



EDITORIAL

CONSUMPTION AND PASSION  
IN UNCONVENTIONAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP  
AS A PROMISING RESEARCH FIELD<sup>1</sup>

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Abstract

**Purpose.** In this editorial we examine the issue of the relationship between entrepreneurship and consumption by framing it within the concept of unconventional entrepreneurship. The literature that has addressed the issue, the premises to the definition of the topic, is examined.

**Design/methodology/approach.** The literature has recently identified a promising field of research in the contribution of consumption experiences to entrepreneurship. The processes of consumption and entrepreneurship have long been denied joint observation.

**Findings.** This editorial is intended to emphasize the importance of the path of research on the topic from the perspective of small business studies, since the relationship between the two major processes, those of entrepreneurship and consumption, can take on special significance in generating new businesses and often, though not necessarily, small businesses.

**Practical and Social implications.** The goal of this editorial is to stimulate the observation of phenomena that influence the relationship between consumption and entrepreneurship, while also examining the implications in new directions, such as the analysis of the relationship between entrepreneurship and community in a changing society and policies to support entrepreneurship.

<sup>1</sup>This editorial incorporates the contents of a keynote speech given at the 6th PISB Workshop "New perspective and interdisciplinary approaches to entrepreneurship", Urbino, May 19-20, 2023. Ideas contained in the editorial have matured as part of a more than decade-long research project shared with Bernard Cova. Thanks to Tonino Pencarelli for comments on an earlier version of the paper.

**Originality of the study.** The paper presents some concepts derived from a long shared research path and proposes some key ideas from a perspective defined as tribal and unconventional entrepreneurship.

**Practical and Social implications.** The analysis points out interesting theoretical and empirical perspectives on the new orientations for SMEs made available by humane entrepreneurship and highlights how their leadership and business models might provide a way to help both people and enterprises become engines for social and environmental change. Moreover, it highlights the drivers underlying an SME's ability to cope with systemic crises, the core values of a humanistic orientation in SMEs, how humane entrepreneurship can enhance virtuous behaviors, and the results deriving from responsible policies and actions.

**Originality of the study.** The study contributes to advance a field's theoretical understanding that is still underinvestigated and helps elicit and broaden the discussion on humane entrepreneurship as it pertains to SMEs.

## 1. Introduction

Developments in the literature as well as observations of empirical cases testify to a growing focus on the contribution of consumer experiences to entrepreneurship. This editorial is intended to emphasize the importance of the issue in the small business studies perspective, since the relationship between the two major phenomena has a special significance in generating new and often, though not necessarily, small businesses. The goal is to stimulate an observation of the phenomena affecting the relationship between consumption and entrepreneurship among the contributors to *Piccola Impresa - Small Business*.

The fact that the same person can hold entrepreneurial roles as well as carry out consumption activities has long been insufficient to generate interest in the relationship between the two phenomena. As is well known, economic theory sharply separates the two phenomena, developing a theory of consumer behavior distinct from that of enterprise. This choice has important motivations and corresponds to situations in which skills and motivations in consumption and entrepreneurship traditionally appeared different. However, these differences are not always perceived with the same intensity today, partly because of the growth of consumer skills (Caru and Cova, 2011) and the characteristics of new technologies that can now place entrepreneurs and consumers in similar positions with respect to large technology platforms (Kozinets and Gretzel, 2021).

The processes of consumption and entrepreneurship have long been denied joint observation. Recently, however, the relationship between the two processes is receiving increased attention (Da Fonseca and Campos, 2021). Already the study of user entrepreneurship (Shah and Tripsas, 2007) has pushed to see situations of consumption that were then, later, the basis for

the formation of skills, for the implementation of the innovation process, up to the development of companies with significant market success.

In this strand of the relationships between consumption and entrepreneurship are the phenomena of passion for specific domains (Cardon et al., 2017), entrepreneurial passion (Cardon et al., 2009; Baraldi et al., 2020), and user-generated innovation (von Hippel, 2016). The literature has examined stories of entrepreneurs who move from a passion for a specific domain (sports, early childhood products, food and wine, etc.) to starting paths that give rise to a business, with an emphasis on the implications of consumption as a ground for developing competences and relationships that then become a foundation for entrepreneurship. More recently, the implications of entrepreneurship for consumption, understood as the impact of the entrepreneurial pathway on the consumption experience, has also been examined (Da Fonseca and Campos, 2021). The relationship between consumption and entrepreneurship has thus been associated with bivalent implications, noting the coexistence of different logics, where until now market and tribal logic were perceived as not compatible and this relationship between them was seen as a black box (Cova and Guercini, 2023).

In this editorial we examine the issue of the relationship between entrepreneurship and consumption by framing it within a concept of unconventional entrepreneurship (Guercini and Cova, 2018). This concept is associated with a specific role of passion and the communities that welcome those who share it. We therefore examine these issues in the following sections. As a result, we have the characters of an unconventional entrepreneurial process, which is not without connections to possible policies supporting new entrepreneurship and which can offer, from connections with already developed strands such as user entrepreneurship, new perspectives also for further development of small business research.

## **2. The emerging subject of unconventional entrepreneurship**

The term unconventional refers to what is “not following what is done or considered normal or acceptable by most people; different and interesting synonym unorthodox” (Oxford learner dictionary). Thus, we have “unconventional marketing” (Cova and Soucet, 2014), “unconventional finance” (Buchner and Wilkinson, 2015), “unconventional management” (Clair et al., 2016), and “unconventional research contexts” (Bamberger and Pratt, 2010). In itself, what is unconventional is anyone who does not adhere to an established convention or accepted standards. Can we talk about the emergence of unconventional entrepreneurship (Guercini and Cova, 2018)? Some changes from more conventional standards to approach entrepreneurship driven by research on alertness to profit opportunities is already in the literature (Kirzner, 1973). Reference is made to forms of entrepreneurship that do not start with the issue of profit opportunities such as: accidental entrepreneur (Shah and Tripsas, 2007); user entrepreneur (Haefliger, Jäger and Von Krogh, 2010); lifestyle entrepreneur (Bredvold and Skålen, 2016); tribal entrepreneur (Cova and Guercini, 2016); consum-

er entrepreneurship (Daskalopoulou and Skandalis, 2019).

Connected to this evolution of unconventional entrepreneurship are additional related subjects such as (1) household sector innovation (von Hippel, 2016); (2) passionate entrepreneur (Cardon et al., 2009); (3) technology trends (Puntoni et al., 2021); and (4) consumer competences (Carù and Cova, 2011). Unconventional entrepreneurship thus emerges in a context in which the motivations for entrepreneurial action do not have as their main theme the pursuit of profit opportunities, but rather the pursuit of a different lifestyle or motivation to satisfy a personal need or rebuild one's life path following previous failures. These motivations for entrepreneurship are set in a context of changes in society, escalating economic difficulties with impact on entrepreneurship. In order to cope with the difficulties of the social but also economic environment, people seek to enhance deposits of competences gained in the context of individual and shared passions. These passions may be shared within communities, which in turn are connected to territory or frequentations in digital environments. In these contexts, individual profiles and group identities are developed, with the accumulation of skills in specific domains. Consumption and entrepreneurship are roles that coexist in the same people in the real world but that scholars are used to treating separately. The context with its evolution calls into question the traditional way of treating these two roles (Huefner and Hunt, 1994). The consumption-entrepreneurship relationship changes because of the development of technologies that may tend to reduce the differences between consumers and entrepreneurs, where "... most marketers in the world today are consumers, not creators, of AI technology" (Kozinets and Gretzel, 2021, p. 156).

In the tradition of entrepreneurship studies, the entrepreneur has been seen as one who assumes certain functions (of innovation and development, political and organizational in nature) (Schumpeter, 1934; Fazzi, 1982). Alternatively, entrepreneurship has been taken as a field of study about such themes as (Gartner, 1990): (1) personality of entrepreneur; (2) innovation; (3) organization creation; (4) creating value; (5) profit or non-profit; (6) growth; (7) uniqueness; (8) the owner and/or manager. In this area, unconventional entrepreneurship examines additional aspects related to motivation and process, focusing on the role of passion for a domain. That may be associated with membership in a community of enthusiasts in which the foundations are laid and skills are formed that may later foster emergence into new enterprises.

### **3. Passion before opportunities for profit**

About the relation between passion and opportunities for profit, in unconventional entrepreneurship, consumer-entrepreneur stories tell paths in which passion for a particular domain precedes the discovery of opportunities for profit (see cases presented by Cova and Guercini, 2023; Milanesi, 2018; Pagano et al., 2018; Ranfagni and Runfola, 2018). Coming before is

understood in a temporal logic, whereby the former emerges in the process previously, but it can also be understood in a logic of importance, because preceding also tends to establish a prevalence of the original logic to which the entrepreneurial actor may remain attached. It can also condition the organizational dimension, where the growth of the enterprise may no longer make it possible for the entrepreneurial actor to make direct contact with the object of his passion that led him to generate the enterprise. Passion is not new in entrepreneurship. It is hard to picture a real entrepreneur without passion, that is, as a strictly rational individual driven solely by a calculative pursuit of profit. *“Iconic entrepreneurs such as Virgin’s Richard Branson, Apple’s Steve Jobs, IKEA’s Ingvar Kamprad, Luxottica’s Leonardo del Vecchio or The Body Shop’s Anita Roddick all shared a deep passion and a strong emotional engagement not only with their businesses but also with broader societal and personal issues, ranging from the environment to living conditions and poverty. But, despite the salience of deep passions in the professional life of so many entrepreneurs, only quite recently has passion surfaced as a core topic in entrepreneurship studies”* (Baraldi et al., 2020, pp. 1-2). In unconventional entrepreneurship, the theme of passion, for contexts already experienced, precedes that of seeking and pursuing profit opportunities or creating and developing a new organization.

The topic of passion in entrepreneurship has been the subject of extensive literature, even remaining to the field of management alone (Cardon et al., 2009; Cardon & Kirk, 2015; Cardon et al., 2017; Chen et al., 2009; Murnieks et al., 2014; Thorgren & Wincent, 2015). Emblematic in this regard is the Go Pro case. Its founder recalls how *“... I first really started developing the idea back in 2002 while on surf trip in Australia with a couple of friends. We were living out of a Toyota van, putting in about 5,000 miles surfing the East, South and West Coasts. I was spending most of my time in the water, sharing amazing moments and waves with my friends. I was also shooting photos (this was pre-YouTube!) from the beach, but from that distance my shots weren’t doing the surf or my friends justice. Some of the most intense and memorable moments in cranking surf were just that, memories. I’d kill for some GoPro footage of that trip! Ironically, that trip is what fired me up to come home and finally start GoPro to create ‘the invisible camera,’ a wearable camera so convenient that you forget you’ve got it on”*<sup>2</sup>.

We can distinguish between an “entrepreneurial passion” (EP) and a “domain passion” (DP) (Cardon et al., 2017), where EP leads to seeking to become an entrepreneur because one is passionate about the entrepreneurial process, while DP is to be understood as a passion for activities in a particular field with respect to which entrepreneurship is a vehicle for pursuing one’s passion. These logics can result in different combinations, not necessarily appearing to be opposed to each other (Baraldi et al., 2020, p. 13). We can imagine that DP and EP can be differently mixed on a continuum in the experiences of real entrepreneurs (Baraldi et al., 2020, p. 18). If the latter is placed on the continuum between individual and group

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<sup>2</sup> Nick Woodman, interview - <https://www.malakye.com/news/3518/gopro-with-founder-inventor-nick-woodman>

dimensions, we can hypothesize different situations combining these dimensions with the continuum between EP and DP.

#### **4. Community before market**

Cambridge dictionary defines community as: “a group of people living in the same place or having a particular characteristic in common” and “the condition of sharing or having certain attitudes and interests in common” (e.g.: “the sense of community that organized religion can provide”). The role of community is related to the idea of belonging, territoriality, culture.

Related to community are concept like “conviviality” (Oxford Dictionary) that is about an atmosphere or event (friendly, lively, and enjoyable) or about a person (jovial, cheerful and friendly). Conviviality has been defined as “friendship/socializing for joyfulness” in comparison to “friendship/socializing for convenience” (Illich, 1973). The theme of conviviality is interesting because it is within the reach of people regardless of organizational size (Guercini and Ranfagni, 2016), connecting entrepreneurship to the community dimension.

We thus have a shift in consumption from “communities of users” to “communities of enthusiasts.” User communities are known to support innovative activities (Franke and Shah, 2003) that can create successful commercial products (Baldwin et al., 2006) and even standard equipment in industry (Hienerth and Lettl, 2011). Enthusiastic consumer communities (Cova et al., 2007) are a specific type of user community with its own capabilities to support innovation and entrepreneurship.

The sharing (of interests, territory, culture etc.) produce community. Sharing passion consists in moments of exchange and creation through personal interaction, enrichment through experiences and thus motivation formation, generating a form of proximity. In this sense, passion works similarly to other traditional proximity generators (physical, cultural, psychic, etc.). This generates a sense of belonging/membership and corresponds to a form of proximity (physical, cultural, etc.). The community is heterogeneous (there are juniors and seniors) yet integrated, it is a place of learning and comparison, it is only made possible by sharing that feeds it.

Unconventional entrepreneurship, as highlighted in the literature (Da Fonseca and Campos, 2021) is linked to the study of the impact of consumption on entrepreneurship development, but the study of the impact of entrepreneurship on consumption experience is also noted (Cova and Guercini, 2023).

#### **5. The unconventional entrepreneurial process as a research opportunity**

Passion can be seen as a context, the sharing of which produces social ties and a sense of community, with effects comparable to those of sharing



in another context of importance for the generation of entrepreneurship, as the territorial context of industrial districts (Becattini et al., 1990). The changing society, learning in a community, and “passion as a context” can be similarly to other the ones associated with other forms of proximity. Learning in a community of enthusiasts can be compared with cases of the atmosphere in the “Mashallian” industrial district. The consumption-entrepreneurship relationship can thus be considered for future research on entrepreneurship, addressing questions such as: Can support for passion formation in consumption be the basis for new public policies for entrepreneurship development? Can research on unconventional entrepreneurship also be examined for implications on consumption processes?

The formation of new enterprises from the experience of passion and community in consumption is described through a multi-stage process (Guercini and Cova, 2022).

In the first stage, individual resources are produced from the investments in passion and skills that are formed. Along with these, there is the generation of community resources in relation to the sharing of collective experiences, the sense of belonging to the community of enthusiasts based on the sharing of passion as context, access to common and individual member assets, and interests and practices that may involve organizations. Collective identities, experiences and capabilities, situated learning in such communities through social processes are then produced.

In a second phase, we see the emergence of innovation and the formation of prototypes of objects, products, through multiple community memberships. Individuals use the community dimension as an asset and as a context for definition of needs, in which then solutions are formulated and tested as prototypes or new tools are developed.

In a third stage there is the emergence of the entrepreneurial dimension through the recognition of opportunities and the exploitation of learning outcomes described earlier. It is at this stage that an overcoming of the dimension of passion and community might appear, but this in many cases does not take place in the sense of a shift to one logic and the abandonment of the previous one, but rather in the sense of the coexistence of the different logics, even in spite of situations of opposition or conflict that might be perceived by some member of the community. Prototyping is recognized, in this phase, as an opportunity, and the individuals in the community exploit the results of the previous phase with risks of value slippage.

Finally, in a fourth and final phase, market emergence is noted, with market testing and the formation of a market that crosses the community boundary. Prototypes are developed through new product versions. Market development corresponds to the emergence of word-of-mouth outside the enthusiast community (Guercini and Cova, 2022).

This process of unconventional entrepreneurship is not without problematic implications (Guercini and Cova, 2018). One aspect concerns the conflict between this process and the enthusiast’s main activity of professional growth, which, however, can be resolved through entrepreneurial initiative. More significant, on the other hand, is the risk of alienation due

to the totalizing nature of entrepreneurship originated from the consumer experience, such that it absorbs the person who develops from passion an entrepreneurial opportunity that also absorbs his or her professional and work dimension (Guercini and Cova, 2018). This is precisely why the unconventional entrepreneur has a strength in the particularly advanced ability to read consumers, sharing their same passion and originally being one of them. Similarly in the analogy with the district context, in the context of communities of enthusiasts, economies of belonging can emerge that include this ability to read as a target market, as well as the greater ease in being able to achieve their collaboration.



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