
Guest editorial: Entrepreneurial strategy and cultural practices towards sustainable business growth: language and sensemaking

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441

Introduction to the special issue

Across sectors and within the wider global economy, the pursuit of sustainable business growth requires both reflection and realignment of strategic and at times entrepreneurial, imperatives (Hickel and Kallis, 2020; Rosário *et al.*, 2022; Munoz and Dimov, 2023; Petersen, 2025). As new or growing ventures endure and navigate volatile markets, traditional growth models that have focused solely on immediate financial returns are proving insufficient. In addition, advancing entrepreneurial strategy must now integrate embedded cultural practices to foster resilience and multi-dimensional sustainability (Crammond, 2024b, 2025; Fang *et al.*, 2025). This synergy directly impacts business longevity across three critical and measurable pillars: entrepreneurial agility, financial viability and environmental stewardship (Crammond, 2024a; Russell *et al.*, 2025).

This special issue explores the dynamic intersection between evolved entrepreneurial strategies and the cultural practices that reinforce them. When strategic innovation is supported by an aligned organisational culture, businesses can successfully balance profitability with ecological and social responsibility, turning sustainability from a compliance mandate into a competitive advantage.

Entrepreneurs pursue growth not only through strategic actions and capabilities, but also through networks, relationships, narratives, cultural meanings, learning processes and institutional contexts (Nicholson and Anderson, 2005; Berglund *et al.*, 2020; Brownell *et al.*, 2024). Thus, entrepreneurial strategy and cultural practices are not separate domains but intertwined dimensions of sustainable growth that can be strategised. Across global markets, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) face mounting pressure to innovate business models as digital technologies. In addition, international competition and institutional complexity reshape competitive landscapes (Petersen, 2025; Wirtz and Daier, 2017; Wirtz and Kubin, 2023).

Crucial to executing these strategies are mechanisms of language and sensemaking (Cornelissen *et al.*, 2012; Cunliffe and Coupland, 2012). Language is not merely a tool for communication; it is the primary medium through which organisational reality is constructed, negotiated, (digitally) managed and sustained (Crammond *et al.*, 2018, 2026a, b). Sensemaking represents the collaborative process by which members of an enterprise interpret fluid environments, assign meaning to disruptive changes and chart a collective path forward. Entrepreneurial ecosystems and their support mechanisms have often been conceptualised as configurations of actors, institutions, resources and formal support infrastructures, while less attention has been paid to the relational processes, design (Dimov, 2021) and narrative construction (Cunliffe and Coupland, 2012): entrepreneurial practices through which resources and support is accessed, brokered, negotiated and sustained. Together, language and sensemaking serve as the foundational architecture for legacy building and the preservation of corporate history, ensuring that core values endure across leadership generations.

By shaping how internal and external stakeholders perceive an organisation's purpose, language transforms vision into action (Townsend and Hunt, 2019; Crammond, 2023). This linguistic alignment is particularly vital for societal impact and corporate social responsibility (CSR), as it bridges the gap between noble intentions and authentic execution (Wang *et al.*, 2025).



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Through this special issue, we examine how the nuanced deployment of language and sensemaking enables organisations to articulate values, navigate strategic transformation and secure sustainable institutional growth.

Overview of the special issue papers

This special issue is proud to present eight papers organised into three themes: how *networks and support drive sustainable growth*; the *narrative framing of entrepreneurial identity*, and, moving forward, how *technology is transforming sustainable business models*. Each of these themes offers critical insight into contemporary sustainable growth. Predictably, sustainable growth is a common concern confronted across all themes, while entrepreneurial strategy and cultural practices emerge in different forms within contributions.

The first theme of supportive networks towards sustainable growth, including the first three papers, investigates how external structures shape sustainable entrepreneurial development and growth. These studies examine the critical roles that networks, localised ecosystems, accelerators and active social engagement play in a venture's trajectory. Rather than viewing entrepreneurs as isolated actors, this research demonstrates how strategic embedding within supportive institutional and community frameworks provides the vital resources, mentorship and social capital necessary to sustain long-term business models.

The second theme, focussing on narrative framing and comprising three papers, explores how entrepreneurs interpret success, failure, resilience, identity and strategic transition. The authors demonstrate how language, personal narratives and cultural meaning-making help leaders process complex organisational realities. By analysing these discourses, the papers reveal how entrepreneurs build a coherent professional identity and maintain psychological and strategic resilience when navigating major corporate pivots or bouncing back from market setbacks.

The final theme of transformative technology impacting business modelling and the final two papers focus on structural and operational transformation within SMEs. These studies analyse how smaller firms successfully create or overhaul their business models to compete. They investigate the mechanics of technological leapfrogging, rapid digital transition, internationalisation and the cultivation of advanced network capabilities. Together, these two papers highlight how agile infrastructure and relational assets allow SMEs to bypass traditional developmental stages and secure sustainable growth.

In the context of supportive infrastructure and enterprising networks, the first three articles in this special issue analyse issues pertaining to entrepreneurial access practices and sustainable growth strategies. Using quantitative, qualitative and bibliometric approaches, the studies ask: *How do entrepreneurs access and make sense of networks, ecosystems, accelerators, and how does the social engagement shape sustainable development and growth of entrepreneurial ventures?*

The first article of this special issue by [Wahidi \(2026\)](#) draws on effectuation theory ([Sarasvathy, 2001](#)) and analyses relational entrepreneurship and several characteristics the characteristics of inclusive networks: that is, diversity of networks and trust and mutual understanding. As opposed to common conceptualisations of networks as a structural feature of an entrepreneurial ecosystem, the author regards networks as relational space enacted by entrepreneurial agency ([Jack and Anderson, 2002](#); [Steyaert and Bouwen, 1997](#)). Wahidi conducted a survey among 731 entrepreneurs in Lebanon, France, Germany and the UAE – owners, founders and senior managers. The study advanced current research on entrepreneurial networks in a couple ways. First, the study revealed heterogeneous pathways of network diversity translation into long-term sustainability strategies: the value of social and experiential diversity was found dependent on country's ecosystem maturity and governance and having stronger predictive power of long-term sustainability strategies in Lebanon and UAE.

The second article by [Konroyd \(2026\)](#) combines design theory with co-evolutionary sensemaking approach ([Berglund et al., 2020](#); [Cristofaro, 2022](#)) and analyses the university campuses as spaces in which mission-free and social missions co-exist. Based on five interviews with representatives of campus-linked accelerator programs in Canada and publicly available documents, the author uncovers how ecosystem actors engage with infrastructure. The author investigates narrative frictions and affordance issues and sensemaking around the opportunity tensions as well as programmatic and subsidiary service conflict at university-linked accelerators. The study highlights how addressing discrepancy between campus-linked accelerators formal discourses and experiences can help provide better services to start-ups.

[Dat and Thi Hue \(2026\)](#) employ a hybrid literature review approach combined with bibliometric methods and offer conceptual refinement of two related literatures: sustainable entrepreneurship and sustainable entrepreneurial intentions. The authors discuss human capital, environmental and ecosystem factors that affect entrepreneurial intentions and find limited diversity of theoretical frameworks – as it becomes apparent, sustainable entrepreneurial intentions are mostly conceptualised as a cognitive individual-level outcome. Social, relational and cultural dimensions are still rarely considered and reflect relatively nascent stages of the field, in which coherence of research investigations relies on well-established theoretical frameworks. The authors suggest that in the future, greater attention should be paid to the elements of entrepreneurial ecosystems other than education, such as technology, networks, financial support and market access, as well as negative effects of entrepreneurial ecosystem factors on entrepreneurial intentions. To develop the field further, greater engagement with dynamic and evolutionary approaches as well as integrating system-level theories with individual-level models is required.

Relating to the second emerging theme, the following three papers confront the question: *How do, or can, entrepreneurs deal with contextual challenges, and both communicate and socialise strategies for sustainable growth?*

[Akahome \(2026\)](#), with the fourth paper of this special issue, examines how entrepreneurs in developing countries, specifically Nigeria, actively interpret and navigate business failure using narrative sensemaking. The discussion highlights tensions between emotional repair, such as overcoming shame and identity disruption, and strategic rationality required to rebuild viable business models within highly fragile institutional environments. The study finds that entrepreneurial recovery is a non-linear, narrative-driven process rather than a basic behavioural adjustment. By framing failure through socio-cultural and relational lenses, entrepreneurs reconstruct positive identities and restore social legitimacy. Ultimately, sustainability-oriented strategies emerge as downstream outcomes of this restored legitimacy rather than from pre-planned strategic targets.

[Andersen and Lindberg \(2026\)](#) investigate how entrepreneurs use “Nordicness” as a place identity and narrative strategy to navigate tensions between business growth and sustainability. The discussion explores the sociology of narrative, examining how cultural resources, such as trust, equality, authenticity, serve as symbolic assets for artisan and green entrepreneurship. The study conceptualises “Nordicness” not as a static category but as a dynamic pool of meaning used for institutional legitimation. It argues that telling stories aligned with Nordic values enables firms to position themselves strategically against societal narratives, managing growth expectations under constraint.

The sixth paper, from [Singh et al. \(2026\)](#), explores how interpersonal distrust within entrepreneurial teams secretly undermines long-term, sustainable organisational growth. By synthesising interdisciplinary literature across organisational theory, entrepreneurship and sustainability studies, the authors build a sequential model explaining the hidden relational costs of mistrust. The framework demonstrates that interpersonal distrust restricts open communication and shared sensemaking. The study concludes that proactively building relational trust and supportive workplace cultures is critical for securing enduring, responsible economic, social and environmental success.

The final two contributions of this special issue address a shared question: *How do SMEs transform or create business models under conditions of technological disruption and global uncertainty?*

Paper seven of this special issue, authored by [Geng and Khushk \(2026\)](#), examines technological leapfrogging as a mechanism through which resource-constrained SMEs bypass intermediate technological stages and adopt advanced digital systems. Contrary to the assumption that radical technological shifts require organisational slack, the findings show that scarcity can act as a catalyst for discontinuous technological change. Through a multiple-case study of Chinese SMEs, the research identifies a three-phase process, constraint-driven recognition, strategic bricolage and value logic transformation, demonstrating how firms creatively mobilise limited resources to access high-end technologies and convert them into business model innovation (BMI). This work reframes leapfrogging as a constraint-enabled pathway to new value creation, offering a micro-process theory that explains how SMEs move from technological catch-up to strategic creation.

The final contribution to this special issue, from [Torkkeli et al. \(2026\)](#), shifts the analytical lens to the cognitive and relational foundations of BMI in internationalising SMEs. Drawing on survey data from Finnish firms, it investigates how individual sensemaking, specifically communication-oriented and cultural sensemaking, relates to BMI and whether network capability mediates these relationships. The results show that communication-oriented sensemaking is positively associated with BMI and that this relationship is partly mediated by network capability. Cultural sensemaking, by contrast, does not significantly predict BMI. These findings highlight that in international contexts, managers' ability to articulate, share and negotiate interpretations is more consequential for business model change than culturally embedded schemas alone. Network capability emerges as a critical mechanism through which individual cognition translates into strategic renewal.

Together, the two studies offer a multi-level understanding of how SMEs innovate under constraint. Technological leapfrogging illustrates how firms transform their business models through discontinuous technological adoption, while the sensemaking study reveals how cognitive processes and network capabilities shape BMI during internationalisation. Both contributions underscore that SMEs actively reinterpret, recombine and reconfigure resources to create new value. In this view, entrepreneurial growth, BMI strategy and sustained digital and international expansion emerge from entrepreneurial action, resource configuration and network development as intertwined micro-to-meso processes rather than outcomes driven by macro-level forces ([Petersen and Rasmussen, 2024](#)).

Considerations for future research

As highlighted, this special issue presents concepts such as entrepreneurial ecosystems, sensemaking, narratives, dynamic capabilities, business model innovation, trust and entrepreneurial learning. Methodologically, the papers included in the issue employ quantitative, qualitative, conceptual and review-based approaches and span a wide range of geographical and institutional settings. This special issue demonstrates that sustainable entrepreneurial growth is a complex phenomenon that cannot be adequately understood through a single theoretical lens or methodological approach.

We recommend that future research should move beyond treating sustainable entrepreneurial intentions as purely cognitive, individual-level outcomes by integrating social, relational and cultural dimensions. Scholars should employ dynamic, evolutionary approaches that bridge individual-level models with system-level theories. Specifically, investigations should explore ecosystem elements beyond education, such as technology, networks, financial support, market access and examine negative effects of ecosystem factors.

Additionally, researchers need to explore how interpersonal dynamics, including narrative sensemaking, place identity and the costs of relational distrust impact psychological resilience, legitimacy and strategic transformation. Finally, more studies should investigate the

micro-processes of SME BMI under constraints, examining how communication-oriented sensemaking, strategic bricolage and network capabilities enable rapid, technological internationalisation.

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