting flexible and inclusive models enhanced through digitization, and engaging in continuous collaborative legitimation efforts. Although these strategies do not guarantee specific impacts, they provide a framework for developing and sustaining effective social entrepreneurship initiatives, guiding social intrapreneurs toward creating impactful and sustainable solutions to societal challenges.

3.6 Contributions

This study was designed to ask, “How might universities innovate by using digital social intrapreneurship to address global concerns and constraints?” We used a case study to examine a university intrapreneurial activity precipitated by the COVID-19 pandemic and its associated diverse, non-scripted research award program. Our case study showed that employing an open-ended decentralized model on the part of *The University* yielded innovative outcomes that, while unanticipated and undirected, aligned with *The University*’s strategic plan and ethos and generated their own resource stream. The model we examined is an open-ended reward system focusing broadly on identifying possible solutions, allowing networks to emerge organically in the university environment. The outcome analyzed provided the development of innovative networks

yielding ingenious outcomes. Thus, we maintain that this case contributes to the alternative 'messy' theoretical model for wicked problem-solving (Ney & Verweij, 2015).

From an outcome perspective – a new *VI*, a new Research Centre, and the reported advancement of a range of entrepreneurial participants in various environments worldwide – all support the establishment of considerable social entrepreneurial well-being development on the part of the university and its actors.

The depicted case of digital intrapreneurship highlighted a number of theoretical and practical attributes that led to a successful social intrapreneurial venture. Central to this perspective was a focus on the third mission of universities, reflecting demands to impact cultural, social and community development. First and foremost, the issue of legitimacy, both internal and external, was shown to be a critical and formative factor leading to a successful endeavor. This required both the internal stakeholders – the staff and leadership – as well as the external ones, the NGOs and communities, to develop strategies of collaboration and partnership to attract resources and deliver them across multiple levels. Digital aspects of the social innovation were shown to be critical in providing the necessary adaptability and global reach of the intrapreneurial activity launched by the *VI.* They provided knowledge diffusion and social value efficiently and, when required, trans-nationally, demonstrating the ease of adaptability, flexibility, and social fit.

The case also demonstrated the unique confluence of values and ethos, both of the *VI* and the new Research Centre launched through the project, as well as the convergence of the universities' strategic plan, mission statement, and overall social values as highlighted by its 'Brighter World' vision. It also highlighted the model of collaborative partnerships with NGOs and communities, whereby activities were designed, modified, and customized utilizing a respectful exchange of equals, avoiding pedantic and condescending orientations sometimes attributed to

university-oriented initiatives. Finally, from a theoretical perspective, elements of both pragmatic legitimacy and consequential legitimacy were shown to operate at various levels, both internally and externally, in order to accomplish the multifaceted goals of the university, faculty, students, NGOs, and participants. This required a complex interplay between strategic cooperation, internal and external legitimacy, mutually compatible values, positive signalling, resource transfer, and strategic partnerships, as depicted in the case.

This study adds to the present comprehension of the constituents that define favorable outcomes within intrapreneurial pathways. Previous research has expressed reservations about the efficacy of academic intrapreneurship (De Keyser & Vandenbempt, 2023; Fini et al., 2018; Guerrero et al., 2016; Rybnicek & Konigsgruber, 2019). Our case study indicates that appraising intrapreneurial trajectories within universities based primarily on pecuniary metrics might be an unjust evaluation approach.

In sum, we provide an instructive model for future intrapreneurial innovation in the face of difficult problems faced by universities and their communities elsewhere. This study offers an interdisciplinary intraorganizational global perspective on university intrapreneurship, which may help other universities enhance their social intrapreneurial activities.

3.7 Limitations and Future Research

Our case study focuses on a North American context in which faculty from a Canadian and a US university developed a social intrapreneurial initiative with the initial support of the Canadian university's research fund. While this case study demonstrated extensive collaboration with international partners, new studies are needed to examine other contexts, including universities in the Global South. The qualitative nature of this study provides rich and nuanced insights but may limit the ability to quantify results and establish clear cause-and-effect relationships. Future

research employing a mixed-methods approach may provide more comprehensive evaluations integrating both qualitative richness and quantitative precision. As well, relying primarily on document analysis, direct observations, and interviews might present biases. By incorporating additional sources and ethnographic methods, future work can provide a more holistic view.

We did not delve deeply into potential challenges, ethical dilemmas, or unintended negative consequences that might emerge from academic intrapreneurship initiatives. A balanced evaluation that also examines potential downsides would provide a more comprehensive view of the phenomenon. Also, the focus on virtual digital incubation, while innovative, may not capture the full spectrum of academic intrapreneurship experiences and limits a more diversified understanding.

In conclusion, our study makes a valuable contribution to the discourse on academic and digital intrapreneurship. The outlined limitations underscore the importance of diverse, multifaceted future research. Addressing these constraints will further illuminate the multifaceted roles universities play in promoting societal welfare through intrapreneurship.

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Appendix:

Call for "COVID-19 Research Fund" by *The University*

The call and the list of award winners can be found here[9]: https://research.mcmaster.ca/vpr-covid19/covid-funding-opportunities-updates/covid-19-research-fund/

"Stream 1 - Research with Immediate Impact: With a global war raging on COVID-19, *The University* researchers have already brought some much-needed arsenal to the cause through their scientific and technological advances. In an effort to do more, this program will fund research with immediate impacts, and which broadens our knowledge and understanding of the virus and provides us with the necessary tools to fight it. For instance, we welcome projects like those that build our capacity for vaccine development, therapeutics and diagnostics; advance a cure or effective treatments; employ innovative technologies and AI solutions to enable the manufacturing of the requisite equipment; or identify practices that better address the needs of healthcare workers and patients. Approximately $1.5M in university funding is available to support Stream 1 awards."

"Stream 2 - Research Aimed at Longer-term Outcomes: The collateral damage of COVID-19 on populations and economies will live well beyond a vaccine. What does a post-COVID world look like—both locally and globally—and what tools are needed to reduce the impacts of this and future pandemics on our economic, political, and societal health? We welcome projects examining a wide range of issues: global health policy in an era of entrenched nationalism; health care and climate change; the role of the media (social and otherwise) and fake news cycles; how epidemics shape history, consciousness and the arts; deepening global inequality and epidemics; race and epidemics; populism and the war on science; better city planning in light of urbanization and

[9] (Footnote will be added if the editor agrees) https://research.mcmaster.ca/vpr-covid19/covid-funding-opportunities-updates/covid-19-research-fund/

densification; the psychological fallout of pandemics on vulnerable populations; or the economics of funding a post-COVID world. Up to approximately $1M in university funding is available to support Stream 2 awards."

Table 3. 1

Internal and External Awards and Grants Secured by The *VI* Team

Agency	**Timeline**	**Award Amount (Canadian Dollars)**
IDRC — International Development Research Centre	April 2023-March 2025	$199,057
Polish National Agency for Academic Exchange	July 2022-July, 2023	$110,000
BIRMAC Project and Ideas Fund	Feb. 2023- Feb. 2024	$14,993
SSHRC New Frontiers in Research Fund-Special Call 2022	June 2023-May, 2025	$493,254
SSHRC Insight Development Grant	July 2021-July 2023	$62,332
SSHRC Insight Grant	June 2021- June, 2026	$295,251
MITACS, RTA 2020	May 2020- June, 2020	$6,000
MITACS, RTA 2020	July 2020-Oct, 2021	$6,000
The University Digital Transformation Research Centre	June 2021-Sept, 2021	$8,000
Research Excellence Fund, *The University*	Jan, 2021	$45,750
The University COVID-19 Rapid Research Fund	June 2020-May 2022	$99,290

Chapter 4

A Trauma-Informed Approach: Temporal Reorientation, Identity Reconstruction and Preventing Retraumatisation in Refugee Entrepreneurship Support

The paper presented in this chapter was accepted for publication on January 21, 2025, for the *Special Issue: 'Practice and Policy Developments in Migrant Entrepreneurship: A Call to Arms'* in the *International Small Business Journal*. The peer-reviewed Accepted Manuscript is used in the thesis. Information on issue/volume were not available at the time of thesis submission.

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4. Preamble

The second paper aims to address the burgeoning refugee crisis and its intersection with entrepreneurship, a domain where refugees encounter unique challenges and opportunities. The paper's core objective is to develop a comprehensive framework to support refugee entrepreneurship, acknowledging the significant role of trauma in shaping refugee experiences.

Refugee trauma is a complex issue stemming from involuntary displacement due to conflict, persecution, or other severe conditions, leading to various mental health challenges (Bemak & Chung, 2017; Kirmayer et al., 2011). This trauma often starts with premigration events like exposure to war, violence, and severe deprivation, significantly affecting psychological well-being. The extent of these experiences varies among refugees and is influenced by conflict intensity, individual factors, and support systems (Hecker et al., 2018; Nickerson et al., 2010; Papadopoulos, 2021). The journey to the host country, fraught with danger and uncertainty, then adds to this burden. These traumatic experiences continue to affect mental health and adaptation in the host country, with the resettlement process itself posing challenges and potentially retriggering past traumas (Bemak & Chung, 2017; Ehrkamp et al., 2022; Papadopoulos, 2021).

Refugees experience higher rates of psychiatric disorders, including PTSD, depression, anxiety, and mood disorders, compared to the general population due to trauma and resettlement stressors (Fazel et al., 2005; Giacco et al., 2018; Hameed et al., 2018). These conditions often persist long after resettlement, highlighting the need for long-term mental health support in resettlement programs (Bogic et al., 2015; Steel et al., 2009). Different types of traumatic experiences have varied impacts on refugee mental health. Torture, threats to life, and traumatic loss are particularly damaging. Threats to life are significant predictors of PTSD, and when combined with traumatic loss, they can increase symptom severity and disability. Comorbid

conditions, like PTSD with major depressive disorder (MDD), result in worse long-term outcomes than either condition alone (Bapolisi et al., 2020; Betancourt et al., 2012; Steel et al., 2009; Stepakoff et al., 2006). Family separation is another major stressor for refugees, heightening anxiety and PTSD symptoms due to concerns for relatives' safety (Hecker et al., 2015; Liddell et al., 2022). This separation adds to the trauma experienced before resettlement, illustrating the complexity of refugee mental health, often marked by multiple overlapping traumas and comorbid conditions. Furthermore, trauma impacts vary by gender and age.

The trauma experienced by refugees due to conflict and displacement can significantly impact their entrepreneurial journey, an aspect often overlooked in current research (Rawhouser et al., 2024; Newman and Christensen, 2024). Thus, this paper delves into the experiences of refugee entrepreneurs and introduces a trauma-informed framework tailored to their unique psychological challenges, such as temporal disintegration[10], identity dissolution[11], and the risk of retraumatization[12]. Building on trauma-informed care principles (Huang et al., 2014), the framework offers strategies to help entrepreneurship service providers recognize and address the profound effects of trauma. This approach not only fills gaps in the current literature – which often emphasizes resilience while overlooking mental health struggles – but also provides a nuanced understanding of how trauma influences entrepreneurial behavior and outcomes. While the framework remains theoretical, by drawing on literature across disciplines, it proposes structured

[10] Temporal disintegration disrupts refugees' ability to connect past, present, and future, which compromises their capacity to act on goals and adapt to new environments.
[11] Identity dissolution causes identity fractures and threatens the sense of self, requiring refugees to navigate complex processes of acculturation and identity reconstruction amidst cultural and social challenges in the host country.
[12] Refugees are susceptible to retraumatisation during and after resettlement due to ongoing adversities and chronic stressors.

interventions that can guide service providers in addressing the effects of trauma on refugee entrepreneurs. The framework is built around three core elements.

Temporal Reorientation: Trauma often disrupts a refugee's ability to focus on the present or plan for the future. The framework emphasizes interventions that help refugees regain control over their sense of time and rebuild their capacity to aspire. Key recommendations include (1) *Mindfulness practices,* which enhance present-moment awareness, reduce trauma symptoms, and support emotional regulation. Integration of Mindfulness practices into entrepreneurship programs can help refugees remain grounded while managing the complexities of entrepreneurial life; (2) *Bridging practices* incorporate two mindsets – continuity/discontinuity and future-making – to help refugees reorient their sense of time. Continuity leverages past strengths for stability, while discontinuity releases refugees from trauma-laden identities, and future-making transforms aspirations into concrete steps. Paired with Mindfulness practices, Bridging practices stabilize refugees in the present while fostering a hopeful sense of agency over their future trajectories.

Identity Reconstruction: Forced migration disrupts refugees' sense of self, requiring complex processes of acculturation and identity rebuilding. This framework outlines two key approaches to address these challenges. *Personal Identity Narratives* involve activities like re-authoring conversations and guided reflections on past, present, and future experiences to weave cohesive self-narratives. These narratives transform adversity into strength, balancing "the past is past" with "the past is our strength" to foster a flexible and resilient identity aligned with reconstructed goals. *Collective Entrepreneurial Identity* Creation focuses on collaborative activities, such as story circles and networking events, to co-develop shared entrepreneurial identities. By fostering a sense of belonging and collective problem-solving, these efforts transcend

the stigmatized "refugee" label, enabling resource-sharing and mutual growth within a supportive community.

Preventing Retraumatization: A key focus of the framework is the creation of a safe and trustworthy environment where refugees can feel supported and empowered. It highlights the importance of providing psychological safety, avoiding practices that might trigger trauma responses, and fostering transparency and consistent communication. These strategies aim to reduce the risks of retraumatization by creating spaces where refugees feel psychologically safe and can express themselves without fear of judgment.

Although the framework does not present empirical findings, it highlights the need for future research to validate these interventions and explore their effectiveness across diverse refugee populations. By addressing the complex interplay of trauma, temporal disintegration, and identity challenges, this study contributes to the literature by bridging trauma-informed care with entrepreneurship support services, advocating for holistic systems that consider both the economic and psychological well-being of refugees. The ultimate goal is to provide a flexible, culturally sensitive approach that empowers refugees to overcome their psychological barriers, rebuild their identities, and succeed as entrepreneurs in their host societies.

The paper presented in this chapter was accepted for publication on January 21, 2025, for the *Special Issue: 'Practice and Policy Developments in Migrant Entrepreneurship: A Call to Arms'* in the *International Small Business Journal*. The peer-reviewed Accepted Manuscript is used in the thesis. Information on issue/volume were not available at the time of thesis submission.

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A Trauma-Informed Approach: Temporal Reorientation, Identity Reconstruction and Preventing Retraumatisation in Refugee Entrepreneurship Support

Abstract

Entrepreneurship support services for refugees provide a wide range of services to support venture creation and build resilience. However, mental health supports to address issues of trauma are often not included in these programs. This is problematic because the trauma experienced by refugees can negatively impact elements of entrepreneurship that are critical for success, and the entrepreneurial journey carries a risk of retraumatisation. We propose a framework for a trauma-informed approach to refugee entrepreneurship support that integrates insights from the literature on trauma-informed care. The framework emphasises three key components: temporal reorientation, identity reconstruction, and preventing retraumatisation. Temporal reorientation helps refugees reconnect with the present and envision a positive future using tools like mindfulness and bridging practices. Identity reconstruction focuses on developing a cohesive entrepreneurial identity, enabling refugees to rebuild their sense of self through narrative identity work and cultivating a collective entrepreneurial identity within their communities. Preventing retraumatisation involves creating safe, culturally sensitive environments that foster trust while empowering refugees through holistic, peer-supported interventions. This framework offers a novel approach to addressing the unique challenges refugee entrepreneurs face, integrating mental health considerations into entrepreneurship support and paving the way for future research focused on trauma's impact within entrepreneurship.

Keywords: refugee entrepreneurship; entrepreneurship support; trauma-informed care.

4.1. Introduction

The global refugee crisis, fuelled by escalating conflicts, has reached an unprecedented scale. Over the past decade, the number of refugees has tripled, surging 8% from 2022 to 2023 to a staggering 43.4 million (UNHCR, 2023). By the end of 2023, 3.6 million new individual asylum applications were registered, reflecting a 40% increase compared to the previous year, and 6.9 million asylum-seekers were awaiting decisions on their claims (UNHCR, 2023).

Refugees often encounter significant institutional, social, and economic barriers during their transition, which are further compounded by trauma, ongoing stress, and poor mental health (Silove et al., 2017; Newman and Christensen, 2024; Rawhouser et al., 2024; Slobodin and De Jong, 2015). Increasingly, refugee entrepreneurship is gaining recognition as a pathway for refugees' economic and social integration, with support services playing a crucial role in facilitating this process (Abebe, 2023; Newman and Christensen, 2024). These entrepreneurship support services combine business incubation, skill development, networking, financing, and cultural assimilation to create frameworks that support venture creation (Harima et al., 2019; Meister and Mauer, 2019) and build resilience (Ayala and Manzano, 2014; Shepherd et al., 2020).

While refugees can often access mental health services to address issues of trauma, research has shown that these services are frequently separate (Disney and McPherson, 2020; Im et al., 2021; Silove et al., 2017). In other words, mental health support is typically available, yet refugee entrepreneurship support organisations often do not address mental health issues or trauma *within* their programs (Rawhouser et al., 2024; Newman and Christensen, 2021; Richey et al., 2022a; Impact Hub, 2022). In fact, it has been found that some organisations specifically choose to avoid addressing trauma to prevent triggering trauma-related responses (Newman and Christensen, 2021; Rawhouser et al., 2024).

However, we argue that the siloed approach to entrepreneurship and mental health support services is problematic because it both reduces the chance of entrepreneurial success and increases the risk of retraumatisation. First, the trauma experienced by refugees can negatively impact elements of entrepreneurship that are critical for success. Refugees can experience temporal disintegration, where past trauma disrupts their sense of time, making it hard to focus on the present or plan for the future (Harima and Plak, 2024; Holman and Silver, 1998) – both critical temporal orientations for entrepreneurs (Alkhaled and Sasaki, 2022; Wood et al., 2021); and refugees often face profound disruptions to their sense of self when fleeing their home countries, making it challenging to reconstruct their identities in a new cultural context (Alkhaled and Sasaki, 2022; Berman et al., 2020; Märtsin, 2010; Rugina and Harima, 2024), and limiting their ability to build the necessary entrepreneurial identity (Radu-Lefebvre et al., 2021).

While these two phenomena are significant in shaping refugees' lived experiences and influencing their capacity to engage in entrepreneurial activities, they are neither exhaustive nor universal components of refugee trauma. For this reason, we also point to an overarching risk of retraumatisation that can occur during the entrepreneurial journey. Entrepreneurship support programs require trust and risk-taking and often impose a rigid timeline. These expectations placed on refugees in entrepreneurial support programs can add to the pressure already faced by refugees at risk of retraumatisation as they settle into the host country (Nascimento and Pureza, 2024; Papadopoulos, 2018; Salmon and Singleton, 2023). In fact, it is for this reason that entrepreneurship scholars have recently called for integrating trauma-informed care into support services for refugee entrepreneurs (Newman and Christensen, 2024; Rawhouser et al., 2024).

Despite the increasing attention to the mental health of entrepreneurs in the broader literature, the predominant focus is on neurodiversity, positive well-being, depression, stress, and

anxiety (Cubbon et al., 2021; Gish et al., 2022; Hatak et al., 2021; Stephan et al., 2023). Existing literature does not capture the profound effects of displacement experienced by refugees. Given the potential negative impacts of trauma on critical entrepreneurial factors and the impact of entrepreneurship on those who have experienced trauma, integrating mental health support into entrepreneurship support programs can help refugees navigate mental health challenges, regain a sense of control, and improve their chances of success (Newman and Christensen, 2024; Rawhouser et al., 2024; Impact Hub, 2022).

This paper proposes a trauma-informed approach to refugee entrepreneurship support, addressing the unique and profound psychological challenges that refugee entrepreneurs face due to their experiences of displacement. The proposed trauma-informed approach focuses on three key areas: *Temporal Reorientation*, *Identity Reconstruction*, and *Preventing Retraumatisation*. By incorporating trauma-informed care principles (Huang et al., 2014) and practices (Harris and Fallot, 2001; Im et al., 2021; Im and Swan, 2021; Miller et al., 2019; Reeves, 2015) into refugee entrepreneurship support services, this approach aims to better meet refugee entrepreneurs' unique needs.

In developing a framework for a trauma-informed approach to refugee entrepreneurship support we make several contributions to the literature. First, we bridge entrepreneurship studies with trauma-informed care, fostering a deeper comprehension of how trauma influences entrepreneurial behaviour and outcomes. In doing so, we develop an agenda for future research that builds on our framework and informs practice. The proposed framework encourages more tailored support within entrepreneurial support organisations, potentially improving refugee entrepreneurs' well-being and performance and influencing broader support strategies for marginalised communities. We recognise that the challenges for refugees still in camps are likely

to be significantly greater than for those who have resettled and acknowledge that entrepreneurship may not always be a viable option for all refugees due to these challenges. However, our primary objective is to establish a foundational framework for trauma-informed research and practice in refugee entrepreneurship that can guide future work. As the field progresses, we anticipate more detailed, context-specific recommendations will emerge.

We begin by examining the existing literature on refugee entrepreneurship, focusing specifically on the challenges refugees face and the gaps in the support services offered, drawing on empirical studies of refugee entrepreneurship support organisations. Next, we delve into the complex nature of trauma experienced by refugees, exploring three areas of concern for refugee entrepreneurs, namely, temporal disintegration, identity dissolution, and the overarching risks of retraumatisation. We then introduce a trauma-informed framework designed to address the three areas of concern, presenting strategies to foster *Temporal Reorientation*, *Identity Reconstruction*, and *Preventing Retraumatisation*. Finally, we discuss the implications of this framework for refugee entrepreneurship support services and develop an agenda for future research.

4.2. Refugee Entrepreneurship

4.2.1 Challenges in Refugee Entrepreneurship

Refugee entrepreneurship offers a crucial pathway to livelihoods and integration for refugees excluded from traditional labour markets (Abebe, 2023; Refai et al., 2018). Fostering their self-reliance and labour market participation drives economic development, enhances social cohesion, and enriches cultural diversity (Skran and Easton-Calabria, 2020). Despite these benefits, refugee entrepreneurs face challenges such as adapting to socio-cultural norms, overcoming language barriers, and learning local business practices. Limited social networks,

institutional barriers – including legal and financial constraints – and issues like xenophobia and discrimination further restrict their access to essential entrepreneurial resources and opportunities (Ivanova-Gongne et al., 2024; Bizri, 2017; Refai et al., 2018).

The refugee entrepreneurship literature has extensively explored the factors supporting the resilience of these entrepreneurs in navigating the challenges (Ayala and Manzano, 2014; Shepherd et al., 2020). Alayarian (2018) defines resilience as the ability to endure severe trauma or neglect without a breakdown in psychological functioning. The literature underscores resilience as essential for overcoming adversity, resulting in positive outcomes like mental well-being and enhanced entrepreneurial performance (Shepherd et al., 2020). It also highlights the importance of positive psychological capacities such as persistence, optimism, and entrepreneurial self-efficacy (Ayala and Manzano, 2014).

The literature's predominant focus on resilience aligns with cultural ideals of strength but fails to acknowledge the full extent of trauma resulting from cultural displacement (Cubbon et al., 2021; Gish et al., 2022). The resilience narrative and the portrayal of refugee entrepreneurs as heroes often obscure the deeper mental health issues and vulnerabilities that surface during the resettlement process (Papadopoulos and Hulme, 2018). This critique extends to entrepreneurship support organisations, which, influenced by the resilience narrative, can downplay the need for mental health support and integrated interventions within their programs.

4.2.2 Support Services for Refugee Entrepreneurs

Entrepreneurial support organisations provide "an ecosystem that promotes and supports entrepreneurial activity" (Tibaingana et al., 2022: 74), providing a variety of services that aim to enable refugees to build essential business skills, navigate legal and bureaucratic hurdles, integrate into local markets, and adapt to the host country's social and business norms (Jürgens et al., 2022;

Harima et al., 2019; Newman and Christensen, 2021). However, a growing body of literature examining refugee-focused incubators and entrepreneurship programs reveals several limitations – including studies on The Spice Kitchen (Newman and Christensen, 2021) and Lighthouse Charities in the US (Rawhouser et al., 2024), The Entrepreneurial Refugee Network in the UK (Richey et al., 2022a), Inkomoko in Rwanda and Kenya (Richey et al., 2022b), and others in Germany (Harima et al., 2019; Jürgens et al., 2022; Rashid and Cepeda-García, 2021), the Netherlands (Babin, 2019; Marchand and Dijkhuizen, 2018), Turkey (Kachkar and Djafri, 2022), Finland (Ojasalo et al., 2023), and Uganda (Tibaingana et al., 2022).

While these studies show many benefits emerging from entrepreneurship support programs, they show that these services often emphasise individual agency and resilience, limiting opportunities for shared learning and mutual assistance (Harima et al., 2019; Newman and Christensen, 2021; Richey et al., 2022a). For example, Newman and Christenson (2021: 21, 18) found in their study of The Spice Kitchen that, even though the incubator followed best practices by "giving incubatees access to customer networks and legitimizing the entrepreneurs to stakeholders in the community", a "common feeling of isolation that remained, despite being part of the incubator program". In fact, following the entrepreneurs over time allowed the researchers to see that social networks became smaller instead of growing.

In addition, services can lack cultural sensitivity and customised programs and resources, leading to mistrust and engagement barriers (Kachkar and Djafri, 2022; Meister and Mauer, 2019). Short-term, rigid timelines can fail to accommodate refugee entrepreneurs' unique challenges and the extended timeframes they need to succeed (Nair and Blomquist, 2020; Richey et al., 2022a). Furthermore, there is often a lack of transparency and inclusion in program design, delivery, and decision-making processes, reinforcing power imbalances and reducing program responsiveness

(Idris, 2019; Tibaingana et al., 2022). In Tibaingana and colleague's (2022: 119) review of entrepreneurial support organisations in Uganda, they found that the "hierarchical approach of many ESO… [used] externally set agendas around self-reliance, livelihoods and innovation… [instead of] agendas that emerge from the needs and priorities of communities".

Together, these studies show that existing support services for refugee entrepreneurs, although well-intentioned, often prioritise economic outcomes over quality of life, including mental, emotional, and social well-being. While entrepreneurship is promoted as a path to self-reliance, this approach often falls short of true empowerment, leaving many refugees under-supported (Nascimento and Pureza, 2024). The narrow focus on economic metrics fails to address the significant psychological impacts of trauma, displacement, and cultural adjustment (Impact Hub, 2022; Newman and Christensen, 2024; Rawhouser et al., 2024; Richey et al., 2022a). The resulting feelings of isolation and unaddressed emotional stress can, in fact, undermine the potential for entrepreneurial success by impairing individuals' capacity to engage meaningfully with their ventures (Newman and Christensen, 2021; Salmon and Singleton, 2023).

Most programs refer participants to overwhelmed mental health support providers, and some even have strict policies barring staff from discussing any potential trauma-related subjects; the few that do offer in-house mental health services often have general mental health support that is not contextualised for the unique demands of entrepreneurship (Newman and Christensen, 2021; Rawhouser et al., 2024). Because of these limitations, scholars have argued for a more holistic approach to support programs, urging the integration of trauma-informed practices into entrepreneurship support (Newman and Christensen, 2024; Rawhouser et al., 2024).

4.3. Refugee Trauma and Entrepreneurship

4.3.1 Refugee Trauma

According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), "Individual trauma results from an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life-threatening and that has lasting adverse effects on the individual's functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being" (Huang et al., 2014: 7). Refugee trauma is a multifaceted and complex issue, beginning with premigration events such as war, violence, and displacement, which often significantly impact psychological well-being (Bemak and Chung, 2017; Fazel et al., 2005). The journey to a host country, often marked by danger and uncertainty, further exacerbates these traumatic experiences, while the resettlement process can retrigger past traumas, compounding mental health challenges (Bemak and Chung, 2017; Papadopoulos, 2018).

Refugees are at a significantly higher risk of psychiatric disorders, including PTSD, depression, anxiety, and mood disorders, and these conditions often persist long after resettlement (Fazel et al., 2005; Giacco et al., 2018). Key stressors such as family separation, economic hardship, social isolation, and discrimination interact with past trauma in a bidirectional manner, continuously affecting mental health (Slobodin and De Jong, 2015), with daily environmental stressors significantly mediating the relationship between past trauma and current mental health symptoms (Schick et al., 2016). Additionally, restrictive asylum processes, prolonged detention, and temporary visas often exacerbate mental health issues (Fazel et al., 2005; Li et al., 2016).

The complexity of refugee trauma is multifaceted and encompasses a range of psychological, emotional, and social challenges. Among these, temporal disintegration, identity

dissolution, and risks of retraumatisation are particularly salient challenges faced by refugees that have a distinct impact on their entrepreneurial journey, though they are not exhaustive or universal components of refugee trauma. These phenomena are significant to this study as they often shape refugees' lived experiences, influencing their capacity to adapt to new environments, engage in entrepreneurial activities, and benefit from support services. Temporal disintegration, for instance, disrupts refugees' ability to integrate past experiences with present realities and future aspirations, creating barriers to the forward-looking perspective essential for entrepreneurship (Holman and Silver, 1998; Harima and Plak, 2024). Identity dissolution, characterised by the fragmentation of social roles and professional identities, complicates the formation of entrepreneurial identities and the navigation of cultural integration (Alkhaled and Sasaki, 2022; Berman et al., 2020). Finally, the risk of retraumatisation arises from ongoing stressors and challenges, such as unrealistic expectations, lack of trust, or power imbalances, which can echo the dynamics of past traumas (Carlsson and Sonne, 2018; Papadopoulos, 2018). The following sections explore these three aspects, demonstrating their interactions with refugee entrepreneurship and entrepreneurship support services.

4.3.2 Refugee Temporal Disintegration

In the context of refugee resettlement, temporality emerges as a critical psychological factor influencing adaptation, as it encompasses an individual's existence within time and the intricate relationships they form between their past, present, and future experiences (Kira et al., 2024). For most individuals, the flow between past, present, and future is natural, but the trauma of displacement often disrupts this temporal orientation for refugees. This disruption, known as "temporal disintegration" (Holman and Silver, 1998), manifests as an involuntary fixation on past traumas, impairing individuals' ability to engage with the present and envision a future (Harima

and Plak, 2024; Sagbakken et al., 2020). Temporal disintegration is often characterised by an inability to visualise a hopeful and plausible future, leaving refugees trapped in a precarious and undefined present that emerged from a damaging past (Holman and Silver, 1998).

The literature encompasses various conceptualisations of this state of temporal disintegration. Nonetheless, they all describe a profound disruption in refugees' temporal orientation, where time becomes oppressive and fragmented, deeply intertwined with their sense of place and future aspirations. For instance, "agency-in-waiting" (Brun, 2015) reflects refugees' inability to act upon their goals, as their capacity to exercise agency is suspended amidst uncertain and constrained circumstances. "Protracted uncertainty" (Horst and Grabska, 2015) highlights the long-term instability that characterises refugees' lives, where the passage of time fails to align with their aspirations or the possibility of resolution. Similarly, "indeterminate liminality" (Alkhaled and Sasaki, 2022) or "perpetual liminality" (Harima and Plak, 2024) underscores the prolonged and pervasive nature of camp life, which obstructs refugees' ability to envision a stable future and undermines their capacity for action. Kodeih et al.'s (2023) "indeterminate temporariness" also emphasises the oppressive temporality of this state, marked by a bleak, uncertain future and an empty, meaningless present. Together, these concepts all converge to describe a suspended state of being that erodes agency and perpetuates the challenges of adapting to a new environment.

The disruption in time manifests profoundly on both personal and psychological levels as refugees grapple with feelings of entrapment, disempowerment, memory disturbances, and difficulty situating themselves in time and space (Sagbakken et al., 2020). Research shows that those with a negative time perspective – those who dwell on bad things that happened in the past or those who feel like they have no control over their future – are more susceptible to depressive symptoms and lack of psychological fulfilment. They often struggle to appreciate positive

memories and experiences, enjoy the present moment, set goals and work towards a better future (Papastamatelou et al., 2021; Marczak et al., 2021).

4.3.2.1 Temporal Disintegration and Refugee Entrepreneurship

In entrepreneurship, a future-oriented time perspective is often considered essential for success. Entrepreneurs are expected to anticipate market trends, strategise long-term goals, and adapt to emerging opportunities and challenges (Kapoor and Sinha, 2022; Levasseur et al., 2024; Przepiorka et al., 2016). This forward-looking approach helps them navigate uncertainty, allocate resources efficiently, and maintain resilience in the face of crises (Kapoor and Sinha, 2022). Entrepreneurs with a strong future orientation are better equipped for opportunity recognition and long-term planning, which are critical for sustaining motivation and achieving goals (Levasseur et al., 2024). This creates significant pressure to constantly envision and work toward a better future, often requiring a proactive and optimistic outlook.

Adopting a future-oriented perspective presents substantial challenges for refugee entrepreneurs, given the temporal disintegration they often experience (El-Shaarawi, 2015; Holman and Silver, 1998). The expectation to focus on long-term goals may clash with the psychological reality of refugees, who are often more concerned with immediate survival and security than with future planning (Horst and Grabska, 2015; Sagbakken et al., 2020). This disparity can create a significant burden as refugee entrepreneurs struggle to align their internal temporal orientation with the external demands of entrepreneurship.

In fact, Jiang et al. (2021) observed that refugee entrepreneurs who remain predominantly focused on the past, characterised by a strong desire to return to their home country and reliance on past experiences, often struggle to progress beyond the conceptualisation phase of the opportunity-production process. This past-oriented perspective hinders their ability to engage with

present opportunities and adapt their business ideas to the host country context, creating a critical barrier in navigating the entrepreneurial process. Moreover, refugees deeply embedded in their home country's culture may generate ideas based on outdated knowledge and networks, resulting in ventures misaligned with the host market. Frémeaux and Henry (2023) have also highlighted that a rigid focus on productivity and future orientation can be detrimental to both entrepreneurs' well-being and the quality of their work.

The emphasis on a highly agentic future-oriented perspective, crucial in entrepreneurship, can clash with refugees' lived experiences of protracted uncertainty and instability, characterised by a state of agency-in-waiting (Brun, 2015). The pressure to adopt this outlook may not only feel unattainable but can also trigger memories of past failures and losses, exacerbating feelings of inadequacy and helplessness. This can reawaken past traumas, making it difficult for refugee entrepreneurs to focus on future goals without being overwhelmed by anxiety and fear (Grisham et al., 2023; Schick et al., 2016). Insights from this research underscore that entrepreneurial processes are shaped by the psychological ability to adopt a future-oriented perspective—a challenge for many refugee entrepreneurs (Alkhaled and Sasaki, 2022; Brun, 2015; Harima and Plak, 2024).

4.3.2.2 Temporal Disintegration and Refugee Entrepreneurship Support Services

Support programs are often short and have rigid timelines driven by funding constraints, which can fail to accommodate the iterative, uncertain nature of refugee entrepreneurship, placing unrealistic expectations on refugee entrepreneurs without fully considering their obstacles and the extended timeframe they may need to succeed (Nair and Blomquist, 2020; Richey et al., 2022a). Business education training often assumes that participants can easily engage in future-oriented planning and decision-making. However, the emphasis on long-term business goals and strategic

planning may conflict with refugees' immediate concerns and preoccupations with past traumas, leading to frustration and disengagement (Harima and Plak, 2024; Holman and Silver, 1998). Concepts like budgeting, saving, and investment may seem irrelevant or unattainable to those stuck in a state of "agency-in-waiting" (Brun, 2015), exacerbating feelings of inadequacy and hindering entrepreneurial progress.

Additionally, a cognitive fixation on past traumas can make it difficult for refugees to trust new relationships or fully participate in community activities (Holman and Silver, 1998; Papadopoulos, 2018), leading to further isolation instead of building social capital – this social disconnection reinforces temporal disintegration, creating a cycle of alienation that complicates entrepreneurial efforts. Similarly, cultural orientation programs, designed to facilitate understanding of social norms in the host country, can highlight the discontinuity between past cultural practices and new expectations, deepening the sense of loss and displacement (Schippert et al., 2021; Warren and Nigbur, 2024).

4.3.3 Refugee Identity Dissolution

Fleeing one’s home country and seeking asylum profoundly disrupts an individual’s established identity, creating significant biographical fractures and identity fragmentation (Alkhaled and Sasaki, 2022; Berman et al., 2020; Märtsin, 2010; Rugina and Harima, 2024). Forced migration strips individuals of the societal roles, professional recognition, and community ties that once anchored their social identities (Alkhaled and Sasaki, 2022). The loss of home, as Alcock (2003) describes, represents more than physical displacement; it is a “rupture in the continuity of being,” leading to the fragmentation of the ego. The concept of ‘rupturing otherness’ highlights the self-estrangement refugees experience when there is a significant cultural gap between their culture of origin and the host culture (Märtsin, 2010). Navigating identity

reconstruction amidst cultural dislocation and the challenges of resettlement intensifies the trauma of displacement and profoundly impacts refugees' sense of self and social positioning (Colic-Peisker and Walker, 2003; Märtsin, 2010).

The identity dissolution can also entail the permanent loss or deactivation of professional identities, as many refugees must abandon their careers and aspirations, particularly affecting middle-class refugees who report a deep sense of lost potential and dissatisfaction with their current professional lives (Rugina and Harima, 2024; Warren and Nigbur, 2024). Beyond professional roles, displacement also disrupts personal identities tied to family and community connections, leaving refugees instead with an externally imposed administrative identity as "refugees." This stigmatised and devalued label further exacerbates the erosion of self-worth and societal recognition (Alfadhli and Drury, 2018; Colic-Peisker and Walker, 2003).

The "cultural identity jolt" often forces refugees to re-evaluate their identities and decide whether to maintain connections to their home country or adapt more toward the host community (Jones Christensen and Newman, 2024). To navigate this, refugees have been found to adopt various acculturation strategies, striving to balance their original cultural identity with the expectations and norms of the host society (Adeeko and Treanor, 2022; Bemak and Chung, 2017; Colic-Peisker and Walker, 2003). Acculturation is a multifaceted process that involves cultural adaptation and change resulting from interactions between different cultural groups (Ellis et al., 2010) and is deemed essential for refugees' psychological adjustment and identity reconstruction (Ivanova-Gongne et al., 2024; Jones Christensen and Newman, 2024).

However, the specific forms of identity work and acculturation strategies adopted by refugees vary depending on the levels of support and acceptance they receive in the host country (Alkhaled and Sasaki, 2022; Colic-Peisker and Walker, 2003). The identity reconstruction process

also varies based on the cultural gap between the refugee and the host country, as reconciling conflicting values can lead to culture shock, alienation, and identity confusion (Bemak and Chung, 2017; Ellis et al., 2010).

4.3.3.1 Identity Dissolution and Refugee Entrepreneurship

Entrepreneurial identity plays a pivotal role in entrepreneurial success, influencing strategies, behaviours, and interactions while serving as a guidepost for decision-making, resource mobilisation, and social capital development (Radu-Lefebvre et al., 2021; Mmbaga et al., 2020). For refugee entrepreneurs, this identity becomes even more significant, functioning as both a means of preserving their cultural roots and a vehicle for reinvention. Research highlights that identity choices in refugee entrepreneurship shape acculturation strategies, with the potential to help individuals navigate the complexities of integration (Jones Christensen and Newman, 2024). Additionally, entrepreneurial opportunities provide refugees with a powerful platform for identity reconstruction, allowing them to redefine themselves, gain agency, and make meaningful contributions to their new communities (Rugina and Harima, 2024).

However, refugees face significant challenges in forming an entrepreneurial identity due to identity dissolution and the complexities of their lived experiences. The identity void created due to losing their professional roles, societal status, and community connections (Wehrle et al., 2018; Rugina and Harima, 2024) can be exacerbated by expectations to embody entrepreneurial traits such as self-reliance, risk-taking, and innovation (Essers and Benschop, 2007; Swail and Marlow, 2018), which may conflict with their cultural norms and deepen the sense of identity loss and disconnection (Bemak and Chung, 2017; Märtsin, 2010). Without access to the foundational elements typically used to reconstruct identity, refugees can struggle to gather the resources and

confidence needed to navigate entrepreneurial paths, making identity reconstruction a significant hurdle (Berman et al., 2020).

When there are significant cultural differences between the host and the home country, the acculturation process can further complicate entrepreneurial identity formation, as refugees must reconcile multiple, potentially conflicting identities. Adapting to new roles as cultural minorities while simultaneously developing an entrepreneurial identity can result in role conflict, cognitive dissonance, and emotional distress (Bemak and Chung, 2017; Ivanova-Gongne et al., 2024). Refugees must also navigate the tension between honouring their cultural heritage and aligning with the norms of their new environment (Jones Christensen and Newman, 2024). There is not always a clear pathway to reclaiming professional roles or societal status, which can add to the challenges of developing a strong and coherent entrepreneurial identity. While some refugees navigate these challenges by creating ventures that specifically reinforce their cultural heritage or integrate into their new environment (Jones Christensen and Newman, 2024), the process remains fraught with emotional distress and barriers.

4.3.3.2 Identity Dissolution and Refugee Entrepreneurship Support Services

Support services often take a passive approach, expecting entrepreneurs to seek help independently when needed (Salmon and Singleton, 2023; Skran and Easton-Calabria, 2020), and frequently overlook the importance of identity reconstruction (Rawhouser et al., 2024; Richey et al., 2022a). This has been found to lead to missed opportunities to support refugees in rebuilding identities and integrating into new communities and placing unrealistic expectations on them without fully considering their obstacles.

The business education and language training offered to refugee entrepreneurs aim to equip them with the necessary skills to navigate the local business landscape. However, these programs

often require assimilation into the host country's business culture, potentially alienating refugees who may already be struggling with identity dissolution. The emphasis on mastering a new language and business jargon can reinforce feelings of inadequacy and disconnection from one's cultural roots, further complicating the identity reconstruction process (Bemak and Chung, 2017; Rugina and Harima, 2024). This pressure to conform to new norms can also exacerbate the trauma of losing one's native language and cultural identity, leading to a sense of self-betrayal and internal conflict (Alayarian, 2018) and increasing the challenge of finding a new identity. Moreover, the focus on formal compliance and financial literacy can highlight the loss of professional identity, particularly for middle-class refugees who may have held prestigious positions but now struggle with basic administrative tasks (Colic-Peisker and Walker, 2003). This experience can deepen the sense of disempowerment and exacerbate the identity crisis by reminding refugees of their diminished status in the new country.

Networking for refugees experiencing identity dissolution can be a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it can help build social capital and connection that supports identity reconstruction; on the other, it can expose refugees to the stigmatisation and prejudices associated with their “refugee” identity. Cultural orientation programs aim to facilitate the integration of refugees by introducing them to the social norms of the host country; however, these programs can function to highlight cultural differences, deepening the sense of “otherness” (Adeeko and Treanor, 2022; Bemak and Chung, 2017). The emphasis on adopting new cultural norms can create a conflict between maintaining one's original identity and conforming to the expectations of the host society, leading to cultural dissonance, identity confusion, and a sense of alienation (Bemak and Chung, 2017; Märtsin, 2010). This tension can be exacerbated by the pressure to reconcile values

from their country of origin with those of the host society, intensifying feelings of otherness and dislocation (Märtsin, 2010).

4.3.4 Refugee Risks of Retraumatisation

The refugee experience extends beyond initial displacement to include the long-term challenges of survival and adaptation in a new country (Papadopoulos and Hulme, 2018). The most distressing experiences can actually occur during the later phases rather than the initial traumatic events, as post-migratory factors can amplify the psychological impact of earlier traumatic events. Research suggests that the challenges refugees face during resettlement, such as inadequate living conditions, insecurity, and legal uncertainties, often correlate more strongly with distress than the initial trauma of displacement (Carlsson and Sonne, 2018; Papadopoulos, 2018). These ongoing adversities, compounded by daily stressors like bad news from relatives, family illnesses, and community conflicts, increase anxiety and fear and trigger memories of past traumas, resulting in unpredictable fluctuations in PTSD symptoms (Bruhn et al., 2018; Carlsson and Sonne, 2018).

Upon arrival in a host country, refugees often encounter situations that deprive them of autonomy and agency. As highlighted by Alayarian (2018), the dependency experienced by refugees, who must rely on external support and have limited control over their daily lives, can be deeply unsettling. Lack of financial stability and unemployment or underemployment are also significant contributors to the retraumatisation of refugees (Bruhn et al., 2018). The pressure to support themselves and their families in an unfamiliar environment, coupled with the uncertainty of their future prospects, can create a constant source of stress and anxiety (Carlsson and Sonne, 2018; Papadopoulos, 2018).

Retraumatisation is the reactivation or exacerbation of trauma-related symptoms and distress in individuals with pre-existing trauma (Pazderka et al., 2021). This can be caused by

subsequent exposure to a wide range of triggering events or situations (Alexander, 2012; Butler et al., 2011; Dallam, 2010; Pazderka et al., 2021; Papa and La Bash, 2012), including those encountered in support service settings (Butler et al., 2011). For refugees, these triggers often include daily stressors associated with displacement, such as social isolation, poverty, and discrimination, which are as impactful on mental health as prior displacement trauma (Miller and Rasmussen, 2017). Additionally, these triggers can include the inherent stressors of entrepreneurship, insensitive interactions with support providers, customers and other stakeholders, and situations that replicate the dynamics of their original trauma (Newman and Christensen, 2024; Rawhouser et al., 2024).

Furthermore, the interactions refugees have with support service providers and other institutional representatives can also be a source of retraumatisation. Lack of privacy, power imbalances, and cultural misunderstandings during these interactions can increase feelings of vulnerability and trigger trauma responses (Griffiths, 2018; Schippert et al., 2021). When support providers raise false hopes for change, this can also lead to disappointment and further trauma (Weber, 2019).

4.3.4.1 Retraumatisation and Refugee Entrepreneurship

Entrepreneurship is inherently demanding, involving significant risk, stress, uncertainty, long hours, heavy workloads, time constraints, and limited resources (Muñoz et al., 2023; Rauch et al., 2018). The entrepreneurial journey is often likened to an emotional rollercoaster, with frequent shifts between stress and moments of success (De Cock et al., 2020). These ups and downs are especially pronounced for refugee entrepreneurs, who face the added complexities of adapting to a new cultural context, navigating legal uncertainties, and managing the psychological impact of past traumas (Newman and Christensen, 2024; Papadopoulos and Hulme, 2018). The constant

state of alertness required in entrepreneurship can lead to emotional exhaustion and heightened anxiety, particularly when making decisions in uncertain conditions with scarce resources (Adeeko and Treanor, 2022; Salmon and Singleton, 2023).

The high levels of uncertainty refugees experience may actually correlate with a greater willingness to embrace uncertainty in their entrepreneurial endeavours (Paksoy et al., 2023). However, it is important to consider the potential impacts of this risk-taking on trauma. While moderate PTSD symptoms might enhance risk tolerance and resilience, severe PTSD symptoms have been found to decrease risk-taking behaviour, potentially hindering entrepreneurial activities (Augsburger and Elbert, 2017). Additionally, refugee entrepreneurs may overwork because of the pressure to succeed and neglect personal well-being, exacerbating isolation and stress (Bruhn et al., 2018; Muñoz et al., 2023). The stigma against seeking help in entrepreneurial cultures can also pressure refugees to project resilience and suppress emotional struggles, worsening mental health and leading to severe stress reactions, including depression, cognitive impairment, and physical health issues (Louie, 2016; Rauch et al., 2018).

4.3.4.2 Retraumatisation and Refugee Entrepreneurship Support Services

Entrepreneurship support services for refugee entrepreneurs can unintentionally impose burdens that may retraumatise individuals. These challenges often arise from the design and delivery of these services, which may overlook the unique psychological and emotional needs of refugees. Berman et al. (2020) highlighted that trauma influences individuals' perception of and integration of new experiences. Across all domains of support services – business education and language training, social skills and networking, and cultural orientation – the expectations within these programs can exacerbate existing mental health issues. The need to exert agency, maintain hope, and make progress throughout the program can lead to fear of failure or actual venture

failure, echoing previous humiliations, feelings of incompetence, and experiences of powerlessness. The vulnerability of refugee entrepreneurs can mean that even small “normal” failures in the entrepreneurial journey are experienced as retraumatising. Moreover, while aiming to foster independence, support services can unintentionally reinforce feelings of dependency and lack of control; reliance on external advisors, mentors, and bureaucratic systems can replicate dynamics of powerlessness, triggering trauma related to loss of autonomy and self-determination (Alayarian, 2018; Griffiths, 2018; Weber, 2019).

4.4. Framework for a Trauma-Informed Approach to Refugee Entrepreneurship Support

Trauma-informed care initially emerged in clinical and social service settings. This approach has now become a pivotal framework across healthcare, education, and other areas of social interaction, emphasises the importance of understanding the impact that trauma can have on an individual's well-being and life outcomes (Harris and Fallot, 2001; Miller et al., 2019; Reeves et al., 2015).

A trauma-informed approach, as outlined by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), aims to realise the extensive impact of trauma, recognise the signs and symptoms of trauma, respond by integrating trauma knowledge into practices, and actively seek to resist retraumatisation (Huang et al., 2014). The framework of trauma-informed care is built on strengths-based principles, where the focus is on identifying and enhancing survivors' existing capacities, transforming potentially maladaptive responses into useful skills (Reeves et al., 2015).

The six guiding principles of trauma-informed care are designed to be adaptable across diverse settings. *Safety* involves creating environments where individuals who have experienced trauma feel physically and psychologically secure; *trustworthiness and transparency* are achieved through transparent and open organisational operations and decision-making processes, fostering trust among refugees, community members, and the support organisation's staff; *peer support* leverages the lived experiences of refugees to establish safety, hope, and mutual recovery; *collaboration and mutuality* emphasise power-sharing and partnership at all organisational levels, recognising that healing occurs through relationships and shared decision-making; *empowerment and choice* focus on recognising and building upon individuals' strengths and fostering resilience; and finally, addressing *cultural, historical, and gender issues* involves actively countering cultural biases and incorporating culturally responsive practices to meet the diverse needs of refugees (Huang et al., 2014).

Implementing a trauma-informed approach requires comprehensive staff education, leadership support, and sustained resources. Practitioners need training in evidence-based, culturally appropriate interventions using trauma-specific tools. Leadership must oversee the integration of trauma-informed care through policies prioritising this approach. Ongoing training and workforce development should embed trauma-informed principles in hiring, supervision, and staff support, fostering environments that mitigate trauma's impact on clients and staff (Huang et al., 2014).

The proposed trauma-informed approach to refugee entrepreneurship support is grounded in SAMHSA's principles. It is structured around three main elements: *Temporal Reorientation*, *Identity Reconstruction*, and *Preventing Retraumatisation* (see Table 4.1. for an overview). We discuss how services can be redesigned to address temporal issues and identity challenges and,

subsequently, how integrating the principles of the trauma-informed approach can create an environment that prevents retraumatisation.

As the Table 4.1. indicates, we show how 1) mindfulness and bridging practices help refugees reconnect with the present and envision a positive future, 2) personal and collective entrepreneurial identity development practices enable refugees to rebuild strong, cohesive identities; and 3) safety, cultural sensitivity and peer support help providers reduce the risks of retraumatisation.

Table 4. 1

Framework for a Trauma-Informed Approach to Refugee Entrepreneurship Support

Core Elements	Challenges Addressed	Purpose	Practices	Activities and Expected Outcomes
Temporal Reorientation	Temporal disintegration disrupts refugees' ability to connect past, present, and future, which compromises their capacity to act on goals and adapt to new environments.	To reconnect refugees with the present and allow them to envision a positive future	**Mindfulness Practices**	***Activities:*** Routinised body scan, meditation, mindful movement, and breathing space interspersed with support programs
				Expected outcomes: Enhanced present-moment awareness and emotional grounding; reduced cognitive fixation on trauma
			Bridging Practices	***Activities:*** Creative and expressive activities (e.g., vision boards) guided toward developing "time-calibrated narratives" (Wood et al., 2021) based on preferred configuration of temporal dis/continuity and future-making
				Expected outcomes: Where they are now connected with where they aspire to be; sense of personal agency over present and future aspirations
Identity Reconstruction	Identity dissolution causes identity fractures and threatens the sense of self, requiring refugees to navigate complex processes of acculturation and identity reconstruction	Rebuild and reinforce a strong and coherent personal and entrepreneurial identity.	**Personal Identity Narratives**	***Activities:*** Re-authoring conversations; sharing personal stories with guided reflection on past, present, and future; weaving micro-narratives into a cohesive self-narrative
				Expected outcomes: Cohesive, flexible personal identity based on preferred configuration of redemptive, "the past is past," and "the past is our strength" narratives; goals aligned with reconstructed identities

	amidst cultural and social challenges in the host country.		**Collective Entrepreneurial Identity Creation**	***Activities:*** Collaborative activities (e.g., story circles, challenge workshops, and collaborative projects); networking and community events in safe spaces
				Expected outcomes: Collective identities that integrate shared refugee and entrepreneurial identities; sense of belonging; collective problem-solving, and resource sharing
Preventing Retraumatisation	Refugees are susceptible to retraumatisation during and after resettlement due to ongoing adversities and chronic stressors.	Establish a trauma-informed foundation for providing services.	**Safety**	***Activities:*** Consistent schedules with time deceleration; open communication; collective decision-making processes; creating safe spaces
				Expected outcomes: Trust, meaningful engagement, reduced uncertainty and pressure
			Cultural Sensitivity & Peer Support	***Activities:*** Translation services and translanguaging strategies; non-verbal communication; peer mentorship programs; culturally relevant and trauma-informed care training for staff
				Expected outcomes: Sense of belonging, decreased sense of isolation and alienation

4.4.1. Temporal Reorientation

Addressing temporal disintegration and the resulting "agency-in-waiting" requires a multi-faceted approach. Jiang et al. (2021) specifically highlighted the importance of incorporating present-focused activities in support programs to help refugee entrepreneurs balance present engagement with the more prevalent push for future-oriented thinking. Our goal is to offer practical support that transitions refugees from a place of suspended agency to active participation in their present and future lives. While organisations may adopt various approaches aligned with this principle, we propose two key interventions: mindfulness and bridging practices.

4.4.1.1 Mindfulness

Frémeaux and Henry (2023) emphasise the necessity of balancing high-paced activity with slower, reflective periods, particularly in entrepreneurship contexts. This principle highlights how, by fostering intentional periods of deceleration, entrepreneurs create space for reflection, creative thinking, and present focus. We propose integrating the Mindfulness-Based Trauma Recovery for Refugees (MBTR-R) program into current refugee entrepreneurship support services (Aizik-Reebs et al., 2021; Oren-Schwartz et al., 2023). MBTR-R is a structured, trauma-sensitive group intervention tailored to refugees' mental health needs. It has been found to result in significant improvements in trauma-related mental health, inhibition of intrusive, trauma-related thoughts, and increased self-compassion, aiding refugees in managing intrusive thoughts and remaining open to new experiences (Aizik-Reebs et al., 2021). For refugee entrepreneurs, moments of present-focused mindfulness can balance the push for future-focused entrepreneurial activities and aid temporal reorientation by unfixing the fixation on the past (Hinton et al., 2013; Oren-Schwartz et al., 2023).

The mindfulness program employs practices like body scan, sitting meditation, mindful movement, and the 3-minute breathing space to enhance mindfulness and attention regulation. These practices promote awareness and acceptance of bodily sensations and emotions without judgment or repression, helping participants detach from past traumas and fear of the future to instead focus on the present (Aizik-Reebs et al., 2021; Oren-Schwartz et al., 2023). By focusing on present experiences without judgment, participants learn to manage overwhelm and disengage from trauma-related thoughts, manage trauma symptoms, regulate emotions, and stay grounded (Oren-Schwartz et al., 2023).

Once the stress attached to temporal disintegration is reduced, entrepreneurship support programs can then engage in bridging practices that reconnect past, present and future within the entrepreneurial journey.

4.4.1.2 Bridging Practices

To address temporal disintegration as it relates to refugee entrepreneurs' complex relationship with the future, we propose two complementary mindsets to form the basis of bridging practices: continuity/discontinuity and future-making. First, entrepreneurship support programs should adopt a balanced approach to temporal continuity and discontinuity (Kira et al., 2024). Continuities help refugees draw on positive aspects of their past, such as cultural traditions, while discontinuities allow refugees to envision a future separate from past traumas. This balance is essential for addressing temporal disintegration, as continuity offers stability, while discontinuity encourages growth (Kira et al., 2024). The second mindset, future-making, actively transforms thinking of the future in abstract visions into concrete, manageable plans and actions (Aleong, 2022). This approach incorporates activities that help refugees rehearse, experiment, and enact new aspirations for the future.

While support organisations may design other interventions that incorporate these mindsets to address temporal issues facing refugee entrepreneurs, we propose operationalising these two mindsets through creative interventions such as “vision board” interventions infused with time-calibrated narratives, as described by Wood et al. (2021). These interventions can embody the balance of continuity/discontinuity and the actionable focus of future-making by helping refugees visually and narratively integrate their own configurations of past strengths, present stability, and future aspirations. Creative interventions like vision boards go beyond artistic exercises to tap into the unconscious (Burton and Lent, 2016). Vision boards, which collage images, words, and symbols of an individual's aspirations, facilitate imaginative thinking and link subconscious desires to conscious goals (Burton and Lent, 2016; Waalkes et al., 2019). These boards can evoke positive emotions and hope, empowering individuals to take control of their future narratives and enhancing a sense of agency and active participation in defining and visualising goals (Burton and Lent, 2016; Scott-Poe and Patel, 2024). This is further supported by Frémeaux and Henry (2023), who highlight the importance of creating space for creative thinking within entrepreneurial activities.

Within these vision boards, entrepreneurs can then begin to tell time-calibrated narratives that support their entrepreneurial journey. Time-calibrated narratives are cognitive tools that entrepreneurs can use to organise their actions within uncertain timelines, including the timing of first steps (initialisation), time to outcomes (pace), and sequence of actions (chronology). Support providers can guide refugees in constructing vision boards that revolve around these three temporal dimensions, encouraging participants to think about the "when" of their entrepreneurial journey. Participants can be directed to identify immediate, short-term actions (initialisation) that serve as attainable first steps, anticipate the duration between actions and outcomes (pace), and set out a

sequential path (chronology) for more complex milestones as they grow in confidence and skill. This encourages participants to mindfully sequence their entrepreneurial steps, starting with manageable tasks that build confidence and gradually moving to more complex goals. Such a process can assist participants in mentally connecting where they are now with where they aspire to be without feeling overwhelmed (Wood et al., 2021).

These narratives are supported by sharing the vision boards with others to gain feedback and reinforce commitment to the narratives. This allows participants to articulate the meanings behind their vision boards through storytelling, helping them connect visual elements to their goals and preferred narratives, bringing the unconscious to the surface to become conscious and more concrete (Aleong, 2022; Burton and Lent, 2016) and to receive feedback and encouragement, strengthening their commitment to each step and helping them adapt their timelines as needed (Wood et al., 2021). Finally, service providers can encourage participants to continually reflect on their vision boards outside of the sessions, discussing the differences between their current narratives and the preferred narratives depicted on their boards (Burton and Lent, 2016; Scott-Poe and Patel, 2024; Waalkes et al., 2019).

Integrating vision boards into refugee entrepreneurship training offers unique benefits by addressing psychological challenges like temporal disintegration that traditional tools like business plans or canvases often overlook. Vision boards creatively help refugees engage in imaginative, non-linear thinking and access to the subconscious, making abstract goals more achievable (Burton and Lent, 2016; Waalkes et al., 2019) and connecting their past, present, and future (Scott-Poe and Patel, 2024). By focusing on proximate and feasible goals while visualising immediate entrepreneurial actions, these exercises encourage participants to bound their temporal horizons,

fostering a sense of control over the near future and enabling them to navigate uncertainties with hope instead of fear.

Such activities address Richey and colleagues' (2022a) observation that refugee entrepreneurs need more time. Building on Kodeih et al. (2023), vision board exercises can serve as a form of "sheltering work". Kodeih and colleagues (2023) emphasise the important role of entrepreneurship support services in helping refugees develop "a reclaimed experience of time" characterised by a meaningful and extended present and a sense of control over the near future by focusing on proximate plans and concrete aspirations. This can enhance a sense of agency and reduce the overwhelming impact of indeterminate temporariness, increasing the likelihood of entrepreneurial success.

Thus, *Temporal Reorientation* can enhance several service categories in refugee entrepreneurship support organisations. For instance, mentorship and coaching programs that incorporate Mindfulness and Bridging practices can help refugees manage trauma symptoms, regulate emotions, and reduce the psychological burden of past traumas and future uncertainties, thus fostering better engagement with support services and entrepreneurial activities. Business skills and knowledge development programs that integrate temporal reorientation interventions can promote present-moment awareness and help develop feasible entrepreneurial plans for the near future, articulated through their time-calibrated narratives. Financial assistance services can also integrate temporal interventions to empower refugees to manage financial anxiety, set realistic financial goals, and develop savings plans within their vision boards. Organisations providing resources and infrastructure can include access to quiet spaces for meditation or group mindfulness and bridging practice sessions.

4.4.2 Identity Reconstruction

Entrepreneurial identity is a dynamic and multifaceted construct that emerges from the interplay of personal experiences and collective social interactions. Far from being static, it evolves through narratives, embodied practices, and shared group memberships, reflecting both individual aspirations and relational dynamics (Gur and Mathias, 2021; Kašperová and Kitching, 2014; Pan et al., 2019). This identity is particularly complex for refugee entrepreneurs, requiring them to balance the independence required for self-definition with the embeddedness of collective identities formed within their entrepreneurial ecosystems (Gur and Mathias, 2021; Pan et al., 2019). Such a dual focus can enable refugees to transform their stigmatised refugee identity into narratives of agency and belonging, fostering resilience and purpose amid adversity. While support organisations may design other interventions, we propose two main interventions: Personal Identity Narratives and Collective Entrepreneurial Identity Creation.

4.4.2.1 Personal Identity Narratives

Personal identity is an evolving, multidimensional construct reflecting an individual's unique sense of self, shaped by life experiences and interactions while maintaining continuity across time and contexts (Haslam et al., 2003; Luyckx et al., 2011). Thus, an entrepreneur's narrative personal identity reflects a dynamic interplay between their self-concept and their evolving venture experiences. It is shaped through storytelling, where they construct legitimacy and meaning for others, negotiating conflicts between personal ambitions and societal expectations (Gur and Mathias, 2021; Kašperová and Kitching, 2014; Pan et al., 2019). It has been found that entrepreneurs draw on various discursive resources to build and refine their identities, which include cultural narratives, personal stories, and professional discourses (Alkhaled and Sasaki, 2022; Watson, 2009). Narrative identity, then, is an evolving internal story that integrates past

experiences and future goals, providing coherence and meaning to life (McAdams, 2018). Shaped by cultural contexts and social interactions, it reflects both broad life themes and specific moments.

However, refugees often feel disconnected from the building blocks necessary to construct a strong and positive identity. A structured narrative approach – building on the time-calibrated narratives above – can help provide the building blocks. Narrative identity building has been found to benefit refugees in general by fostering posttraumatic growth and supporting the development of a positive identity despite past trauma (Kerr et al., 2020; Yusefzade et al., 2024); it enhances self-awareness, restores life coherence, and clarifies self-concept (Kerr et al., 2020; Yusefzade et al., 2024). This process can empower refugees to regain agency, shift from victimhood to proactive action, pursue goals, and build resilience, all of which are crucial for entrepreneurship (Yusefzade et al., 2024).

According to the literature, support services should consider three personal narratives when designing interventions: redemption narratives (McAdams et al., 2022), "the past is past", and "the past is our strength" narratives (Gemignani, 2011). First, redemption narratives play a crucial role in identity reconstruction by turning negative experiences into positive outcomes (McAdams et al., 2022). By reframing adversity as a source of strength and learning, individuals can shift from a passive, victimised identity to an empowered one. Second, when designing interventions for refugee entrepreneurs, it is crucial to find a flexible balance between the "the past is past" narrative and the "the past is our strength" narrative (Gemignani, 2011). Setting aside the past helps manage emotional pain and build a future-oriented identity while drawing on the past creates continuity and strength in disrupted lives (De Haene et al., 2018; Gemignani, 2011). Refugees will often lean toward one of these narratives more than the other: some pursue identity reinvention, consciously distancing themselves from previous identities associated with trauma (Jones Christensen and

Newman, 2024), drawing on the "the past is past" narrative; others engage in identity reinforcement, embracing and leveraging their cultural heritage in their ventures (Jones Christensen and Newman, 2024), which corresponds with the "the past is our strength" narrative.

Encouraging conscious, reflexive exploration of both narratives can allow refugees to develop a stronger sense of self. This flexible approach supports the "both/and" approach in maintaining the balance between "the past is past" and "the past is our strength" (De Haene et al., 2018; Gemignani, 2011). This approach can help refugees transform trauma into self-healing narratives and establish strong, positive identities that incorporate both their heritage and future aspirations. We propose a Story Circle intervention designed to address the identity challenges of refugee entrepreneurs where they share, express, and integrate small stories (Bonini Baldini, 2019; Moore, 2017); these small stories then build up to a cohesive narrative that reflects a coherent sense of self. It is important to note that this practice, in particular, requires expertise in trauma-informed care and managing potentially difficult conversations.

To begin, participants share personal stories in a group setting. This practice requires but also fosters trust and allows each participant's story to emerge naturally, supporting identity reconstruction through dialogic and relational processes (McAdams, 2018; Radu-Lefebvre et al., 2021; Baldini, 2019; Moore, 2017; McDonough and Colucci, 2021). Facilitators guide participants to reflect on their past, present, and future through micro-narratives—small, significant stories that reconnect them with their personal journeys, drawing out who they are (Yusefzade et al., 2024). Participants are encouraged to explore both distancing from past identities associated with trauma and embracing their cultural heritage, aligning with the "both/and" approach (Gemignani, 2011; De Haene et al., 2018).

In the next step, participants select key themes to highlight across their stories, weaving together micro-narratives into a cohesive self-narrative (Bonini Baldini, 2019; McDonough and Colucci, 2021; Moore, 2017; Yusefzade et al., 2024). They explore alternative possible selves (Stewart and Neimeyer, 2001), including identity reinvention, identity reinforcement, and repositioning of tradition (Jones Christensen and Newman, 2024; Alkhaled and Sasaki, 2022). Facilitators guide participants in making deliberate choices about which past experiences to include in their broader self-narrative, encouraging a flexible reinterpretation of self that integrates both their heritage and future entrepreneurial aspirations. In a supportive, non-judgmental setting, participants are encouraged to share openly, fostering mutual recognition. The feedback received helps strengthen their entrepreneurial identity and reinforces the positive aspects of their journey. This step also plays a crucial role in building community and mutual understanding among participants (Bonini Baldini, 2019; Schweitzer et al., 2014). Participants reinforce a positive self-concept by highlighting the redemptive aspects of their narratives and the flexible balance between the past and the future.

The final step focuses on applying and reinforcing the newly developed personal identity while planning for the future, bringing together identity and temporal work (Chow, 2015; Yusefzade et al., 2024). With support from peers and service providers, participants envision and plan the next chapter of their life story by setting specific, actionable goals aligned with their reconstructed identities. To realise these goals, participants engage in detailed “re-authoring” conversations (Hutto and Gallagher, 2017) that involve practical planning, strategising, and identifying the necessary steps, resources, and milestones (Chow, 2015; Yusefzade et al., 2024).

Thus, by integrating redemption narratives and encouraging a flexible balance between neglecting and embracing the past, this intervention helps refugee entrepreneurs transform trauma

into self-healing narratives and establish cohesive personal identities that incorporate both their heritage and future aspirations (Gemignani, 2011; De Haene et al., 2018).

4.4.2.2 Collective Entrepreneurial Identity Creation

A strong entrepreneurial identity is important for success (Alkhaled and Sasaki, 2022; Haşim and Soppe, 2023), and entrepreneurial support services are well-positioned to help refugees develop this identity through co-creation with other refugee entrepreneurs (Kodeih et al., 2023). Such collective entrepreneurial identity can emerge from the shared sense of belonging and mutual understanding among entrepreneurs in the program, shaped by their social roles, group memberships, and collaborative practices; it is a dynamic process where personal and collective identities intertwine, enabling entrepreneurs to navigate tensions between individual autonomy and community engagement (Gur and Mathias, 2021; Kašperová and Kitching, 2014; Pan et al., 2019).

Developing a collective identity among refugees can foster empowerment and mutual support. It builds social networks that provide emotional support, reduces stigma, and buffers against the identity challenges of displacement (Byrne, 2016; Schmid, 2020). However, this identity cannot be defined solely by the stigmatised and liminal "refugee" label (Alfadhli and Drury, 2018; Schmid, 2020). Instead, this identity can arise from shared experiences and a sense of common fate (Alfadhli and Drury, 2018), enabling mutual aid, collective actions, and access to identity resources that are more effective collectively than individually (Alfadhli and Drury, 2018; Byrne, 2016). We focus, in particular, on how refugee entrepreneurs can collectively develop a shared entrepreneurial identity.

Refugee entrepreneurship support organisations can play a key role in entrepreneurial identity co-creation by providing safe and nurturing environments (Kodeih et al., 2023). By

"fostering a local place" and cultivating a sense of belonging among participants, refugees can then co-construct narratives of resilience and agency, reinforcing their shared entrepreneurial identity as they move through the program and develop their ventures. It is through social interactions and sharing personal stories that refugee entrepreneurs form deeper connections and develop a cohesive group identity (Phillips et al., 2013).

Importantly, support organisations can aid in co-constructing an identity that transcends the "refugee" label, encouraging participants to collectively view themselves as empowered entrepreneurs with a common purpose (Alfadhli and Drury, 2018; Byrne, 2016). This is not to deny the refugee label but instead to embrace a dual identity as a positive distinction that solidifies their collective identity and reinforces their uniqueness (Khayesi et al., 2014). As relationships deepen and circumstances evolve, this identity continuously adapts, enhancing refugees' ability to succeed in business endeavours by leveraging collective support to overcome challenges (Hajek, 2023; Khayesi et al., 2014; Phillips et al., 2013).

Where the act of sharing personal identity narratives draws out an individual's unique life story, crafting and sharing common stories during the program can facilitate a collective entrepreneurial identity for the group. Both structured and informal activities contribute to fostering connections on professional and personal levels, which are essential in building this cohesive group identity (Hajek, 2023). Given the emphasis on social networks within support organisations, group narrative activities can likely be integrated into existing offerings. Adding formal and informal story circles into existing social events can create a platform for participants to share personal stories about their entrepreneurial journeys, focusing on common challenges, sacrifices, and achievements and facilitating collective identity development (Khayesi et al., 2014; Phillips et al., 2013).

Emphasising entrepreneurial capabilities through these stories can help reduce the stigma associated with being a refugee (Alfadhli and Drury, 2018). To reinforce a collective entrepreneurial identity, challenge workshops can be added that culminate in collaborative problem-solving projects. These projects require teamwork, resource pooling, and decision-making, strengthening the sense of collective identity and purpose (Hajek, 2023; Haşim and Soppe, 2023). Such collaborations can help entrepreneurs bond over shared goals and values, creating a supportive network that extends beyond the workshop setting (Alfadhli and Drury, 2018; Byrne, 2016).

Collective entrepreneurial identity creation helps refugee entrepreneurs address identity dissolution challenges by co-creating a strong collective identity that integrates their dual identities – encouraging identification as both refugees and entrepreneurs empowers participants to transcend stigmatising labels, reclaim agency, and construct a more empowering identity. This approach can also promote integration by celebrating cultural backgrounds while preserving their sense of self, working alongside personal identity narratives to mitigate the effects of identity dissolution.

Thus, *Identity Reconstruction* practices can be integrated into existing support services in several ways. In particular, any collaborative activities can integrate elements of entrepreneurial identity co-creation. Mentors can use sessions not only to advance the venture but also to ask probing questions that allow for further elaboration of identity narratives; networking opportunities, such as events and support groups, can promote collective entrepreneurial identity creation and provide practice in sharing the identity with others in a safe space, where narratives can be further refined or even changed over time; shared problem-solving that focuses on venture success can also be a source of shared identity building.

4.4.3. Preventing Retraumatisation

4.4.3.1 Safety

In the context of refugee entrepreneurship support services, it is essential to establish an environment of safety that functions as a "holding environment while they settle" (Alayarian, 2018). The physical environment and the attitudes and behaviours of staff play a vital role in fostering a sense of safety (Cleveland et al., 2018; Kodeih et al., 2023; Miller et al., 2019). Fostering a local place where refugees feel safe and supported in their entrepreneurial pursuits is crucial, as it helps mitigate the negative psychological effects of oppressive temporality and allows refugees to reclaim a sense of agency and purpose in their lives (Kodeih et al., 2023).

To provide psychological safety, it is essential to create spaces where refugee entrepreneurs can express their identities-in-progress and share their experiences without fear of judgment or pressure to always be resilient. These safe spaces play a crucial role in fostering acceptance and understanding, particularly for individuals who have experienced significant rejection or discrimination (Alayarian, 2018). Allowing for vulnerability and struggle instead of constant progress is therefore critical. Programs designed with a rigid focus on productivity can be detrimental to both entrepreneurs' well-being and the quality of their work (Frémeaux and Henry, 2023). Though well-intentioned, such programs increase pressure and can add to the uncertainty experienced by refugees in their resettlement.

To counter the potential for added pressure and uncertainty, support services should avoid tight timelines and highly controlling practices, excessive surveillance, or unnecessary restrictions, which can trigger feelings of shock and humiliation and ultimately lead to retraumatisation (Cleveland et al., 2018). By adopting a slower, more deliberate approach—including periods of time deceleration mentioned above, which allow for reflection, creative thinking, and relationship

building—these services can create a safe environment where refugees can integrate new experiences at their own pace, leading to more sustainable outcomes (Frémeaux and Henry, 2023).

Moreover, structuring day-to-day activities based on routines can provide a sense of purpose and rhythm to refugees' lives (Kodeih et al., 2023). Establishing consistent routines, such as scheduled training or workshops, not only strengthens the interventions but also helps refugees regain control over their near future and experience a meaningful and extended present (Kodeih et al., 2023). Stability, predictability, and consistent interactions over time can also build trust (Cleveland et al., 2018; Schick et al., 2016).

Establishing trust is critical for a feeling of safety, as well as for entrepreneurial success. This is particularly difficult to establish in the context of refugees, who have likely had many negative experiences with organisations that failed to fulfil promises, eroding trust in new support systems (Richey et al., 2022a). Programs aiming to support refugee entrepreneurs must work hard to address these challenges by fostering a psychologically safe environment where meaningful, trusting relationships can develop. Service providers should attempt to address and minimise power imbalances, as refugees, especially those who have endured significant trauma, may be highly sensitive to dynamics involving authority, cultural misunderstandings, or privacy concerns (Schippert et al., 2021). These factors can evoke memories of past abuses, making it crucial for providers to adopt a client-centred framework that builds trust (Griffiths, 2018).

Providers should create interactions where refugees feel acknowledged and understood, avoiding behaviours that seem like gatekeeping, which can undermine trust (Roche et al., 2020). While service changes and resource limitations may be unavoidable, they should be handled carefully and transparently. Support services should prioritise transparency in activities, processes, and plans so refugees fully understand the steps taken (Weber et al., 2019). By keeping refugees

informed and supported, organisations enhance their sense of safety (Cleveland et al., 2018; Schick et al., 2016). Research shows that involving refugees in decision-making processes and offering them choices regarding the services they receive helps restore their sense of control and encourages self-advocacy (Im et al., 2021). This approach promotes self-efficacy by encouraging refugees to actively engage in their healing process, set personal goals, and develop skills that contribute to their well-being (Im et al., 2021; Miller et al., 2019).

In addition to a non-judgemental environment based on trust and transparency, staff competence and sensitivity are essential for addressing trauma safely. Without proper training, staff may overlook signs of anxiety or panic during activities, leading to unintentional harm (Schippert et al., 2021). Continuous education on the trauma related to displacement equips staff with the skills to identify and respond appropriately, including referring individuals to external mental health support when necessary. Comprehensive training should involve all levels of staff to ensure a unified understanding of refugees' challenges (Miller et al., 2019).

4.4.3.2 Cultural Sensitivity & Peer Support

Cultural sensitivity is another crucial factor in supporting refugee entrepreneurs, as it honours their diverse backgrounds and experiences (Im and Swan, 2021; Hinton et al., 2013). Entrepreneurship support organisations can foster deeper engagement by recruiting and training staff with cultural and linguistic connections to participants (Richey et al., 2022a). Staff knowledge, training, and self-awareness are critical components in creating a supportive environment.

It has been found that standard approaches focused on adapting to the host country's culture often miss the opportunity to build bridges across the cultural divide; instead, recognising that refugees have diverse acculturation goals can help tailor support services to effectively address

their specific needs and aspirations (Jones Christensen and Newman, 2024). For example, for refugees pursuing reinvention, encouraging them to envision future selves and goals that may diverge from their past experiences can be empowering; conversely, those focused on reinforcement can be supported in integrating their cultural heritage and skills into their future aspirations (Jones Christensen and Newman, 2024). Thus, tailoring support to refugees' specific cultural contexts—including language and beliefs—and individual choices not only ensures that interventions resonate effectively (Im and Swan, 2021; Im et al., 2021) but also fosters a sense of belonging and respect (Schippert et al., 2021). By moving beyond one-size-fits-all models of cultural adaptation, organisations can better address the diverse needs of refugees (Im et al., 2021), decreasing the stress and pressure of adapting to a new culture and reducing the likelihood of inadvertently retraumatising individuals.

Cultural competence is also crucial for service providers working with refugees, as it involves understanding how different cultures express distress, use coping mechanisms, and engage in traditional healing practices (McKeon et al., 2024). This competence helps service providers support healing, build on existing emotional resources, and recognise a lack of coping. Cultural competency training for staff can enhance understanding of the intersection between mental health, trauma, and refugee entrepreneurship and how trauma affects refugees differently based on their cultural backgrounds (McKeon et al., 2024).

Furthermore, addressing language barriers is vital in refugee trauma-informed support services (Schippert et al., 2021). While basic language skills suffice for daily tasks, refugees often rely on their native language to express emotions. Translation services, though essential, may limit the sharing of personal struggles (Kakos, 2024; Schippert et al., 2021). Incorporating strategies like translanguaging—using both home and instructional languages—enhances understanding and

communication (Kakos, 2024). Non-verbal methods, such as music and dance, bridge language gaps, provide emotional outlets and foster new social networks (Thornton and Spalding, 2018). These culturally and linguistically responsive practices enable support services to better address refugee needs, reducing entrepreneurship's compounding pressures to better prevent retraumatisation.

Peer support is another practice that is integral to trauma-informed care, empowering refugee entrepreneurs by addressing socio-cultural challenges and fostering resilience (Mahon, 2022; Portyanko et al., 2023). Collaborative peer relationships can provide essential resources like mentorship, emotional support, and coping strategies (Mahon, 2022; Portyanko et al., 2023). Shared cultural roots can further aid acculturation choices, preserve cultural identity, and promote both well-being and entrepreneurial success (Block et al., 2018; Mahon, 2022). Training settled refugees as peer mentors can equip them to lead support sessions, creating environments where newly arrived refugees can access resources and address challenges collaboratively. These sessions, rooted in shared experiences, provide psychosocial support and help mitigate trauma's effects on identity (Mahon, 2022; Berman et al., 2020). Incorporating paraprofessionals and peer educators from refugee communities into entrepreneurship support services can enable culturally grounded and strengths-based interventions (Block et al., 2018).

Thus, practices for *Preventing Retraumatisation* can enhance existing refugee entrepreneurship support services in several ways. For instance, mentorship and coaching programs can incorporate practices like time deceleration, transparent communications, and check-ins to ensure a psychologically safe environment, enabling refugees to explore entrepreneurial opportunities without undue pressure. Structured day-to-day activities, such as business skill workshops or creative sessions, can provide a sense of stability and purpose, mitigating the adverse

effects of uncertainty and fostering meaningful engagement. Financial and business development services can also ensure that timelines are flexible and goals are tailored to individual pacing, reducing the risk of retraumatisation. Additionally, creating transparent communication processes and recruiting culturally and linguistically aligned staff through all aspects of the program can build trust, enhancing refugees' confidence in the support systems and encouraging sustainable entrepreneurial progress.

4.5. Discussion

4.5.1. Contributions

Research has shown the many benefits of entrepreneurial support programs for refugees (e.g., Meister and Mauer, 2019; Newman and Christensen, 2021; Richey et al., 2022a); however, this research also clearly articulates the limitations of these programs and specifically calls for the development of trauma-informed services (e.g., Newman and Christensen, 2024; Rawhouser et al., 2024). Refugee trauma has been found to significantly shape refugees' lived experiences, influencing their capacity to adapt to new environments, engage in entrepreneurial activities, and benefit from support services (Bemak and Chung, 2017; Disney and McPherson, 2020; Im and Swan, 2021; Miller et al., 2019; Rawhouser et al., 2024). In fact, even when these organisations use "best practices" found in the entrepreneurship support organisation literature, their services can negatively impact refugee entrepreneurs (Newman and Christensen, 2021). We develop a framework that can address these challenges, integrating trauma-informed care into the work of entrepreneurship support programs. In doing so, we make several contributions to the literature.

Given that this work is new to the field of refugee entrepreneurship, our primary objective is to establish a foundation and agenda for research going forward. Existing research has recently drawn our attention to broader mental health domains such as neurodiversity, PTSD, anxiety, and

depression within entrepreneurship (Cubbon et al., 2021; Gish et al., 2022; Hatak et al., 2021; Stephan et al., 2023) and the way trauma can negatively impact refugee entrepreneurs specifically (Newman and Christensen, 2024). But trauma is multifaceted, encompassing a range of psychological, emotional, and social disruptions (Fazel et al., 2005; Papadopoulos, 2018). We identify three key impacts of trauma that we argue are particularly salient challenges within the entrepreneurial context: temporal disintegration (Holman and Silver, 1998; Kira et al., 2024; Sagbakken et al., 2020), identity dissolution (Alcock, 2003; Berman et al., 2020; Märtsin, 2010), and the risk of retraumatisation (Bruhn et al., 2018; Carlsson and Sonne, 2018; Papadopoulos, 2018). Refugees often experience temporal disintegration, where trauma disrupts their sense of time, making it hard to focus on the present or plan for the future (Harima and Plak, 2024; Holman and Silver, 1998) – critical temporal orientations for entrepreneurs (Alkhaled and Sasaki, 2022; Wood et al., 2021); and refugees often face profound disruptions to their sense of self when fleeing their home countries, making it challenging to reconstruct their identities in a new cultural context (Alkhaled and Sasaki, 2022; Berman et al., 2020; Märtsin, 2010; Rugina and Harima, 2024), and limiting their ability to build the necessary entrepreneurial identity (Radu-Lefebvre et al., 2021). Refugees are also at risk of retraumatisation as they settle into the host country (Nascimento and Pureza, 2024; Papadopoulos, 2018; Salmon and Singleton, 2023), a risk that is exacerbated in programs that require trust and risk-taking and often impose a rigid timeline (Richey et al., 2022a).

The framework we then develop specifies interventions that target these challenges, outlining the overarching practice, key activities, and expected outcomes. Our framework adapts practices from the trauma-informed care literature (Butler et al., 2011; Harris and Fallot, 2001; Huang et al., 2014; Im and Swan, 2021; Im et al., 2021; Miller et al., 2019; Reeves et al., 2015) to develop entrepreneurial practices that aim to restore a present and future time orientation, develop

a strong and cohesive identity, and ensure safety and culturally sensitive services that avoid the risks of retraumatisation. In doing so, our approach goes beyond the traditional focus on resilience (Ayala and Manzano, 2014; Shepherd et al., 2020) and business achievements (Newman and Christensen, 2021), acknowledging the deeper psychological needs of refugee entrepreneurs to have space and time for healing. In doing so, we challenge the assumption in the literature that resilience is always good, helping people rise above traumatic events and navigate the challenges of entrepreneurship. We draw on the trauma literature (Alayarian, 2018; Bemak and Chung, 2017; Papadopoulos, 2018) to argue that a singular focus on resilience can negatively impact entrepreneurs who have faced extreme trauma. Without balancing the push for resilience with an acceptance of vulnerability, entrepreneurs are at the risk of being retraumatised and unlikely to succeed in their entrepreneurial pursuits.

By advocating for creative interventions, such as vision boards and story circles, this study expands the scope of entrepreneurship support services (Jürgens et al., 2022; Harima et al., 2019; Newman and Christensen, 2021), fostering a holistic and adaptive approach to engagement. These creative practices provide activities that address the unique challenges faced by refugee entrepreneurs, simultaneously expanding and customising the toolbox available to refugee entrepreneurship support programs. Importantly, these practices address the embodied, non-conscious impacts of trauma and healing (Alayarian, 2018; Papadopoulos, 2018; Van der Kolk, 1994). We, therefore, suggest creative interventions that operate below the surface are a critical feature of support for those who have experienced trauma.

The framework also broadens the understanding of entrepreneurial identity formation in the context of displacement by highlighting the impact of identity dissolution on refugee entrepreneurs (Adeeko and Treanor, 2022; Alkhaled and Sasaki, 2022; Jones Christensen and

Newman, 2024; Rugina and Harima, 2024). The loss of social roles, professional recognition, and community ties due to forced migration creates an identity void that is challenging to navigate. These contribute to an expanded understanding of entrepreneurial identity as a dynamic process influenced by individual aspirations and socio-contextual disruptions, particularly under conditions of forced displacement. Our suggestions for approaching this issue involve an interplay between personal and entrepreneurial identities, individual narrative reconstruction and collective co-creation, providing flexibility around the integration of cultural and refugee identities.

Future research should prioritise the empirical validation of our conceptual framework, including pilot testing in diverse contexts, to assess its effectiveness and refine the model. Research should also explore the framework's adaptability across different refugee groups, considering the varying cultural, social, and economic conditions that may influence the success of interventions. Comparative studies can help identify the necessary adjustments to tailor the framework to specific refugee populations, paying particular attention to the degree of cultural differences between the home and host countries.

Moreover, while the framework offers a holistic approach to supporting refugee entrepreneurs, it is essential to acknowledge that entrepreneurship may not always be the best choice for all refugees. A deep analysis of this issue is beyond the scope of the current paper, but we encourage future research to explore these contingencies.

Further investigation is needed to understand the impact of intersectional identities, such as gender, age, disability, and religion, on the entrepreneurial experiences of refugees. Developing tools to measure psychological *and* entrepreneurial outcomes will be crucial for evaluating the framework's success. Research should also focus on the sustainability and scalability of the proposed interventions and the integration of the framework with existing economic and social

structures in host countries. These efforts will ensure a more effective approach to supporting refugee entrepreneurs in practice.

4.5.2. Practical Implications

Even when services offer mental health support to refugees, it is often separate from entrepreneurial support services (Disney and McPherson, 2020; Im et al., 2021; Silove et al., 2017). One of the biggest implications for policy and practice is the need to *integrate* trauma-informed care into entrepreneurial support services. Because trauma directly impacts factors critical for entrepreneurial success and the entrepreneurial journey has the potential to impact trauma, we argue that separate mental health support is not sufficient. Instead, we suggest that refugee entrepreneurship programs prioritise a holistic approach by integrating mental health support with entrepreneurial training. By reconnecting refugees with the present and allowing them to envision a positive future, integrated services can address temporal disintegration and build actionable entrepreneurial steps toward the future. By helping refugees rebuild their sense of self and establishing a collective entrepreneurial identity, integrated services can address identity dissolution and enhance social cohesion within communities. Integrated services are also better positioned to ensure programs are designed to avoid retraumatisation and staff and peer mentors are trained to respond sensitively. Our framework also works toward shifting the focus of entrepreneurship support programs from purely economic outcomes to include psychological, emotional, and social well-being. This broader approach ensures that programs address the multidimensional challenges faced by refugee entrepreneurs. Table 4.1. provides examples of the activities and expected outcomes associated with each of these three practices.

Another key implication of our framework is the need for flexibility *and* consistency, and room to explore within the programs. Entrepreneurship support should adopt flexible timelines

and periods of deceleration and emphasise short-term achievable goals to align with refugees' immediate needs and mitigate feelings of overwhelm associated with long-term future planning. Programs should simultaneously provide consistent routines and support structures to foster stability and trust among participants. While we suggest particular mindsets and identities, we also highlight the need for each entrepreneur to find their own balance of opposing elements, such as continuity and discontinuity, reinvention or reinforcement. Focusing on collaborative projects and shared problem-solving can strengthen participants' sense of belonging and agency, mitigating the effects of displacement and trauma. By embedding these practices into their operations, support organisations can create environments that empower refugees to thrive both personally and professionally. However, balancing the inclusion of trauma and entrepreneurship training is incredibly sensitive. We, therefore, recommend broader flexibility in offering opportunities for addressing trauma without pushing refugees to engage in ways they are not comfortable with.

Finally, we acknowledge the challenges of implementing our framework for trauma-informed care within entrepreneurial support organisations. The complexity of the framework may be difficult for organisations to implement effectively, as it requires a multidisciplinary approach that not all organisations can provide. There is also a risk of cultural generalisation, where interventions may inadvertently oversimplify or stereotype diverse refugee populations, necessitating highly individualised support that can be resource-intensive. Scalability is another significant challenge – personalised interventions may lose effectiveness when expanded to larger groups, requiring innovative solutions to maintain quality and impact. We suggest that these services require extensive planning by organisations, strong support from policymakers and funders, and deliberate evaluation and adjustment over time as we work towards stronger support for refugees in their entrepreneurial journeys.

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Chapter 5

Entrepreneurial Emancipation and Autonomy Through a Freirean Lens: Case of Bar Hostesses in Kenya

This paper was submitted, on January 3, 2025, to the Academy of Management Conference 2025 (Entrepreneurship Division) and is currently, January 26, 2025, under review.

5. Preamble

The COVID-19 pandemic has been widely conceptualized as a collective trauma – an event or series of events that disrupt the social fabric, carries wide-ranging psychological ramifications, and yields long-lasting effects on both individuals and communities (Kalsched, 2021; Stanley et al., 2021; Silver et al., 2021). While this framing applies to global populations, marginalized groups, such as sex workers in Kenya, experienced disproportionate adversities that amplified the pandemic's traumatic impact (Babu et al., 2024; Hassan et al., 2023; Mantell et al., 2021).

Collective trauma, in the context of COVID-19, involves chronic uncertainty, fear, and repeated exposure to stressors that affect entire populations simultaneously (Silver et al., 2021; Stanley et al., 2021). Unlike shorter-term crises—such as natural disasters or terrorist attacks—the pandemic persisted for an extended period, which undermined people's ability to regain stability (Stanley et al., 2021). The sense of insecurity stemmed from an "invisible enemy" (Kalsched, 2021), wherein the virus was neither readily observable nor quickly contained. Lockdowns and curfews, although intended to prevent transmission, necessitated social isolation and quarantines that undermined critical forms of community support (Kalsched, 2021; Silver et al., 2021). Consequently, many individuals experienced intensified fear, helplessness, and psychological distress as the pandemic lingered (Silver et al., 2021).

Against this backdrop, Kenyan sex workers faced unique and acute challenges, compounding the collective trauma that COVID-19 caused globally. Economic insecurity, housing instability, and social exclusion – already prevalent in the sex work community – were heightened by the health crisis (Babu et al., 2024; Hassan et al., 2023). These factors conspired to produce a multi-layered traumatic experience, where the universal stressors of the pandemic were magnified by the specific realities of engaging in criminalized labor, stigma, and unequal access to resources.

Severe Economic Hardship: For sex workers, collective trauma manifested through severe and sudden income loss as COVID-19 restrictions shut down typical work venues like bars, clubs, and hotels (Babu et al., 2024; Hassan et al., 2023). Clients themselves faced economic challenges, reducing their spending power and availability (Babu et al., 2024). In an industry reliant on in-person interactions, curfews and lockdowns curtailed opportunities to earn, leading many to accept more precarious or lower-paying arrangements to survive (Mantell et al., 2021). The chronic nature of the pandemic meant sex workers had fewer and fewer coping strategies over time, reinforcing a traumatic sense of hopelessness and despair.

Increased Violence and Exploitation: Sex workers already contend with a high incidence of violence; however, COVID-19 deepened this vulnerability. Restrictive measures pushed some to conduct business in private residences, heightening the risk of physical or sexual harm (Babu et al., 2024; Mantell et al., 2021). Law enforcement authorities tasked with enforcing curfews contributed to this traumatic environment through harassment, extortion, and even sexual coercion (Hassan et al., 2023). The fear of violence – exacerbated by limited work options – became a defining feature of the pandemic period, compounding the collective shock, anxiety, and stress experienced in these communities (Babu et al., 2024).

Stigma, Discrimination, and Social Exclusion: The criminalization of sex work in Kenya rendered sex workers vulnerable to social stigma and discrimination, which escalated during the pandemic (Hassan et al., 2023). Some were wrongly labeled as vectors for COVID-19 transmission, intensifying community hostility and surveillance (Babu et al., 2024). This stigmatizing environment undermined trust in public institutions and deterred many from seeking financial or medical assistance (Hassan et al., 2023). In effect, sex workers were systematically excluded from relief programs meant to mitigate pandemic-related hardships (Mantell et al., 2021).

Disrupted Access to Healthcare: Curfews and mobility restrictions limited both the hours and the availability of sexual and reproductive health services, which are vital for sex workers (Babu et al., 2024; Mantell et al., 2021). Financial burdens made it difficult to afford transportation to medical facilities, while stigma further discouraged help-seeking (Babu et al., 2024). Many missed critical antiretroviral therapy appointments or lacked access to contraceptive methods (Mantell et al., 2021).

Housing Insecurity and Demolitions: Beyond sex work-specific vulnerabilities, many sex workers in Nairobi reside in informal settlements (Hassan et al., 2023). During early COVID-19 lockdowns, large-scale demolitions displaced thousands of residents, including sex workers (Hassan et al., 2023). The simultaneous loss of livelihood and shelter is emblematic of how broader structural injustices collided with the pandemic to produce profound stress. With minimal avenues for safe housing and little capacity to socially distance, the resulting insecurity and chaos contributed to feelings of powerlessness.

Mental Health Challenges and Isolation: The pandemic's isolation measures reverberated across all communities, but especially among already marginalized groups. Restrictions on movement and social gatherings severed communal support networks that sex workers often relied on for emotional and financial aid (Hassan et al., 2023). Rising cases of anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation (Babu et al., 2024) highlight the intersection of collective trauma with longstanding marginalization. Moreover, quarantines cut off social outlets, exacerbating loneliness and stress for sex workers who often lack access to mental health services.

Strained Family and Household Dynamics: School closures meant children stayed home full-time, adding layers of complexity to sex workers' lives (Hassan et al., 2023). Financial strain intensified, fueling household tensions and, in some cases, intimate partner violence (Babu et al.,

2024). This dimension of collective trauma underscores that sex workers, like many others, faced unprecedented disruptions in family and domestic routines. The pandemic thus extended beyond professional barriers, touching every corner of personal life in ways that magnified stress and instability.

Chronic Exposure and Fear: Central to the notion of COVID-19 as a collective trauma was the unrelenting exposure to a global catastrophe – through news outlets, social media, and community conversations – that incited continuous fear and uncertainty (Silver et al., 2021). For Kenyan sex workers, this fear was twofold: the threat of infection and the threat of arrest or violence in attempting to maintain an income (Babu et al., 2024; Hassan et al., 2023). Even as lockdowns eased, the potential for subsequent waves of infection prolonged anxiety and perpetuated psychological distress (Stanley et al., 2021).

In sum, COVID-19 exemplifies a collective trauma with far-reaching consequences for Kenyan sex workers, reflecting both the universal impacts of the pandemic and the structural challenges endemic to sex work under criminalization. By understanding the pandemic's prolonged and multifaceted hardships – economic insecurity, violence, mental health struggles, and systemic exclusion – we gain critical insights into the vulnerabilities that this community navigates in times of crisis.

In the context of the collective and individual trauma highlighted above, the third paper in this thesis focuses on exploring pathways of empowerment and transformation. Recognizing the multifaceted adversities faced by marginalized groups such as Kenyan sex workers, this study delves into their potential to navigate systemic barriers and reimagine their realities. Specifically, the paper examines how entrepreneurship, guided by critical consciousness principles, can serve as a vehicle for both personal and community emancipation. Situating the study within the broader

dynamics of trauma and structural inequality sets the stage to investigate transformative approaches that empower individuals to transcend limitations and drive systemic change, addressing the dual challenges of resilience and agency in post-pandemic recovery.

Entrepreneurial Emancipation and Autonomy Through a Freirean Lens: Case of Bar Hostesses in Kenya

Abstract

This study explores the transformative potential of entrepreneurship through the lens of Paulo Freire's critical consciousness (conscientização). Using an in-depth, multi-method qualitative approach, we investigate how bar hostesses (i.e., sex workers) in Nairobi, Kenya exercise entrepreneurial autonomy (at the individual level) and emancipatory entrepreneuring (at the collective level) after engaging with a targeted virtual business incubator in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings reveal how the virtual incubator became a platform for the bar hostesses to exercise critical reflection and collective action, by identifying structural constraints (limit-situations), envisioning alternative futures (untested feasibility), and enacting transformative change (limit-acts). Participants developed entrepreneurial ventures that transcended stigmatized identities, enhanced agency, and created informal support networks, working collectively to build institutions rooted in mutual support and trust. By reframing entrepreneurship education through the Freirean lens of critical consciousness, we highlight how collective, community-driven approaches can transcend individualistic, market-centric narratives in entrepreneurship education.

Keywords: Entrepreneurship; Emancipation; Autonomy; Paulo Freire; Sex Work

5.1. Introduction

Entrepreneurship is increasingly recognized as a transformative force for growth, prosperity, and social change, offering solutions to alleviate poverty, create civic wealth, and address resource constraints, systemic barriers, stigmatization, and societal exclusion (Bruton et al., 2013; Lumpkin & Bacq, 2019; Stephan et al., 2016; Sutter et al., 2019; Bacq et al., 2023; Clercq & Honig, 2011). Entrepreneurial emancipation offers a valuable lens for understanding how marginalized individuals facing stigma leverage entrepreneurship to assert agency, reframe stigmatized identities, and navigate societal norms, ultimately creating opportunities for inclusion and empowerment (Rindova et al., 2009,2022; Ruebottom & Toubiana, 2021; Lewis & Crabbe, 2024). Despite these largely theoretical contributions, knowledge about how entrepreneurs navigate and transform adverse contexts remains fragmented, raising critical questions about the broader emancipatory potential of entrepreneurship for marginalized populations (Bacq et al., 2023; Laine & Kibler, 2022; Pidduck & Clark, 2021; Jennings et al., 2016).

Emancipatory entrepreneurship is predominantly framed around market participation and transactional activities and often viewed as an individual's liberation from economic constraints and personal dependence on their community (Rindova et al., 2022). The literature's focus on individual entrepreneurs as sole agents of change, may be characterized as heroic figures who free themselves from constraints. However, it tends to neglect the collective or community dimensions of emancipation (Benali & Villesèche, 2024; Goss et al., 2011; Rindova et al., 2022). It also fails to acknowledge the informal institutional arrangements organized by these actors, which scholars frequently refer to as "institutional voids" (Mair & Marti, 2009; Webb, Khoury & Hitt, 2020; Olabisi et al., 2017). This constrains understanding of how collective emancipatory

entrepreneurial activities can empower entire communities, sustain transformative change, and address systemic issues beyond personal liberation from economic or community dependency.

In this study, we address these gaps by adopting Paulo Freire's (1970) *conscientização* – also known as critical consciousness theory or conscientization – and extending it to the domain of entrepreneurship, expanding our understanding of entrepreneurial emancipation at individual and collective levels in highly stigmatized and resource-constrained contexts. Freire's (1970) emancipatory theories emphasize education as a tool for liberation – where individuals are encouraged to critically reflect on and challenge oppressive structures through dialogue and transformative action. Freire's (1970) concepts, such as limit-situations, untested feasibility, and limit-acts, offer a transformative lens for examining entrepreneurial emancipation as they emphasize the interplay between structural oppression and human agency as a pathway for individuals and communities to challenge and transform their realities through critical reflection and action.

The relevance of Freire's perspectives for pursuing emancipation and obtaining autonomy are highlighted in research (Knijnik & Hunter, 2022; Putri, 2020; Shoukry & Fatien, 2024). However, his perspectives are seldom utilized in the entrepreneurship literature – except for limited scholarship on entrepreneurial ecosystems (Berglund and Johansson, 2007; Birdthistle et al. 2022), entrepreneurial autonomy (Siqueira et al., 2023) and entrepreneurship education (Verduijn & Berglund, 2020; Arenius & Lenz, 2024; Klapper & Fayolle, 2023; Walmsley & Wraae, 2022). In this study, we adopt a Freirean lens to study entrepreneurial emancipation in a community of entrepreneurs in the sex work industry in Nairobi, Kenya, a context characterized by multiple and compounding limit-situations – structural and historical barriers, such as systemic stigma, poverty,

violence, and marginalization, which constrain individuals and communities (Freire 1970; Ronald & Roskelly, 2001; Rossi Corcoran, 2024).

5.1.1 Contextual Background and Research Question

The Kenyan capital has long been a hub for sex work, concentrated in bars, clubs, guest houses, and on the streets, with over 2,000 hotspots (Shah et al., 2023; Wanjiru et al., 2022). Criminalization of the trade exposes workers to harassment, violence, and legal exclusion, perpetuating stigma and marginalization (Wanjiru et al., 2022; Woensdregt, 2024). The COVID-19 pandemic and associated restrictions disrupted traditional income sources, forcing many sex workers to operate during the day, increasing visibility, stigma, and community discrimination (Kimani et al., 2020; Gichuna et al., 2020). Excluded from government relief programs, they face heightened financial exploitation, violence, unsafe practices, and extortion by clients and law enforcement (Hassan et al., 2023; Kimani et al., 2020). Their already limited access to healthcare dwindled due to logistical and financial barriers, while isolation exacerbated mental health issues (Babu et al., 2024). The closure of traditional venues led to a shift toward covert, home-based work, increasing risks of violence and police harassment (Hassan et al., 2023), and although online platforms offered alternatives for some younger workers, they failed to fully replace lost income or reduce exploitation (Kimani et al., 2020).

This is the context where we meet our research participants. They are a group of bar hostesses (i.e., female sex workers) who are “aging out” of the profession, dealing with the compounding repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic, and affected by multiple formal and informal institutional voids (Mair & Marti, 2009; Webb et al., 2020). They were receiving health, advocacy, and empowerment support at a local NGO dedicated to supporting sex workers when,

in 2021, they participated in a three-month entrepreneurship training program at a virtual business incubator that had partnered with the NGO.

Through a Freirean lens, we explore how the virtual incubator served as a platform for the bar hostesses to exercise entrepreneurial autonomy (Siqueira et al., 2023) at the individual and entrepreneurial emancipation at the collective level. In other words, we examine how entrepreneurship provided the bar hostesses with the autonomy and critical consciousness to identify the structural and systemic barriers they faced (limit-situations), envision alternative pathways beyond these constraints (untested feasibility), and take deliberate, emancipatory actions (limit-acts) to challenge oppressive structures and create new opportunities. In doing so, they create informal institutions that serve to advance their interests and further increase their agency. Thus, we explore the following research question: "*How can entrepreneurship, viewed through a Freirean lens of critical consciousness, enable stigmatized individuals and communities to recognize systemic barriers, envision alternative solutions, and enact transformative change?*"

In this study, we draw on qualitative data – Multiple rounds of longitudinal interviews with participants before and after the incubator, interview with the NGO director, the contents of the training modules, and the discussions within the training sessions – to explore the research question. Through an abductive case study approach, we demonstrate how the virtual incubator, with the support of the NGO, catalyzes the community's collectivist mentality to create a platform for critical consciousness (Freire, 1970).

The study provides practical insights into designing entrepreneurship programs that empower marginalized communities by integrating Freirean principles of critical consciousness. It emphasizes the importance of creating safe, dialogical spaces within training programs, fostering reflection, collaboration, and co-creation among participants. By tailoring entrepreneurship

education to the realities of stigmatized individuals, the study highlights how programs can support both individual and collective efforts to address systemic barriers. It also demonstrates the potential for entrepreneurship to inspire alternative institutional frameworks, offering sustainable solutions to structural challenges. Finally, it highlights that the need for NGOs and policymakers to prioritize interventions that enable marginalized communities to critically reflect on their constraints and design transformative solutions.

In the following sections, we begin by exploring Freire's philosophy, examining how it informs and extends concepts of entrepreneurial autonomy and emancipation. Next, we outline the methods employed in the study, followed by a discussion of the findings, which illuminate the role of the incubator and the bar hostesses' process of conscientization. Finally, we address the implications and contributions of the study, highlighting its relevance to both theory and practice.

5.2. Freire's Critical Consciousness

Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy (1970, 1973, 1985, 1992), most notably *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) (cited over 125,000 in Google Scholar), provides a foundational framework for understanding the nature of oppression, the pathway toward liberation, and the central role of critical consciousness in transformative emancipatory action. Paulo Freire (1970) argued that liberation is achieved through critical consciousness – which entails a deep awareness of the systemic nature of oppression coupled with the recognition of one's capacity to transform reality. Freire's work emphasizes that oppression is inherently dehumanizing, stripping individuals of their agency and full humanity. Consequently, liberation is fundamentally a process of humanization centered on reclaiming critical thought, agency, and purposeful action.

Achieving critical consciousness is based on a dynamic interplay of critical reflection and transformative action, which Freire (1970) calls praxis. Critical reflection involves understanding

the roots of injustice and oppression – situating individual experiences within broader social, historical, and political contexts. Freire (1970) emphasized that reflection without action risks becoming empty rhetoric, while action without reflection may unintentionally perpetuate oppression. Praxis, then, is the ongoing synthesis of thoughtful inquiry and concrete measures aimed at confronting and dismantling oppressive structures. Dialogue is pivotal in this process (Freire, 1970), enabling collaborative, transformative encounters that critically examine power dynamics, challenge oppressive myths, foster solidarity, and drive collective action. Through the dynamic interplay of reflection, dialogue, and action, the oppressed can reclaim their agency and humanity, shifting from passive acceptance to active resistance.

Freire's concepts of limit-situations, untested feasibility, and limit-acts delineate the process of conscientization. *Limit-situations* refer to structural and historical barriers, such as systemic inequality, stigma, poverty, and marginalization, which constrain individuals and communities (Freire, 1970; Ronald & Roskelly, 2001; Rossi Corcoran, 2024; Siqueira et al., 2023). Such barriers are dynamic, shaped by socio-political forces and human agency, and may be seen in various ways such as insurmountable, inevitable, surmountable through action, or constructs to be disrupted. Freire (1970) framed these barriers not as immutable obstacles but as challenges that hold the seeds of their own transformation, serving as the frontier between an individual's current state and their potential to transcend these constraints (Freire 1970, 1992; Pinto, 1960). Recognizing these limit-situations involves perceiving underlying contradictions that, once critically analyzed, can catalyze transformative action (Freire, 1970, 1992).

Untested feasibility, building on this recognition, represents the ability to envision and articulate alternative possibilities beyond these constraints. It embodies hope and the belief in a new reality, fostering the imagination and innovation necessary to transcend oppressive conditions

(Freire 1970, 1992; Ronald & Roskelly, 2001; Siqueira et al., 2023). This concept underscores the direct relationship between understanding one's circumstances and the belief in a dream or aspiration to transform the status quo (Freire, 1970, 1992). Successfully overcoming one untested feasibility often leads to the emergence of new ones, reinforcing the iterative cycles of transformation (Freire, 1970, 1992). Finally, *limit-acts* are intentional, praxis-driven efforts that integrate critical reflection, collective solidarity, and action to translate such visions into tangible, transformative actions (Freire, 1970; Ronald & Roskelly, 2001; Rossi Corcoran, 2024; Siqueira et al., 2023). These acts involve proactive engagement with reality, wherein individuals recognize their transformative capacity and reshape their environment through material, social, and institutional innovations.

Some Freirean concepts and perspectives are crucial to conscientization. First, Freire (1970) emphasized that the oppressed should become the "subjects of decision" in their own liberation. He warned that imposed liberation risks replicating oppression, thus advocating for a problem-posing approach to education centered on collaboration, dialogue, and mutual learning (Freire, 1970). This model positions teachers and students as co-creators of knowledge, both engaged in a shared commitment to liberation. Entrepreneurship education provides a particularly strong opportunity to create this type of emancipation due to its experiential and experimental engagements, multifaceted nature, and contextual requirements. Entrepreneurship education, which is not necessarily based on a specific set of codified knowledge or skill sets, is an appropriate forum for dialogical education, where both teacher and student grow together, as conceptualized by Freire (Shor & Freire,1987; Wegerif, 2013).

Second, Freire (1970) positioned trust – referred to as having faith in others – as the cornerstone of genuine dialogue, meaningful collective action, and liberation. He argued that

oppression often creates a climate of mistrust, fragmenting relationships and preventing individuals from working together toward shared goals. Trust enables the recognition of others as equal participants in the journey toward liberation and as capable of contributing to a collective vision.

Third, Freire's (1992) philosophy of hope – a dynamic and transformative force – is essential for challenging oppression and envisioning a more just and equitable world. Freire rejects passive optimism, framing hope as active, critical engagement that empowers resistance to dehumanization and inspires transformative action (Freire, 1992). For Freire, hope underpins critical consciousness, urging individuals and educators – viewed as political agents – to foster awareness of injustice and the strength to overcome it. This requires activated individuals to employ the necessary agency to reformulate the institutions that help them navigate their situation. Entrepreneurship educators, by integrating social justice and critical reflection into their dialogical methods, can cultivate an environment of agency and empowerment that promotes collaborative community-centered models that encourage transformative hope and embedded systems thinking, yielding resilience and transformation.

5.2.1 Freire & Entrepreneurial Emancipation and Autonomy

Freire's (1970) critical consciousness offers a rich foundation for exploring transformative entrepreneurial action at the individual and collective levels through the lens of entrepreneurial autonomy (Siqueira et al., 2023) an emancipatory entrepreneuring (Rindova et al., 2009). Entrepreneurial autonomy (Siqueira et al., 2023) is the process where individuals identify and address economic, social, or environmental challenges through entrepreneurial efforts. It involves an internal locus of control, self-governance, critical reflection, and self-efficacy to make independent decisions, often challenging dominant power structures while fostering

socioeconomic change. It occurs in an environment that facilitates learning through practice and from failure and innovating through ingenuity by solving solutions to difficulties and constraints (Lampel et al., 2014).

Entrepreneurial autonomy is not a pursuit of individualism but a reclamation of agency and self-determination, mirroring Freire's (1970) insistence on the oppressed being the "subjects of decision." Freire's *limit-situations* finds resonance in entrepreneurial autonomy, where these constraints are critically analyzed and reframed as opportunities for innovation. This process embodies Freire's idea of *untested feasibility*, highlighting the potential to disrupt the status quo and envision alternative futures. Through *limit-acts*, individuals transform barriers into actions for systemic change, mirroring the entrepreneurial process in sustainable enterprises and inclusive innovations. In other words, entrepreneurial autonomy operationalizes Freire's abstract principles by enabling individuals to transform critical awareness into entrepreneurial actions that address systemic issues.

Freire's (1970) principles of critical consciousness also parallel the emancipatory perspective in entrepreneurship, which seeks to 'break free' from constraints and 'break up' existing limitations (Rindova et al., 2022). The three aspects of entrepreneurial emancipation (Rindova et al., 2009) – seeking autonomy, authoring, and making declarations – resonate with Freire's perspectives on liberation and critical consciousness. Freire's conscientization enriches the entrepreneurial emancipation framework by framing it as a collective, reflective, and dialogical process that disrupts the status quo, unlocks latent potential, and fosters new possibilities, particularly in marginalized communities (Berglund & Johansson, 2007; Olabisi et al., 2017; Prieto et al., 2012; Rindova et al., 2009; Siqueira et al., 2023). Praxis (Freire, 1970) elevates the notion of "authoring" (Rindova et al., 2009) by framing it as a deliberate effort to reimagine social

relationships and structures through dialogue and solidarity. The element of "making declarations" (Rindova et al., 2009) mirrors Freire's insistence on the power of dialogue and collective narratives in disrupting oppressive norms and envisioning alternative futures. Freire's principles of trust, collaborative learning, and hope add depth to entrepreneurial emancipation by framing it as not merely individualistic but deeply communal and transformative.

Thus, by bridging Freirean philosophy with entrepreneurial practice, we can highlight how individuals and communities can leverage entrepreneurial autonomy (Siqueira et al., 2023) and emancipatory entrepreneuring (Rindova et al., 2009) to confront oppression, innovate within their contexts, and pursue liberation as an ongoing endeavor (Freire, 1970). This approach fosters an awareness of the ethical dimensions of business decisions, highlighting the role of entrepreneurship in challenging systemic inequalities rather than reinforcing them.

Sex work presents a compelling context for examining entrepreneurial emancipation as a response to entrenched stigma and systemic oppression through a Freirean lens. Within the sex industry, individuals confront multi-level barriers, from macro-level legal and policy restrictions to meso-level institutional discrimination and micro-level societal biases, all of which perpetuate marginalization and constrain agency (Benoit et al., 2018; Krüsi et al., 2016; Link & Phelan, 2001; Toubiana & Ruebottom, 2022). By applying Freire's (1970) conscientization to this context, entrepreneurial efforts can be seen as transformative acts of resistance, where sex workers challenge oppressive structures and reframe constraints as opportunities. Entrepreneurship in this context can facilitate not only structural emancipation by fostering alternative market systems but also cognitive and emotional emancipation, enabling individuals to reconstruct stigmatized identities and resist marginalization through self-determination and resilience (Ruebottom & Toubiana, 2021).

5.3. Methods

Nairobi, Kenya, provides a compelling context for examining the emancipation and autonomy of female sex workers, who face systemic barriers such as stigma, discrimination, and criminalization (Nyariki et al., 2023; Woensdregt, 2024). These challenges, compounded by poverty, limited education, and economic vulnerability, force many to operate covertly, exposing them to exploitation and abuse, often by law enforcement (Schroeder et al., 2024). Social exclusion further marginalizes them, denying access to essential healthcare and legal protections (Kibicho, 2016; Shah et al., 2023). The COVID-19 pandemic intensified these struggles, with lockdowns causing income losses, increased violence, and riskier practices, while heightened stigmatization unfairly blamed sex workers for spreading the virus (Mantell et al., 2021; Babu et al., 2024; Hassan et al., 2023). This intersection of institutional asymmetries, systemic barriers, oppression, resilience, and systemic shocks like COVID-19 makes Nairobi a critical setting for exploring transformative reflection and action through a Freirean lens.

This case study (Stake, 2008) centers on 11 bar hostesses (i.e., sex workers) in Nairobi, Kenya. This study utilizes a comprehensive, multi-method, longitudinal qualitative approach, incorporating multiple interviews, a focus group, contents of virtual training and discussions, and a three-year longitudinal visitation and follow-up process. This intensive design captures insights that would be difficult to obtain through broader, less intensive methods. The data includes 29 longitudinal interviews with the participants and site visits, a focus group interview with the participants, an interview with the founder of a supporting NGO, observations from the authors of the paper as instructors of the incubator, and the transcripts of the seven sessions of the incubator and the course materials. Initial semi-structured virtual interviews (December 2021) explored participants' backgrounds, entrepreneurial aspirations, challenges, ambitions, and support

networks. We were directly involved in the six-month virtual training program (February–August 2022), which focused on entrepreneurship training (ideation, marketing, sales, managing finances), community-building, and experiential learning. Follow-up virtual interviews (March 2023) assessed training outcomes, challenges, and progress. An in-person group interview (January 2024) provided insights into collective experiences and network dynamics. Lastly, field visits and one-on-one interviews at the site of their businesses (June 2024) in Nairobi documented real-world applications of the training, collective actions, and business challenges. All interviews and training sessions were transcribed, and translations were reviewed for accuracy and cultural sensitivity.

The participants were receiving health and advocacy empowerment support at a local NGO dedicated to supporting sex workers when, in 2021, they participated in an entrepreneurship training program at a virtual business incubator that had partnered with the NGO. The NGO facilitated introductions and ensured that the recruitment process was sensitive to the participants' circumstances. Inclusion criteria included being a bar hostess connected to the NGO and having an interest in pursuing or already engaged in entrepreneurial activities. The participants were aging out of sex work and were already dealing with the repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic once they entered the virtual incubator program. Some had already started micro-businesses – such as a beauty shop, a food kiosk, producing and selling knitwear, selling second-hand clothes, making soaps and detergents, or rearing chickens – and others had ideas they wanted to pursue or had no idea what they wanted to do.

To encourage participants to feel comfortable and be open during the study, we employed several strategies. The participants were already familiar with one of the researchers in the study who was Kenyan, had met the participants before, and had a close connection with the NGO

founder. Interviews were conducted in either English or Swahili, based on the participant's preference, to ensure ease of communication. Participants were informed about the confidentiality of their responses and assured that their identities would be protected.

We conducted a qualitative analysis informed by an exploitative abductive approach (Bamberger, 2018; Dubois & Gadde, 2002; Sætre & Van de Ven, 2021; Timmermans & Tavory, 2022). Iteratively combining deductive and inductive reasoning was particularly effective in our exploration of emancipatory entrepreneuring and entrepreneurial autonomy through a Freirean lens in a highly stigmatized context.

5.4. Designing the virtual incubator

We began the process of designing a virtual incubator during COVID-19, focusing primarily on women and experimenting with cohorts in the USA, Canada, Brazil, and Poland. These various experiences prepared us for engaging and supporting this particularly marginalized group of women in Nairobi, Kenya. The program consisted of 7 sessions – each 80 minutes on average – meeting every two weeks. Each session included the discussion of a relevant bespoke case study, reflecting the challenges of the environment they were living in, as well as opportunities to break through limit-situations through the use of entrepreneurial ingenuity (Siqueira & Honig, 2019). As well, worksheets were utilized to encourage participants to reflect on their learnings, their own situation, and the context and challenges of creating new institutions that challenged existing norms. All the instructors had previous experience either with the virtual incubator education or with similar marginalized persons elsewhere. The team consisted of experienced entrepreneurship educators as well as African scholars who were highly familiar with the specific context. This allowed for the reorienting of entrepreneurship education to align with Freirean principles. As educators, we saw our role as equipping participants to act as ethical, empowered

agents of transformation, capable of addressing global injustices with creativity, resilience, and hope.

We integrated social justice into the curriculum by shifting the focus away from strictly profit-driven ventures to emphasize social entrepreneurship, sustainability, community development, and inclusivity. We designed case studies featuring regional entrepreneurs who address systemic injustices like poverty, inequality, and environmental degradation, demonstrating how entrepreneurship can transform the world and inspire hope by showcasing the potential for positive change through enterprise. For instance, in one case study, students examined an entrepreneur who turned discarded waste into a profitable, community-centered venture. One student noted, "*if you can build a business… [from] what people are throwing away and you can turn that into making money. That helps the environment; it helps your community because it means your community gets cleaned up.*" Others were intrigued by how the entrepreneur adapted products for marginalized groups, such as designing masks during COVID for sign language users. One student praised this inclusivity, noting it made people who typically feel left out more engaged. Another student, inspired by this, highlighted the importance of working with a specific community – like sex workers – to identify their needs and foster business success.

We adopted a dialogue-based approach centered on critical reflection, enabling students to use dialogical methods to critically analyze the societal structures that sustain injustice. There was never any criticism of the work profession the participants engaged in, rather, we facilitated discussions on the ethical implications of business decisions and the role of entrepreneurship in either perpetuating or challenging systemic inequalities. As one instructor reminded participants, "*So we can look around in our own communities, look around our own neighborhoods, and we see people who have the greatest difficulties are the ones that often invent and come up with solutions*

that solve problems that not just they have but many other people have." By providing a platform for enhanced awareness, participants were guided to see entrepreneurship as a means to address these inequities, with us emphasizing that "*all of those problems offer solutions that can not only help you but also help your community. And if you think about how can I help solve a problem that both addresses myself and my community, that's how you'll come up with a great business idea.*"

We also pursued a strategy of cultivating agency and empowerment to help students see themselves as subjects in their learning process and capable of creating change. In line with this, we continually reminded them that "*we will learn from each other… nobody has all the answers or all the knowledge. It's all of us learning together… So you are our subject matter experts,*" while emphasizing that "*you are the best people to understand the problems in your community. And, if you begin to look at them and focus on them, you're the best ones to come up with possible new solutions to solve some of those problems.*" We did this through the use of worksheets that encouraged the participants to experiment with new designs that consisted of experiential learning opportunities, asserting that "*we hope to get you to think about them and come back to us with what you thought and what you've experimented with*" and encouraging them to remain flexible and creative, because "*the important thing is that you are adjusting, that you're changing, that you're trying, that you're experimenting, that you're trying new things, that you're not just doing the same thing.*" Thus, the participants were encouraged to develop ventures targeting local problems, which often overlapped with social issues in their marginalized communities.

We avoided downplaying issues related to risk; rather, we discussed resilience and how actors might overcome even the most difficult challenges in order to yield transformative change. For instance, discussing the story of an African female entrepreneur who rebuilt her business after being defrauded, students admired her resilience and refusal to abandon her vision: "*She never lost*

hope… she went from scratch until she went international." This resilience inspired students to consider the importance of perseverance and calculated risk in business, with one remarking, "*You have to risk, but you shouldn't put all your savings and trust in one place.*" Their discussion focused on how the entrepreneur's story exemplified the potential for transformative change through persistence and commitment. This was facilitated by sharing the interconnectedness of the social, economic, and political system they were operating under, as well as enhancing the importance of ethical leadership as they developed their business models. Thus, entrepreneurship was promoted as a tool for ethical and transformational leadership.

During the training sessions, we deliberately harnessed the students' collectivist spirit by creating opportunities for group work. This approach resonated with them, prompting them to quickly request more group work and gather in small teams. One participant asked, "*I wanted to request if we can do it in group work... I think that would give us better and more results once we are done,*" while another stated, "*I believe we should just be in groups so that we make working together move forward.*" The benefits of this collective approach were reflected in the ways they supported each other's businesses and personal growth during the training. One participant explained how "*some were reaching out to me to … help them in terms of… coming up with the budget for their businesses,*" while others described helping each other set up social media platforms and improve branding. Another pointed out, "*For the homework, we were doing as a team… at least at the moment, when I feel lost, I can call someone.*" Students not only discovered practical solutions in these group sessions but also developed stronger personal bonds: "*Whenever I was going down, I could tell Grace and she too could tell me, 'Celine do this.' So they have been holding my hand.*"

During these collaborative sessions, the participants also engaged in candid discussions on the importance of trust in both business and interpersonal relationships. One participant observed that "*the things which we were taught in the training have benefited me a lot… [about] being trustful to my customers… because you must keep trust first with your customers,*" illustrating the notion that trust is foundational to business success, even when it involves risk. Another participant reinforced this insight, saying, "*On the trust issue, it's about risking … I cannot get somebody I can fully trust. So we must take the risk,*" which echoed the instructor's reminder that "*you have to build that trust. It's not just for you to be trusted. Also, you have to trust others. It's a two-way relationship … That's something also worth trying to see how it works.*" As they continued to work together, participants realized they were gradually building a supportive network: "*Like right now, they [the group] have trust in each other … they call each other … that is something that has been happening ever since.*" This shift was especially significant for those who initially resisted sharing any aspect of their businesses, noting, "We *really had to win each other's hearts and trust.*" By the end of the program, many, like the participant who once hesitated to hire employees for fear they would steal from her, began to see real benefits in delegating tasks: "*I was not trusting anybody. So, me I learned about trust … where I was and where I am right now, I have my employees who I just send them outside [to do deliveries] without even having a problem [questioning their honesty].*" In this way, the synergy of group work and open conversation about trust not only helped them foster better relationships with customers and partners but also empowered them to rely on each other as collaborative allies.

Building on this foundation of mutual support and trust, participants formed an ongoing peer group where they hold monthly review meetings "*just to ensure that we're checking up on each other.*" These sessions allow them to share business updates – whether someone's venture

has stalled or has shifted to a new idea – and offer motivation to those who need extra time and encouragement to launch. In this space, the group actively prevents anyone from giving up, even inviting younger women to join so they can "*start the nurturing from the early stages.*" Practical support also extends to networking and product promotion: "*I am helping Sunday sell her peanuts and then also she can then get her drinks from me,*" one participant explained, illustrating how they advertise each other's goods in their shops. Outside help and expertise are readily shared, such as one woman who facilitated her friend's license application with the Nairobi County. Through these collective efforts, they are also equipped to handle unforeseen hardships like floods, inspiring each other with stories of resilience from their training and reminding each other that "*you can go down and then come up again.*"

It was through these design methods that the virtual incubator became a platform for critical reflection and action, empowering the participants to exercise entrepreneurial autonomy and engage in emancipatory entrepreneuring, individually and collectively. Reflecting on these outcomes, the director of the NGO – who the participants call "mother" – noted, "*I can say the training was good. You were able to give them hope and they were able to see that they can have a business that will be running up to today and beyond.*" She further explained, "*These girls, they get people who want to teach them things. Usually, they'll say … let's try our luck, we don't know what will come out of it … but the fact that they all held on up to the end … It says something about your method of how you did the training … I think there is a way that you caught their attention … And they've been talking about the project for a long time.*"

5.5 Findings: Bar Hostesses' Entrepreneurial Autonomy & Emancipation

5.5.1 Limit-Situations

The findings reveal that the bar hostesses navigate complex and interlocking limit-situations (Table 5.1.).

Table 5. 1

Limit situations faced by the Bar Hostesses

Themes	**Sub-themes**
Gender-Based Violence & Discrimination	Domestic Violence
	Gender-Based Educational Discrimination
Violence & Exploitation in sex work	Sexual & Gender-Based Violence
	Sexual Exploitation
Chronic Economic Hardships & (re)Entry into Sex Work	Early Entry into Sex Work
	Repeated / Forced Return to Sex Work
	Reliance on Sex Work as a Survival Strategy
	Economic Hardships (affecting the growth of side hustles)
COVID-19 Disruptions	Sex Work Under COVID-19
	Side-Hustles Struggling During COVID-19
Aging & Declining Viability in Sex Work	Aging & Reduced Viability
	Competition & Age Discrimination
Muti-level Stigmatization	Social Judgment & Isolation
	Financial Exclusion
	Secrecy and Desire to Exit Sex Work
	Overlapping Stigmas & Marginalization
	Healthcare Stigma
	Stigma Affecting Childcare
	Stigma Against Survivors of Sexual Violence
Institutional Corruption & Extortion	Government and Police Corruption and Extortion
	Regulatory Extortion
	Forced Demolitions & Displacement
Climate Change	Displacement due to Climate Change
	Economic Vulnerability due to Climate Change

Many participants described domestic and intimate partner violence – both ongoing physical and emotional abuse. As one participant recalled, *"He started to beat and mistreat me. I was going through a lot but I had no one to talk to, and no place to go… there was a time when I felt suicidal or throwing the baby away."* Their access to education was often disrupted by abusive family figures or systemic biases that favored male education, as another participant recounted: *"I only ended Form III [third year of secondary school]… my father decided that my brother was the one to continue with school. So, that's how I ended Form III."* This curtailed schooling diminished long-term prospects and contributed to financial vulnerability – further exacerbated by limited financial literacy and capital growth. Compounding these struggles were gaps in sexual health knowledge, as one hostess explained, *"In the beginning… I didn't [know] anything about protection… It took me at least 6 months to know that people are supposed to use condoms."* Lastly, participants noted lacking formal training and specialized skills, which made it difficult to advocate for their rights.

They also encounter a range of limit-situations characterized by violence and exploitation rooted in systemic gender inequities. This is illustrated by what one participant described as an escalating *"femicide … so many stories of girls who have been murdered … dying, being slaughtered … and they are girls between the ages of 18 to around 25."* Beyond the pervasive threat of lethal violence, participants also recounted instances of extortion and sexual assault by clients, explaining, *"They will start like they want to have sex with you… They will start, extorting money from you, they tell you to call your friends, and ask money from them. then… they will beat you, on top of that they will still have sex with you! They will rape you."* Such dangers are compounded by unreliable online clients who exploit women economically through theft or non-payment. As one participant recalled, *"I'd go with a client who consider you as a nothing but a*

sex worker, and he could therefore refuse to pay you." This lack of fair compensation and control further exposes hostesses to harm, as the power imbalance inherent in these transactional encounters perpetuates discrimination and stigma.

Moreover, chronic economic hardships create a cyclical pattern of (re)entry into sex work for all the bar hostesses. Early exposure to poverty – often exacerbated by orphanhood or the absence of parental support – has often led them into sex work at a young age. As one participant recalled, *"I didn't become a sex worker willingly. I started this when I was very young because our mother died when I was 13 years old… This was my first day and this client paid me KSH 200… so that's how my life started because we didn't have food at home."* Even when they attempt alternative livelihoods, participants often face limited access to capital, as another noted, *"Business needs enough capital… But now, I've split my legs here and there so that I can earn a little bit from both sides."*

High living costs further exacerbate these pressures, making sex work a more immediate, though precarious, source of funds. One participant explained, *"Right now, to be honest, business in Kenya is bad… I'll just say, instead of me going to deliver my things, can I just get a client… you really have to make bold decisions for you not to engage yourself in sex work. Business is not easy. Even the sex work business is not easy."* The burden of escalating expenses was emphasized by another who lamented the difficulty of turning a profit, *"…because everything has gone up, they [customers] will say no. You have already cooked the food. You have already taken time to take the food to where they are. So you end up selling the food at a loss."* Ultimately, these systemic challenges – wide impoverishment, exploitative landlords, and scarce financing options – restrict the hostesses' economic mobility and force them to rely on sex work as both an immediate survival strategy and an ongoing necessity.

The COVID-19 pandemic also created a profound set of limit-situations, disrupting both their primary income sources and any existing side businesses. As one participant recalled, *"the time of COVID, it was very hard for sex workers… they closed a lot of joints where we used to hang around."* Not only were their usual venues unavailable, but overall client demand also dwindled, causing severe financial strain. *"Sex work was very much affected… If I didn't have these two regular clients, one supporting food and another managing rent stuff, things would be very bad,"* explained one participant. To comply with new restrictions, some switched to daytime work, which did little to mitigate losses, as *"we were banned to work at night… sometimes you'd be back without a single customer."*

Attempts to diversify also faltered: *"I started a restaurant [before COVID-19] ... we started doing okay but when COVID came, curfews, and all that… the food that you prepared yesterday, you'll have to still recycle it… I don't have electronics like a refrigerator or deep freezer. So, challenges started to arise, and therefore I decided to pause."* Others similarly had to shutter small ventures: *"I later decided to close it because there were not enough customers, and since it's a booth, I had to return it to the owner so that I wouldn't keep paying the rent while there's no business."* Ultimately, this reduced income and stalled entrepreneurship amplified long-standing socio-economic disadvantages.

Aging poses another critical limit-situation, as advancing age reduces their perceived viability in the sex work economy. One participant explained, *"I can't go and compete with the young girls in the street. And age is also catching up with me. So I had to look for something else."* This dynamic is compounded by explicit and implicit age discrimination, which reduces both clientele and earning potential, as another participant observed: *"There's competition because there are those young girls who enter sex business… sometimes you may go to the hotspot and get*

no client." Another similarly acknowledged the future constraints, noting, *"I can't depend on sex work because I'm becoming older, and the sex industry have new and young sex workers… the competition is very high."* Taken together, these factors illustrate how the intersection of age and competition catalyzes a cycle of marginalization.

The findings also showcase that bar hostesses experience a complex web of stigma that operates at multiple levels, shaping profound limit-situations marked by social judgment, financial exclusion, and overlapping vulnerabilities. Many participants described persistent gossip and suspicion, prompting self-censorship and isolation to avoid conflict with neighbors and family. One participant noted, *"there are those signs that makes you feel people are suspecting it, you feel some kind of stigma and some will show it but others won't… you decide to ignore and keep going with your own business."* Another lamented that, *"to most, sex worker is just [an] ignorant and hopeless person."* Such social stigma also extends into the financial realm, as one explained: *"If now I go to the bank to ask for a loan, who will give me the loan? No one can provide a loan to a sex worker."*

Against this backdrop, some participants felt compelled to hide their occupation from family members in order to avoid rejection. One stated, *"They [my family] don't know at all… There's no way when you can talk about it when you have children. You need to hide it."* Others faced intrusive neighbors, with another participant recounting, *"Some people know… and there's this house which I had to vacate… I knew as a single woman I'd never be able to keep living there where all women were married."* Access to healthcare posed similar challenges, as one woman remarked, *"There's that stigma and challenges that we face when we go to hospital, maybe you have STIs."* For mothers, the impact extended to their children: *"My kids were getting traumatized from neighbors, family, friends, telling them your mother is a sex worker, she'll die of AIDS… She*

was very sick, she got admitted for almost 2 months." Survivors of sexual violence encountered yet another layer of blame from law enforcement, as one participant recalled, *"First of all that police station… they will tell you that you wanted to be raped. So, the stigma starts from the reporting desk… that is mental torture."* Taken together, these experiences illustrate how stigma permeates nearly every facet of bar hostesses' lives – from neighbors and banks to hospitals and police – reinforcing a cycle of discrimination, isolation, and minimal legal protection.

The findings also reveal that bar hostesses in Nairobi confront pervasive institutional corruption and extortion, which operate through multiple, interlocking limit-situations. Participants described constant harassment from various enforcement bodies: *"We're going through a lot, and sex business is going down… when city police catch you, they take the money you earned… And the MNS [local city police] are much worse. They don't want money but they want sex."* In more extreme cases, law enforcement fails to protect victims of violence: *"There's a girl who was gang-raped… another… 16 years, raped by the father… the cops told me we wait for the child to be born. Because the child is evidence."*

Even obtaining or holding a license for their micro businesses was no guarantee of safety. As one participant noted, *"The police harass us. Even if you have the license… … I'd say that they have a lot of corruption… you need to give them money… They come daily."* These challenges coincide with crippling bureaucratic and financial pressures, with participants describing prohibitive license fees and frequent shutdowns: *"I did open up a place but had to close down… I couldn't afford the medical license fees together with the costs of running the house… I used to be apprehended all the time."* Another explained how corruption permeates official processes: *"No matter what you do, they'll always find something, and you'll need to give a bribe in order to expedite the [licensing] process."* One client indicated that despite paying over US $500 in license

fees for her establishment, nearly every day she had to continue to 'pay off' local policemen who extorted small sums of money.

These adversities are magnified by forced and unannounced demolitions of informal sector establishments that destroy both businesses and homes without warning: *"I was selling porridge… Unfortunately… my business was among the ones which were demolished… We just woke up one morning and we found there is no house [business]. No anything."* The aftermath leaves people with nothing, as one participant lamented: *"We just saw a tractor approaching from there and within no time it had gone. They could not even wait for you to salvage your belonging."* Altogether, these accounts underscore how institutional corruption, regulatory extortion, and abrupt displacements converge to deepen economic insecurity and perpetuate violence against bar hostesses.

We also observed that climate change introduces yet another layer of limit-situations, magnifying their already precarious economic and social conditions. Participants described how floods and drought undermine infrastructure, disrupt livelihoods, and even trigger forced demolitions. As one recalled, *"My business was doing well… It's only that this type of floods came and carried away our items… After a while… the government also came with the demolitions."* These climate-related crises reduce consumer spending power, particularly for nonessential services, thereby exacerbating income instability. As one recalled. *"We've experienced floods… Now, instead of me buying panties [for sale], I can buy food to my kids. So now there's that shift of priorities."* Drought further compounds these strains, as *"the biggest challenge… is that of drought… some of the fruits the clients have ordered are not available."* Another participant highlighted the resultant economic stagnation: *"There was a very big famine [due to drought] … Like you can stay for a whole week without any customer… It was a big challenge."* These

underscore how climate change functions as a dynamic barrier that interacts with systemic poverty, marginalization, and inequality to constrain both immediate survival strategies and longer-term economic prospects.

5.5.2 Untested Feasibility

In keeping with Freire's (1970) notion of "untested feasibility," the participants demonstrated the capacity to envision and articulate alternative futures beyond current constraints (Table 5.2.).

Table 5. 2

Untested Feasibility, as demonstrated by the Bar Hostesses

Themes	**Sub-themes**
Pursuing Entrepreneurship for Growth & Independence	Entrepreneurial Aspirations & Growth
	Financial Independence & Empowerment
Transitioning out of sex work & Reimagining the Future	Personal and Social Drivers of Transition
	Alternative Livelihood as the Pathway to Exit
Collective/Group-Based Transformation & Empowerment	Collective Empowerment & Aspiration
	Collective Aspiration & Social Activism
	Collective Aspiration & Social Impact
Empowerment Through Education & Skill-Building	Seeking and Acquiring Knowledge
	Applying Learned Skills (Impact and Transformation)

They consistently demonstrated a strong desire to transcend sex work and reimagine their futures. One participant expressed, *"So, there's life beyond sex work and I want to live that life so that I can forget what I'm doing now… my past, my everything from brothel and everything."* For

others, the desire for transformation was rooted in their roles as caregivers, as one participant shared, *"My daughter … the way she was affected as she heard stories that, mom everything you got in this house is because of men… I really wanted to get out of it because of her because I don't want her to have that mentality, to be stressed up, to be depressed"* Some had already begun to envision and enact alternative livelihoods, seeing business as a pathway to stability: *"Since I started business, I've seen there are choices. At least there's something else I can do. Even if I decide to quit sex work, at least now I've something to put food on my table."* These visions reflect a hope-fueled conviction in the possibility of transformation, fueled by the participants' keen awareness of their lived realities and the desire to protect themselves and their families from societal judgment.

As the program developed, the participants began to express an entrepreneurial mindset that reached well beyond their immediate circumstances. Their aspirations included expanding existing small ventures into full-scale businesses – such as transitioning from small clothing stalls into fully branded outlets, opening multiple branches of restaurants and salons, or launching entirely new enterprises (e.g., freelance writing or catering services). One participant envisioned, *"I see myself opening 5 more restaurants in different areas like Nakuru and the like. I always think ahead, and I don't know if my imagination is high or not, but I see myself having a very big restaurant in Nairobi… I also plan to have full package catering services for weddings, parties and other places."* Another described her dream to secure both economic and personal stability, stating, *"I see myself with Pajero, with my own house. For now I'm with children, and my sisters who depend on me… At least I'd leave the rented house and have the house of my own where I can open the door and enter. And that can happen when the business is big."* These articulated desires underscore their belief in transcending oppressive conditions. Indeed, we observed one of the more

successful participants actively engaged in building her own private home from her business revenues, representing a massive shift in normative life trajectories.

They also exhibited a pronounced commitment to collective transformation and empowerment. In contrast to merely aspiring to individual business success, they frequently highlighted the need for safe communal resources designed to uplift and protect fellow bar hostesses and other marginalized groups. One participant, for instance, after the incubator training, described utilizing her furnished apartments business as *"acting like a safe space for the LGBTQI community… ensuring that these people who are being attacked are… being given shelter,"* even though she felt *"kinda limited"* by having only two two-bedroom units and the reluctance of other hosts to accommodate LGBTQI individuals.

Another participant emphasized the importance of expanding capacity-building initiatives for young mothers and survivors of gender-based violence, noting that *"once you go through GBV, you see yourself like you're not wanted,"* and stressing her desire to *"give the young girls an opportunity to be something in life and not just sex workers"* through her social enterprise that she had created after going through the incubator. Beyond offering shelter and mentorship, participants also underscored the value of sharing the knowledge gained in the incubator with their networks, with one explaining, *"I didn't keep quite with the message [learnings from the program]. I [have] shared [it] with my fellows… about how there is life after sex work."*

This spirit of collective uplift extended to economic cooperatives as well: *"We tell them [other sex workers] the importance of saving, then through that saving, you can get a loan and start something small for yourself… we want it [their shared table banking] to be an umbrella for sex workers, like a SACCO [Savings and Credit Cooperative Organization] targeting the sex*

workers only." By advocating for broader societal benefits participants demonstrated their ability to imagine an interconnected pathway toward shared empowerment.

In addition, they emphasized education and skill-building as central pathways for transcending their current circumstances. One participant explained, *"First, I'd like to be educated about saving. The first thing is to save. Secondly, I don't plan to be a sex worker my whole life…when my children grow up while I'm doing business, they will say their mother is a businesswoman."* Another similarly stressed the importance of preparedness, asking, *"I expect to get knowledge that I'll use. After leaving KP [sex work], what next? How am I going to do business?"* Many viewed business training as essential: *"I would want to be empowered… I don't have any business knowledge, and I only use my common understandings… I would like to have entrepreneurship skills."* Participants were also eager to master new concepts thoroughly, as one noted, *"I'm that student who will always ask questions if something hasn't been understood… so that I can be fully educated."* Indeed, with each newly acquired skill – whether bookkeeping or marketing techniques – they felt increasingly capable. As one participant described, *"I'm more confident. Because, at first I was almost giving up! Because I didn't know what to do, I was just doing whatever comes in my mind! But now I'm able to put my things in order, and I'm more confident in solving the problems."* Learnings from the program not only provided tangible competencies but also fueled their transformative sense of possibility.

5.5.3 Limit-Acts: Exercising Entrepreneurial Autonomy & Emancipation

5.5.3.1 Individual Level:

Participants demonstrated entrepreneurial autonomy through a series of transformative "limit-acts" that addressed economic, social, and environmental barriers in their communities.

Grounded in critical reflection and self-determination, these individuals reframed hostile or marginalizing contexts into opportunities for inclusivity and empowerment (Siqueira et al., 2023).

For instance, Diana[13] repurposed her furnished apartment business into a makeshift refuge for members of the LGBTQI community facing heightened risk of violence, highlighting that "*the people who are making good use of it … is the LGBTQI community and it is acting as a safe place for them.*" Once the Kenyan government started to crack down on BnBs, she strategically relocated her furnished apartment business to a less expensive town, stating that: "*I didn't want to lose my niche, I also still wanted to help sex workers. So, the reason why I didn't take it to maybe [another town] and took it to [town] is because… we have so many sex workers [and]… there are a lot of hotspots in [town].*" Even with the rising reports of femicide in BnBs and when people "*stopped booking the furnished apartments because they feel they are not safe,*" she expanded her business, adding logistics services for guests of the NGO and other tourists where "*we have rented cars, we can book for you flights, we can book for you everything.*" Further demonstrating her entrepreneurial autonomy, she simultaneously launched a branding venture – "*So, right now, I'm having a branding company where we brand anything … t-shirts, capes, mugs, bags, every merchandise*" – leveraging her connections to secure orders from a charity connected to a famous car manufacturer – and intentionally employing her peers, stating that "*the person who's doing the designing is a male sex worker.*"

Another participant, Vivian, employed peer sex workers at her bar, explaining, "*I have helped many sex workers at my workplace … I have employed two girls. They are sex workers too.*" She further affirms her leadership, saying that "*I can say that I'm the boss here,*" whilst navigating corrupt or exploitative structures – including police demands for bribes – by organizing

[13] Pseudonyms are used throughout the paper.

collective contributions from neighboring business owners and acting as their representative to keep businesses afloat. She is "*the one who is actually collects the money from all those wines and spirits, and then giving the police!*" When we first met Vivian, she had lost her entire footwear business when a friend absconded with her materials, forcing her to rely on temporary employment for survival. Yet, she refused to "*lose hope*" and worked in a cosmetic business before saving enough – alongside training from the incubator and support from the NGO – to launch her bar, now with more than 350,000 Kenyan Shillings capital.

Asked if her new establishment supports the group created in the virtual incubator, Vivian confirmed, "*Yeah, because usually when they come here, they will get customers here … so now you're like part of the network.*" Vivian elaborates, "*I am helping Maya sell her peanuts [butter at my bar] and then also she can then get her drinks from me … Maybe … she [a customer] don't want to drink alcohol [first] … she will say, let me take porridge [Grace's product] first before I take the drink.*" These reciprocal dynamics highlight Vivian's entrepreneurial autonomy and her strategic use of business networks to support her own enterprise and her peers.

Vivian underscores that sex work remains a part of her livelihood, yet she revels in the newfound autonomy afforded by her entrepreneurial success. "*I wanted to say that … compared to how in the past I had to look for clients, sometimes even in far areas. Nowadays, clients are looking for me. [laughter] They look for me. They come to me themselves. And when I pass, some clients may salivate.*" Her confidence in both her bar and her ability to leverage sex work on her own terms illustrates a notable shift – from searching for opportunities to being sought out. Through this transformation, Vivian further cements her role as a self-determined entrepreneur, poised to support and inspire her peers by expanding her diverse streams of income.

Another participant, Maya, who sells homemade peanut butter, describes sharing information about the benefits of peanut butter in the HIV support group she helps facilitate. She teaches them how to make it – even uses her own machine to grind it for them – so they can sell them and make money. She further illustrates that all of these are informal, noting, "*The Bureau of Standards and the Askaris, the county government's officers, are totally unaware of it… So, I decided, if you [the people she helps] can manage to go to the Bureau of Standards, well and good. If you don't, you put your tin plain [without branding] and send it,*" revealing her resolve to keep operating despite bureaucratic constraints. Meanwhile, another entrepreneur, Grace, extended her services to bedridden hospital patients by routinely delivering porridge, stating, "*Even if they don't have the cash, I'll deliver and give them and make sure they have taken [it] because it was [a] routine [for them],*" underscoring her commitment to communal welfare over strictly commercial gain. Likewise, Faith asserts her entrepreneurial autonomy by crafting flexible, community-based business structures that enable her sex work peers to earn an income while expanding her own customer base. "*For me I think so, created a job opportunity for some of sex workers who are my friends,*" she shares, describing how she sells trousers to fellow sex workers who wear them at hotspots but adjusts the final price to create a margin for those who help her reach new customers. "*I tell her to tell the client, like thirteen hundred. So, the three hundred is for her,*" Faith explains, showcasing her ability to set terms that benefit not only herself but also those within her peer network.

Another participant, Salina, demonstrated how personal and collective trauma can become catalysts for transformative action through the launch of a social enterprise focused on GBV mentorship and community outreach, recounting, "*I've been a GBV survivor and at that time, I didn't know what I was going through in my marriage was GBV,*" which led her to start her own

organization. Confronting an often-hostile police environment regarding GBV – "*the stigma starts from the reporting desk … they will tell you that you wanted to be raped*" – she "*decided to come up with this program for those that feel like they can't go to report*" to educate survivors on reporting protocols and directs them to medical care first. When police appear unresponsive, she threatens to escalate: "*Failure to do that, we will take matters into our hands … we will do a demonstration … You have to raise your voice. They have to hear your voice*." She also offers young women alternatives to sex work by encouraging them to save and start small businesses. Her initiatives also extend to schools, as she recounts: "*We talk about sex. We talk about protection. We talk about how they will conduct themselves to the community at large out there … We talked about teen pregnancies, because that's the main challenge… and those who need the services, I link them to [the NGO].*"

Lacking formal support, Salina persists through volunteerism and limited donations, "*100% volunteering and sometimes if we have well-wishers, I get some pads … one will say, let me give you a bag of rice … if I have nothing, I will just show myself there*". At the time of the last interview (June 2024), she was actively seeking external partnerships to build capacity for her community, explaining that "*I would love if we can get more of capacity building in the GBV mentorship program and the parents empowerment program… for the young girls… so that they get to know what they want in life,*" underscoring that "*you can't do sex work all your life … it gets to a point you have to stop*". Collectively, these actions illustrate how this participant's sense of agency and resourcefulness translate critical reflection into tangible efforts that address systemic inequities and spark transformative change in her communities.

The participants reveal other ways in which they exercise entrepreneurial autonomy by actively challenging the structural constraints of sex work and expanding their livelihood options.

As one explains, "*I supported other three ladies [peer sex workers] to start their own business*", while passing on insights from the training to other sex workers, remarking that "*those things that we were taught, we never kept it for ourselves … there is some people who I have changed their lives. And this thing was all about changing someone's life.*" This drive to mentor and guide peers appears throughout their accounts – whether teaching fellow sex workers how to do online marketing and branding, helping each other with saving strategies in microplanning sessions – "*we are having our meetings we call it microplanning … How you do your saving when you get the shillings*," or being a role model for their children "*that training, has changed my daughter's life. Because every moment when I was in class, she was there with me. She was listening … she is doing her own business … She is selling fruits … And she told me that, I want to do something which can … change the society.*" In short, the participants are wielding their newfound autonomy to redefine what is possible, both for themselves and for fellow sex workers seeking financial independence.

Zara's account offers a glimpse into how they have mobilized entrepreneurial autonomy as a way to challenge and expand beyond the confines of sex work. She describes establishing a portable banking system with a 10% interest on loans, explaining, "*We tell them [the participants in the banking system] the importance of saving, then through that saving, you can get a loan and start something small for yourself*". This initiative, although widespread across Kenya and Africa, was envisioned as an exclusive SACCO for sex workers, highlighting efforts for collective financial empowerment – where each member learns key savings skills and gains access to small loans to begin alternative ventures. As she emphasizes, "Because also there's life after sex work. We need to teach them as early as now." Zara also demonstrates the determination to create new forms of agency, noting how her work has uplifted others by hiring fellow sex workers to model

for her lingerie business. She explains, "*The (girls) they appreciate me that I made them even look smart and appreciate themselves. Because one of them told me that, she used to sell sex now she sells pictures. And through pictures, they wear the panties, the sexy bras. So they use that. So, at least she has shifted from selling sex and now she is in the photo area*."

5.5.3.2 Collective Level:

In examining the participants' experiences, it becomes evident that the virtual incubator group has become a space for collective support and "authoring" (Rindova et al., 2009) of new possibilities, aligning with Freire's (1970) notions of dialogue and praxis. Faith poignantly illustrates this dynamic when she states, "*What we usually do, we share our challenges and we are able to overcome them. Like a month ago, there were floods in our area. So we were asking each other, we were checking on each other… her [Grace] business was swept away with water. And we were able to encourage her… that you can go down and then come up again.*" Their shared resilience resonates with Freire's emphasis on communal solidarity, as they not only discuss obstacles but also actively work to surmount them together, thereby engaging in a form of entrepreneurial emancipation rooted in hope and collective growth.

This is echoed by Lena, who says, "*Yes, we do help each other. We seek to know in what areas are people stuck. For example, there are people whose belongings have been carried away by floods. Some like me were razed down by fire.*" She further underscores how they pool resources, boost each other's stocks, and even refer customers, thus creating a robust network of interdependence. In this way, they manifest Rindova et al.'s (2009) notions of seeking autonomy and making declarations: by actively asserting their collective agency, they disrupt the isolation and vulnerability that often follow in the wake of such disasters. Lena further illustrates the communal benefit by observing, "*If one [customer] has also requested something that she [one of*

the group members] does not sell, she calls you and tells you that there is someone who wants a product that you have." Their collaborative efforts align with Freire's framework of trust and dialogue, underscoring how unity and shared consciousness can foster transformative social and economic relationships.

The stories of Maya and Diana further reinforce how these emancipatory acts are intertwined with communal transformation. Maya explains, "*If there is a problem, you just tell the others so as you can be helped. I had a problem in building my house… they helped me and I was able to build.*" Diana expands on this, recounting how they "*opened a WhatsApp group, and in it, everyone contributed what they had… Maya has built her house now…As her business associates, we came in to support one of us.*" Similarly, Diana's guidance for Clara – encouraging her to shift from a struggling hotel business to wig-making – demonstrates how group members challenge oppressive circumstances by creatively reimagining economic possibilities. As Diana recalls, "*she [Clara] is an outreach worker so she has peer educators who are very good at doing the weaving work…I told her… why can't you get ten thousand, get resources and get the good quality materials for making the wigs … And right now she has employed around four [people]… the other thing is, we helped to look for a place where Clara can get…cheaper and…quality materials [in expensive salons where they do not re-use wigs].*" By supporting one another they embody Freire's dialogical praxis, which pairs critical reflection with collective action. Their journey illustrates a communal process of "making declarations" and "authoring" (Rindova et al., 2009), pointing toward a holistic model of entrepreneurial emancipation where agency, solidarity, and hope converge.

Faith's account of distributing sanitary pads to vulnerable girls with her fellow trainees underscores how the group transcends mere individual gain to collectively uplift their wider community, reflecting Freire's (1970) principle of praxis. "*From the profit I get, we started an*

initiative with some of the members of the team ... We sat down and we thought like Bar Hostess has given us a lot and we should also, with the knowledge and the skills that we've got, we should give back to the less privileged ... we had the menstruation day ... with other partners and something small from our pockets, we contributed and we bought pads and we gave to the vulnerable girls in our community," she explains, illustrating how these women harness their entrepreneurial achievements to address communal needs.

Similarly, the group's collective efforts to gather and distribute resources to community members affected by floods further exemplify their entrepreneurial emancipation and commitment to communal upliftment. As Diana explains, "*with the support of the organization [the NGO], we started doing a campaign whereby we are collecting, it doesn't have to be money, it doesn't have to be finances, [it can be] anything ... just to be able to help where we come from, the communities that have been affected by the floods.*" By harnessing their income-generating activities and leaning on support from the NGO, they launched targeted initiatives to relocate and assist those most affected by flooding and demolitions, ensuring that fellow community members remain safe and sheltered. In true Freirean fashion, they transform their business acumen and modest profits into concrete actions that safeguard peers from further dangers. Referencing individuals within the group, Diana further illustrates how they coordinate relocation projects while pooling even minimal resources – "Even $1 really makes a very, very big change in our group" – thus highlighting a collective responsibility to dismantle barriers and foster meaningful change for the broader community.

In line with Freire's critical consciousness, the participants recognized their shared limit situations and responded by collaboratively establishing a self-governed "retirement fund" through real estate investment. Diana, describing herself as "*the leader of our group*" explained, "*I think*

most of the team is looking at going into real estate. Because we are looking at long term investment. Because we want to pass on this to our children, [and] children [of our children]." By pooling resources and "*putting all the expenses together,*" they aim to secure bank loans or pursue asset financing to develop apartments, thereby generating profits and ensuring long-term stability. As Diana noted, "*Because we also have elderly people in that group. They'll be able to pass it to their children … As they are retiring maybe going back home, they'll be able to know, my children are well off.*" This collective strategy directly reflects their emancipatory agency: rather than remaining confined by traditional constraints, they have actively forged a new institution that not only addresses their current financial needs but also empowers them and their children to break generational cycles of economic precarity.

Building on their collective efforts in real estate, the participants further demonstrated entrepreneurial emancipation by establishing what they described as a "merry go round[14]" that would evolve into a collective business fund. According to Diana, "*we set the rules because we are looking at having… something that we will be owning*" in which each member contributes 10% of her monthly profits to a shared account. This approach not only reflects a Freirean commitment to self-determination – whereby they define their own criteria and management structures – but also illustrates how they are expanding beyond a single business model to accommodate future cohorts and larger investments. As Diana elaborated, "*the amount that is put in… [will determine] how much share [each participant has],*" ensuring equitable distribution of eventual proceeds. Underscoring the group's commitment to solidarity and mutual support, she asserted, "*we couldn't have done that without you guys. Because you people brought us really together to an extent that now we really want to do bigger things*" highlighting that the virtual incubator's facilitation

[14] A rotating savings and credit association

encouraged them in pursuing these transformative actions. Through this collective undertaking, the participants not only overcome immediate barriers but also lay the groundwork for intergenerational wealth creation.

5.6. Discussion

Entrepreneurship offers a powerful means of navigating systemic challenges and fostering social and economic transformation, especially for marginalized communities. This paper examined how a targeted virtual incubator program, incorporating Freirean concepts, helped bar hostesses in Kenya to confront systemic barriers and enact emancipatory change. This social action project precipitated through business education integrated critical consciousness with entrepreneurship to explore how individuals and communities navigate limit-situations, envision alternative possibilities, and take transformative actions. By highlighting the co-creation of innovative institutional models within resource-constrained and stigmatized contexts, this research contributes to the literature on entrepreneurial emancipation and community-driven empowerment, emphasizing the collective potential of entrepreneurship as a tool for systemic transformation. It offers an alternative model of transformation beyond classic neoliberal market dominated objectives.

The study showcases how the virtual incubator – by adopting a co-intentional and problem posing model of education and leveraging the collectivist mentality of the bar hostesses – developed a community for open dialogue and critical reflection. By reframing entrepreneurship as a tool for addressing systemic inequities rather than a purely profit-driven endeavor, the training encouraged participants to see themselves as change agents capable of reshaping their socio-economic realities. Dialogical teaching methods further allowed participants to examine the power dynamics inherent in their own contexts, prompting them to consider how entrepreneurship could

challenge, rather than reproduce, systemic inequalities. Through deliberate strategies that cultivated agency and empowerment, the participants were emboldened to address local challenges collaboratively. Moreover, the incubator elevated hope and trust (Freire, 1970,1992) as pillars of transformative entrepreneurship, encouraging participants to navigate risks and lean on their collective strength.

In this environment, the participants began to re-envision their roles within the socio-economic landscape. They critically reflected on their limit-situations and explored co-designing innovative solutions to take control of their economic futures (i.e., untested feasibility). Aligning with Freire's transformative cycle of reflection and action (i.e., praxis), they act upon their critical understanding of their context and individually and collectively developed solutions to control their destinies. An unexpected finding was that, instead of relying on traditional support groups or collective initiatives, these women employed praxis by developing alternative institutional models – such as cooperatives, support networks, and retirement programs – that were designed on their own terms and challenged traditional hierarchies, sometimes leveraging traditional methods and enhancing them. By institutionalizing their self-efficacy, they began forging new institutions within an environment marked by systemic barriers. This shift represents not only a departure from their previous place at the "base/bottom of the pyramid" (Hart & Christensen, 2002; Prahalad, 2005), but also a leap into creating something unprecedented within their context. The participants discovered that their collective entrepreneurial mindset could navigate markets and lay the foundation for new institutions.

These findings speak directly to the gaps identified in the institutional voids literature (Bothello et al., 2019; Stephan et al., 2015; Mair & Marti, 2009; Nason & Bothello, 2023; Webb et al., 2020) by demonstrating that new institutional forms can emerge not solely through the

introduction of formal structures, but also through the leveraging of cultural values, communal practices, and co-created knowledge that already reside in informal environments. Rather than assuming a vacuum that must be filled by Western-centric institutional models (Nason & Bothello, 2023), our study reveals how participants actively draw on their existing social and traditional networks, mutual trust, and culturally embedded norms to forge innovative institutions that better reflect their lived experiences. In doing so, we highlight the importance of acknowledging the capacity of local communities to co-create institutions that transcend formal-informal dichotomies, challenging the conventional perspective that a lack of formal structures necessarily signifies institutional absence. Our findings showcase that what is often termed institutional void can, in fact, be a fertile space for grassroots institutional innovation, whereby nonformal social and institutional networks are guided by the critical consciousness and collective agency of those who navigate and reshape these environments.

This study also contributes to explaining entrepreneurship education, and indeed aspects of business education, in terms that transcend pecuniary and neoliberal achievements, and approach issues related to community renewal, sustainability, and resilience. This empirically demonstrated through a Freirean lens highlights emancipatory education by expanding the understanding of emancipation beyond individualistic, market-centric perspectives (Benali & Villesèche, 2024; Goss et al., 2011; Rindova et al., 2022) to emphasize collective and community-driven transformation. By integrating critical consciousness theory (Freire, 1970), the study reframes entrepreneurship as a platform for praxis – an iterative process of reflection and action – enabling participants to navigate and challenge systemic barriers while envisioning and enacting innovative institutional models. In a highly stigmatized and resource-constrained context, the findings highlight how entrepreneurship can foster both individual autonomy and collective

empowerment. By reconceptualizing entrepreneurial ecosystems as dynamic and co-created, the study portrays entrepreneurship not only as a means of market participation but also as a pathway for reshaping institutional structures to promote inclusivity and empowerment.

5.6.1 Limitations

This study faces several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the small sample size of ten bar hostesses limits the generalizability of the findings. While the in-depth, longitudinal approach offers rich insights, the results may not be representative of all sex workers or other marginalized populations. The specific social, legal, and economic context of Nairobi could lead to outcomes that may not apply to similar groups in different regions or countries. Furthermore, external factors such as shifts in law enforcement practices, public health conditions, or economic fluctuations may influence the participants' entrepreneurial activities in ways that are difficult to control.

Another limitation arises from the reliance on self-reported data through interviews. Participants may underreport or exaggerate certain experiences due to the stigma associated with their work or discomfort in discussing traumatic events. Social desirability bias may also influence how they present their experiences with entrepreneurship and trauma, potentially affecting the accuracy and reliability of the data. To mitigate the risk of social desirability bias in self-reported data, we incorporated field visits and took photographs of the participants' business environments, with their consent, to cross-verify their accounts. Additionally, the involvement of a trusted co-investigator, who was already a well-known and respected member of the participant community, helped to build rapport and foster openness during interviews, further minimizing this bias.

Researcher positionality and reflexivity are also important considerations. Although we collected data alongside a team, the inclusion of a Kenyan research team member who led some

of the data collection efforts ensured cultural sensitivity and deeper engagement with the participants. Their involvement in the project helped contextualize the participants' experiences more accurately and mitigated the influence of any outsider perspectives.

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Chapter 6

Discussion and Conclusion

Collectively, these three papers offer a comprehensive reconceptualization of how trauma – whether collectively experienced, as in the COVID-19 pandemic; context-specific, as with forced displacement; or compounded and ongoing, as with marginalized women in the stigmatized sex work sector – profoundly shapes and can be shaped by entrepreneurial processes. Drawing on diverse frameworks, including social intrapreneurship, trauma-informed care, and Freirean critical consciousness, this thesis demonstrated that trauma is not merely a backdrop but an active force that can hinder or catalyze innovation.

In university settings, this thesis shows how institutions can harness intrapreneurial thinking to respond to crises with resilience, empowering marginalized entrepreneurs in virtual incubators. In refugee entrepreneurship programs, this thesis highlights the importance of trauma-informed approaches that address the temporal, identity-related, and retraumatization concerns central to forced displacement. Finally, in contexts characterized by systemic stigma and ongoing adversity (i.e., sex work), it illustrates how entrepreneurship, guided by critical reflection, can serve as a collective path toward emancipation and healing. By intertwining these insights, the thesis advances our understanding of entrepreneurship as a vehicle for both individual and collective transformation, stressing that effective entrepreneurial support – especially for vulnerable communities – requires robust institutional engagement, explicit attention to mental health and identity work, and dialogical models that foreground empowerment and agency.

The first paper of this thesis examined how trauma – particularly the collective trauma brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic – can intersect with entrepreneurial processes in institutions such as universities. Anchored in the framework of academic and social intrapreneurship, this paper illustrated how the cascading effects of collective trauma could galvanize universities to adopt intrapreneurial strategies, transforming crises into opportunities for

resilience and positive societal impact. The central case study of an international virtual incubator, established in direct response to the pandemic, underscored how universities can empower marginalized entrepreneurs to develop sustainable ventures in the face of profound disruptions.

By adopting a decentralized, digitally mediated structure, the virtual incubator not only facilitated a safe and accessible environment for these entrepreneurs but also demonstrated the transformative role of trauma as both a challenge and an enabler of innovative solutions for institutions and their stakeholders. In doing so, this paper reframes how institutions can respond to trauma. It highlights that universities, when confronted with internal and external pressures during a crisis, can leverage intrapreneurial thinking to address social challenges effectively. By positioning social intrapreneurship at the core, the paper emphasized how organizational resources can be mobilized to address issues affecting marginalized groups and broader communities, thereby extending the traditional role of universities as agents of societal benefit.

The first paper also stressed the importance of decentralized, multi-level innovation processes. These processes can help tackle "wicked problems" by engaging multiple stakeholders and enhancing institutional legitimacy at local and global scales. It showcased that universities can foster scalable and inclusive initiatives that align with broader social priorities while concurrently fortifying their reputations. This paper bridges gaps in the current literature by integrating the notions of collective trauma, social intrapreneurship, and digital innovation, underscoring how institutions can respond proactively to crises.

Ultimately, the insights from this first paper enrich the entrepreneurship literature by situating trauma as a structural condition that shapes entrepreneurial action and resilience. It challenges conventional models of university engagement by foregrounding the transformative potential of socially-oriented intrapreneurial projects. In practical terms, it provides actionable

recommendations for universities to develop flexible, inclusive, and socially responsive intrapreneurial models that draw on interdisciplinary collaboration and broad stakeholder engagement. This work thus clarifies how, amid global collective traumas, higher education institutions can not only adapt but also lead in creating and sustaining social impact by utilizing entrepreneurship.

The second paper of this thesis offered a pivotal contribution by introducing a trauma-informed framework designed specifically for refugee entrepreneurship support. Grounded in insights from trauma-informed care (Huang et al., 2014), this paper addressed the profound psychological challenges commonly faced by refugee entrepreneurs, thereby expanding our understanding of how trauma shapes entrepreneurial motivations, behaviors, and outcomes. Central to this framework is temporal reorientation, which recognizes that forced displacement often disrupts refugees' ability to reconcile their past, present, and future. Through targeted interventions such as mindfulness and bridging practices, refugee entrepreneurs can better reconnect with the present and construct a hopeful vision for the future. A second core element is identity reconstruction, whereby narrative identity work and the cultivation of collective entrepreneurial identities help mitigate the threat of identity dissolution that frequently arises in the context of forced displacement. Finally, the framework stresses preventing retraumatization and advocates for creating culturally sensitive, trust-building environments that prioritize safety and empowerment. By foregrounding these three areas, this paper transcends conventional approaches to refugee entrepreneurship, urging program designers and policymakers to integrate mental health considerations into their services.

The second paper also provides a critique of current refugee entrepreneurship programs, highlighting a tendency to overlook the deep-seated psychological impacts of trauma. While

existing programs often emphasize resilience as the key to overcoming adversity, this research underscores that resilience alone is insufficient unless it is accompanied by deliberate strategies to address underlying trauma. Consequently, the proposed trauma-informed framework calls for a shift from merely surviving entrepreneurial challenges to thriving through healthy entrepreneurial identity development and community engagement. In doing so, it reframes the notion of resilience, positioning it within a broader context that includes psychological healing and social support.

Beyond offering specific interventions, this paper advocates for a more holistic understanding of entrepreneurship among marginalized populations by integrating trauma-informed care principles. It posits that mental health support is not a peripheral concern but rather a central component of effective entrepreneurial training and support. In doing so, the paper expands the scope of entrepreneurship research to include the psychological, social, and cultural dimensions of refugee experiences, opening avenues for future research that can explore the role of trauma across diverse contexts of entrepreneurship. Ultimately, the proposed framework underscores how a trauma-informed perspective can transform not just how we support refugee entrepreneurs but also how we conceptualize entrepreneurship as a field that must acknowledge and address the complexities of lived experience.

The third Paper offers a nuanced exploration of how entrepreneurship intersects with trauma, particularly within the compounded experiences of collective and ongoing traumas faced by marginalized groups. By focusing on bar hostesses in Nairobi, Kenya – women entrenched in the overlapping traumas of sex work, systemic stigma, and the cascading collective traumas caused by COVID-19 – the paper expands the discourse on entrepreneurial emancipation and resilience.

This chapter uniquely employed Paulo Freire's (1970) concept of critical consciousness to interpret how individuals and communities navigate trauma through entrepreneurship. It

introduced the notion of "limit-situations" as structural and systemic barriers that constrain agency but also present opportunities for transformative action. The study demonstrated how entrepreneurship, when framed through Freire's principles, becomes a powerful mechanism for fostering critical reflection, enabling individuals to recognize oppressive structures, envision alternative realities (untested feasibility), and engage in deliberate transformative actions (limit-acts).

This paper advances the understanding of trauma in entrepreneurship by focusing on collective and ongoing forms of trauma. These women's experiences are shaped not only by discrete traumatic events but by systemic and enduring adversities tied to stigma, economic exclusion, and structural voids. By situating their entrepreneurship within these contexts, the paper bridges gaps in the literature that traditionally separate individual trauma from collective, institutionalized forms of adversity. By examining their experiences, it establishes that trauma is not merely a backdrop but an active force shaping the entrepreneurial journey, influencing identity, decision-making, and resilience.

The participants' entrepreneurial journeys, undertaken through a targeted virtual incubator, highlight the dual role of trauma as both a barrier and a catalyst. Their collective efforts to address structural constraints through cooperative ventures underscore the potential for entrepreneurship to serve as a medium for collective healing and resilience.

This paper also provided actionable insights into designing entrepreneurship training programs for trauma-affected populations. The use of dialogical methods and culturally relevant materials in the virtual incubator facilitated a critical reflection among participants, fostering agency and empowerment. By integrating principles of critical consciousness, such programs can support the personal and collective resilience of individuals navigating compounded adversities.

The empirical case study shed light on how entrepreneurship can act as a transformative force, enabling marginalized individuals and communities to reclaim agency, reconstruct identity, and create alternative socio-economic pathways. It reinforces the thesis's broader argument that trauma, while deeply challenging, also holds potential as a source of resilience and innovation within entrepreneurial contexts.

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