



Handling the beast: How entrepreneurs regulate obsessive passion

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Dualistic model of passion
Work passion
Obsessive passion
Self-regulation
Entrepreneurial cognition
Agentic perspective

ABSTRACT

Passion is a powerful force in entrepreneurship but can become dysfunctional when it takes an obsessive form. Entrepreneurs' passion can substantially fluctuate owing to changes in situational demands and contextual conditions and their efforts to shape their internal states and external environments. Self-regulation theories motivate our active-agentic perspective according to which entrepreneurs actively respond to—and proactively influence—their passion's salience. Building on this perspective, we explore how entrepreneurs actively manage their obsessive passion. Drawing from interviews with 37 entrepreneurs, this study identifies several regulation strategies that differ in the degree of intentional regulation applied and which can enhance or diminish obsessive passion's salience. Results demonstrate that obsessively passionate individuals can act as active agents who regulate their passion's salience to minimize its potentially harmful consequences and maximize positive outcomes.

1. Introduction

"It's like a beast that will never stop eating. I could work on it 24/7. So, you have to decide to stop feeding it, you know?"

—I33:34.

Passion, defined as "a strong inclination toward an activity that people like, that they find important, and in which they invest time and energy" (Vallerand et al., 2003, p. 757), is a key driver of entrepreneurial action and performance (Murnieks et al., 2014; Schwarte et al., 2023). It helps entrepreneurs overcome obstacles and persist under difficult conditions (Newman et al., 2021; Zhao & Liu, 2023). It is typically viewed as beneficial in its harmonious form. However, passion can become obsessive, which is defined as the "controlled internalization of an activity in one's identity that creates an internal pressure to engage in the activity that the person likes" (Vallerand et al., 2003, p. 756). Obsessive passion is marked by an addiction-like urge to engage in an activity and is particularly relevant to entrepreneurship, wherein intense competition, high pressure, and heavy workloads increase the likelihood of emergence (Stroe et al., 2018; Thorgren & Vincent, 2015).

Prior research offers a mixed picture of obsessive passion in entrepreneurship. On the one hand, it can foster resilience (Fisher et al., 2018) and signal commitment and motivation to external stakeholders (Fu et al., 2022; Murnieks et al., 2016). On the other hand, it is associated with rigid persistence and difficulty in disengaging from work,

which can increase emotional exhaustion (Bredehorst et al., 2024; De Mol et al., 2018). This tension asks a central question: how can entrepreneurs harness the benefits of obsessive passion while limiting its costs?

Despite a nuanced understanding of its outcomes, much of the literature portrays passionate individuals as the passive recipients of their obsessive passion (Curran et al., 2015; Vallerand, 2015). More recent work challenges this view by conceptualizing passion as dynamic and subject to self-regulation processes (Gielnik et al., 2017; Lex et al., 2022; Zhu et al., 2024). Therefore, entrepreneurs are not merely subject to their passion but may actively regulate it. However, little is known about whether (or how) entrepreneurs perceive their obsessive passion and intentionally shape its salience to preserve its benefits while avoiding harmful consequences. Based on self-regulation theory (Bandura, 1989; Carver & Scheier, 1998; Lord et al., 2010), we adopt an active-agentic perspective. We use qualitative data from 37 entrepreneurs to explore whether entrepreneurs believe they can shape their obsessive passions and identify the strategies they use to manage it in advantageous ways.

This research advances the dualistic model of passion by offering a novel perspective on obsessive passion. Although obsessive passion entails limited direct control over one's engagement in the valued activity (Vallerand et al., 2003), entrepreneurs can indirectly shape how it manifests through self-regulatory strategies. We thereby move beyond the view of obsessively passionate individuals as passive victims to their

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2026.116240>

Received 1 February 2023; Received in revised form 22 April 2026; Accepted 23 April 2026

Available online 6 May 2026

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drives (Curran et al., 2015; Vallerand, 2015). Adopting an active-agentic perspective enables the identification of practical self-regulation strategies.

Our findings help explain the mixed findings on obsessive passion in entrepreneurship, demonstrating that entrepreneurs can regulate the salience of obsessive passion and explaining why prior research on the entrepreneurial context has linked it to harmful consequences (De Mol et al., 2018; Ho & Pollack, 2014; Pollack et al., 2020; Stroe et al., 2020) and beneficial outcomes (Fisher et al., 2018; Fu et al., 2022; Murnieks et al., 2016; Thorgren & Wincent, 2015). Herein, when entrepreneurs successfully align their obsessive passion with their preferences, they can retain its benefits while limiting its downsides.

The study also extends our knowledge of self-regulatory processes (Carver & Scheier, 1990; Lord et al., 2010). Notably, entrepreneurs use handling strategies to shape the salience of obsessive passion; thus, conscious perception, self-awareness, and agentic regulation are core processes in its everyday manifestation. We thus contribute to research on self-regulatory processes (Frese & Gielnik, 2023; Lord et al., 2010) by explaining how these processes enable entrepreneurs to actively shape their obsessive passion.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Obsessive passion in entrepreneurship

The dualistic model of passion distinguishes harmonious and obsessive passion (Vallerand et al., 2003). Harmonious passion supports engagement while preserving balance throughout one's life, whereas obsessive passion causes one to focus on an activity to the detriment of other aspects (Vallerand, 2015). While obsessively passionate individuals enjoy their target activity, their engagement is driven by contingencies such as self-worth or a desire for external validation (Vallerand et al., 2019). Therefore, obsessive passion is marked by pressured engagement, rigid persistent and a constant internal urge that can crowd out other interests, goals, needs, or activities (Bélanger et al., 2013; Vallerand et al., 2023).

Entrepreneurship's high demands and performance pressure foster excessive engagement (Morris et al., 2012; Stroe et al., 2018). As the entrepreneurial role becomes central to one's identity, venture work can take up a disproportionate place in one's life. Consequently, entrepreneurs may dwell on venture-related tasks and struggle to imagine life outside entrepreneurship (Kakarika et al., 2022; Murnieks et al., 2016; Stroe et al., 2020). Obsessive passion has been linked to entrepreneurs' lower social approachability, reduced business income (Ho & Pollack, 2014), and rumination (Pollack et al., 2020; Vallerand, 2015), potentially increasing burnout and interpersonal conflict (Curran et al., 2015; De Mol et al., 2018). However, it is also associated with habitual entrepreneurship (Thorgren & Wincent, 2015), increased resilience (Fisher et al., 2018), and a stronger appeal to potential cofounders and investors (Fu et al., 2022; Murnieks et al., 2016).

2.2. Self-regulation theory

Self-regulation theory explains how individuals direct their thoughts and actions toward their goals (Bandura, 1989; Carver & Scheier, 1998). Self-regulating individuals actively shape their behaviors, work styles, and environments according to their goals rather than simply reacting to circumstances (Bandura, 1989; Carver & Scheier, 1990). Self-monitoring and self-directed attention are central to this process by enabling individuals to evaluate their behaviors and performance against their goals (Carver & Scheier, 1998; Lord et al., 2010); when a discrepancy is perceived between their current and desired situation, they engage in self-corrective action. When their progress is evaluated positively, they sustain or intensify the relevant behavior (Carver & Scheier, 1998; Lord et al., 2010).

When applied to obsessive passion, this perspective suggests that

entrepreneurs may regulate their internal states, behavior, and environment to align obsessive passion with their goals. Because these goals and circumstances differ, the methods they use and the level of obsessive passion they seek may differ too. For example, entrepreneurs who want to protect their private life may reduce the salience of their obsessive passion because it can intensify conflicts with loved ones and increase work overload (Lavigne et al., 2014; Philippe et al., 2010; Vallerand et al., 2003). However, they may also want to preserve its benefits (Fisher et al., 2018; Fu et al., 2022; Murnieks et al., 2016). They may furthermore limit the negative emotions linked to obsessive passion while still drawing on its energizing qualities (Philippe et al., 2009; Vallerand, 2015).

Recent research treats passion as a psychological experience whose salience and manifestation can be shaped through self-regulatory processes (Gielnik et al., 2015, 2017; Lex et al., 2022; Zhu et al., 2024). Accordingly, scholars have underscored the role of cognitive appraisal and enacted behavior in shaping entrepreneurial passion (Gielnik et al., 2017; Lex et al., 2022; Zhu et al., 2024). For example, entrepreneurs may support their passion through greater effort (Gielnik et al., 2015) or make it salient by reframing anxiety as passion in interaction with investors (Zhu et al., 2024). This view also aligns with psychological work indicating that passion can be actively cultivated (e.g., O'Keefe et al., 2018). Therefore, passion's salience is responsive to active self-regulation, including momentary cognitive appraisals. This is also in line with foundational theorizing on the manifestation of obsessive passion, positing that its salience is subject to ongoing development and that it can manifest in varying degrees of obsessiveness (Mageau et al., 2009; Vallerand, 2015). Nevertheless, the theoretical grounding and empirical evidence on how entrepreneurs actively manage obsessive passion remain limited. Therefore, the primary research question of this study is as follows:

RQ. How do entrepreneurs perceive and manage the salience of their obsessive passion for their entrepreneurial activity?

3. Methodology

3.1. Design

We adopted a qualitative, theory-building approach based on semi-structured interviews to examine how entrepreneurs handle obsessive passion salience. This method was suitable for this early stage of theorizing on the phenomenon and can capture subjective experience and nuanced meanings (Charmaz, 2014; Gioia et al., 2013).

3.2. Participants

We purposefully sampled entrepreneurs with a focus on ventures that commenced within the past 10 years. This helped reduce retrospective bias while preserving variation in participants' passion-handling maturity. We included entrepreneurs with high overall passion and varying degrees of obsessive passion to capture diverse regulation strategies. Interviewees were recruited through prior research contacts, which supported trust and rapport. To confirm their fit, we also reviewed interviewees' social media profiles, company websites, and media coverage. Sampling continued until theoretical saturation (Charmaz, 2014). The final sample comprised interviews from 37 entrepreneurs (lasting 26–99min, yielding 34h of audio and 608 single-spaced transcript pages or 321,840 words), including 10 women, aged 25–65 years ($M = 37$), across different industries (see Table 1).

3.3. Data collection

Before each interview, we reconfirmed consent and assured interviewees of their confidentiality and anonymity to encourage their open, honest responses. The interview guide ensured consistency while allowing emergent themes to surface (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). We

Table 1
Sample overview.

ID	Age	Sex	Company age	Education	Company size (n)	Industry	Serial entrepreneur	Length of interview (hh:mm:ss)	Sum of transcribed words
1	33	M	7	PhD	6	Fashion and Accessories	2	00:29:27	5,220
2	32	M	3	University degree	2	Sports and Fitness	2	00:26:29	11,118
3	30	M	1	University degree	4	Medical Technology	1	00:49:22	4,937
4	31	M	4	University degree	60	Business Services	1	00:27:40	5,345
5	34	F	4	University degree	3	Cleaning Services	1	00:40:37	5,092
6	32	M	4	University degree	6	Alcoholic Beverages	1	00:50:53	8,215
7	31	M	3	University degree	11	Food and Nutrition	2	00:46:10	8,951
8	28	M	1	University degree	4	Medical Technology	1	00:56:34	9,519
9	29	F	2	University degree	8	Skilled Labor Services	3	01:12:27	8,110
10	28	M	1	University degree	6	Business Services	1	01:00:22	7,534
11	29	M	1	University degree	6	Building Construction	1	00:50:49	7,214
12	65	M	4	PhD	15	Business Services	1	01:00:36	4,506
13	31	F	1	University degree	1	Business Services	2	00:51:34	9,351
14	37	M	1	University degree	4	Software	5	01:39:30	6,614
15	37	M	6	University degree	9	B2C E-Commerce	1	00:57:12	12,163
16	34	M	9	University degree	17	Pharmaceutical Products	1	00:55:28	10,593
17	25	M	3	University degree	5	Education	1	00:54:51	13,199
18	39	M	6	University degree	8	Business Services	2	00:50:19	9,219
19	52	F	1	Apprenticeship	1	Business Services	1	00:46:55	13,756
20	34	F	3	University degree	1	Business Services	1	01:02:59	9,710
21	32	M	0	University degree	2	Food & Nutrition	3	01:16:57	11,139
22	34	M	4	University degree	20	Marketing	1	00:51:21	8,126
23	33	M	5	University degree	20	Pharmaceutical Products	1	00:35:52	9,029
24	31	M	6	University degree	35	Business Services	1	01:03:24	7,383
25	39	M	1	University degree	1	Business Services	2	00:45:16	7,844
26	58	F	2	University degree	1	Business Services	2	00:59:47	7,977
27	44	F	5	University degree	1	Sports & Recreation	1	01:04:42	10,367
28	33	F	2	University degree	1	Marketing	1	01:06:34	11,377
29	43	F	1	University degree	6	Business Services	1	01:14:36	7,771
30	36	M	5	University degree	30	Environmental Technology	1	00:42:10	7,003
31	50	M	3	University degree	2	Business Services	2	00:48:30	8,208
32	56	M	6	University degree	140	Medical Technology	5	00:55:52	9,759
33	30	M	2	University degree	10	Aviation Technology	1	01:09:14	5,489
34	25	M	1	University degree	4	Mobile Internet and Apps	1	01:05:14	16,401
35	44	F	2	University degree	2	Business Services	2	01:06:00	8,019
36	49	M	10	University degree	160	Food and Nutrition	4	00:44:16	8,799
37	42	M	2	University degree	2	Business Services	2	01:11:36	6,783

Note. M = Male; F = Female; Age in years; Company size = number of employees (including founder[s]); B2C = business-to-consumer.

began with broad, exploratory questions about interviewees' relationship with their ventures that further narrowed to the nature of their entrepreneurial passion. For example, we asked, "How would you characterize your relationship with your entrepreneurial activity?" This was followed by questions like, "How would you define your entrepreneurial passion?"

3.4. Data analysis

Guided by the principle of emergence, we iteratively developed a theoretical model from the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). We initially analyzed the data independently, then met to compare codes and refine interpretations through critical discussion (Gioia et al., 2013; Magnani & Gioia, 2023). Moving iteratively between individual analysis and joint discussion, we gradually developed the research model and identified obsessive passion regulation strategies. We began with open, line-by-line coding to generate first-order codes grounded in the raw data (Charmaz, 2014), using interviewees' own words whenever possible. For example, we created the code "creating emotional distance between entrepreneurial activity and entrepreneur" from the phrase "But one has nevertheless been able to create a certain emotional distance between the baby 'venture' and oneself" (I16:19).

We then refined code boundaries and identified patterns in how entrepreneurs handled obsessive passion through constant comparison. These patterns reflected different degrees of agency, from reactive endurance to active control. Entrepreneurs described their obsessive passion handling ranging from complete passivity to a high degree of active agency. For example, a passive, reactivity attitude is reflected in the phrase "This will be over in 3 weeks, then the project is over, then it will be quieter" (I26:102). Conversely, taking agency over the entrepreneurial activity is represented by phrases such as, "It is my responsibility if I take the free time or not and I need to block it in my calendar and I must defend it against incoming tasks" (I20:28).

We subsequently used axial coding to group first-order codes into broader second-order categories and aggregated these into overarching dimensions that captured the core relationships and mechanisms within the data. For instance, we grouped several forms of emotional, spatial, temporal, and role-based distancing under the second-order category "creating distance." This and related categories were then subsumed under the aggregate dimension "handling strategies." Fig. 1 presents the data structure.

4. Findings

4.1. Entrepreneur's obsessive passion

Participants' responses revealed core features of obsessive passion, including all-encompassing engagement and the pressures and contingencies tied to it. One interviewee described, "regarding the entrepreneurial activity, you are ready 24/7 for it." (I6:26). Others noted that,

"There's naturally a bit of, well, 'pressure,' it's there in the back of your mind that if this doesn't work out, then you're left with nothing, no other security. So, in that sense, it's a bit constricting [...] there's the compulsion to continue." (I14:69).

"For me, it is completely obsessive. It is very difficult to switch off. I feel like I don't want to leave [work or] let control go of anyone. I got a new Apple watch, a present my boyfriend gave me, and I love it, because I don't miss anything now. It is always on me, and nothing goes [outside my control]. If I loose control, I am scared that it will get out of hand. I realized that recently, [because] I [have] got so much work on, I am not getting enough sleep, I am not getting enough rest time. My sleeping has been really bad, really interrupted as well, so there is definitely a clear negative side. I think I am on fire until I run out of energy and then I feel really ratty." (I29:85).

Interviewees also described, "this is incredibly important to me. It's, well—how should I put it? It is my passion project" (I19:14). They referred to feelings such as "getting on fire" (I29:85) and "totally in the euphoria, endorphins" (I18:45). They saw these activities as being deeply integrated into their identity and self-view, which is a core element of Vallerand's (2003) conceptualization of passion. An interviewee described it as "reflection of who I am" and "it is intense and obsessive, because you become it [the venture]." (I29:9). This interviewee also said,

"It is to serve my passion and also my opportunity, my ability to be successful and to do something to a very high degree and I also like the actual content. It's really weird. But I really like doing it." (I29:130).

Another described it as "Yes, but in a way it has become part of your identity, and it simply belongs to you" (I34:81). I9 explains "I am involved with my whole being, my entire self. With my intellect, but also with my heart and my soul" (I9:38). Although obsessive passion overlaps with workaholism in excessive work and difficulty detaching, it is distinguished by this strong enjoyment and deep identity integration (Astakhova et al., 2022; Birkeland & Buch, 2015).

4.2. Theoretical model

This section introduces and explains the resulting theoretical model (Fig. 2) using representative evidence from the data (Appendix A1). The model underscores entrepreneurs' self-awareness (including whether and how they perceive their passion) as a crucial prerequisite for obsessive passion regulation and how it sparks different approaches to that regulation.

4.2.1. Self-awareness as a prerequisite for regulation

Recognizing obsessive passion is the first step in managing it effectively. One participant described it as "It's like a beast that will never stop eating. I could work on it 24/7. So, you have to decide to stop feeding it, you know?" (I33:34). Once entrepreneurs are aware of their obsessive passion and its consequences, they can manage it, either actively or passively. For those who feel more deeply controlled by it, external intervention may help disrupt the pattern and trigger their self-awareness, as one interviewee noted, "My son is there, and he says, 'Mom, I'm hungry.' So, in a way he pulls me out of it [the obsessive working phase], and then I say, 'okay, sure.'" (I35:69).

Participants who experience frequent success often remain absorbed in the "euphoria" of building their venture (I18:40). Entrepreneurs may not consciously reflect on their obsessive passion. However, without self-awareness, they are driven by pressure and compulsion. As I7 explained, "When you are deeper into it and have numerous clients [...] the external pressure increases [...] 'okay, I now must do this as well,' and you become obsessed." (I7:76). When entrepreneurs recognize this "hamster wheel" (I16:14), they can assess whether their obsessive passion is beneficial or harmful.

4.2.2. Positive or negative appraisal as regulation trigger

When entrepreneurs recognize their obsessive passion, they can appraise it cognitively. Many participants viewed it positively because it brings excitement and sharpens their focus. One compared it to an "adrenaline kick" (I7:16). They often genuinely enjoyed their work and therefore experienced obsessive passion as energizing rather than harmful. As one interviewee explained,

"For me, the obsession itself is not negatively charged. As long as I am doing something that I enjoy a lot and have fun with it, I am willing to work on it and maybe even deprioritize my hobby or go the extra mile [...] this might sound a bit cliché, but the truth is, I really get to do what I enjoy every day." (I23:68).

This positive appraisal is especially strong when an obsessive passion

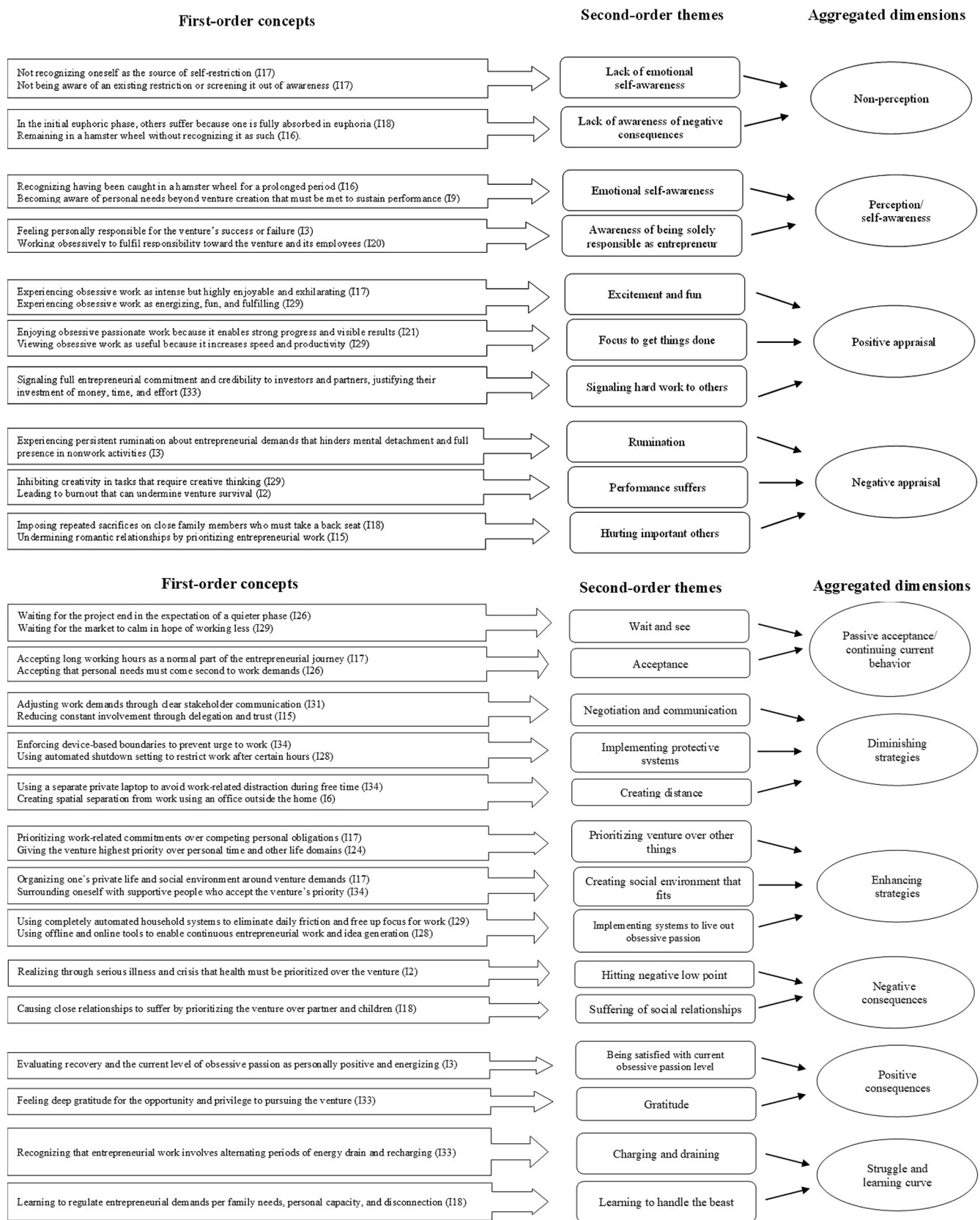


Fig. 1. Progressive data structure.

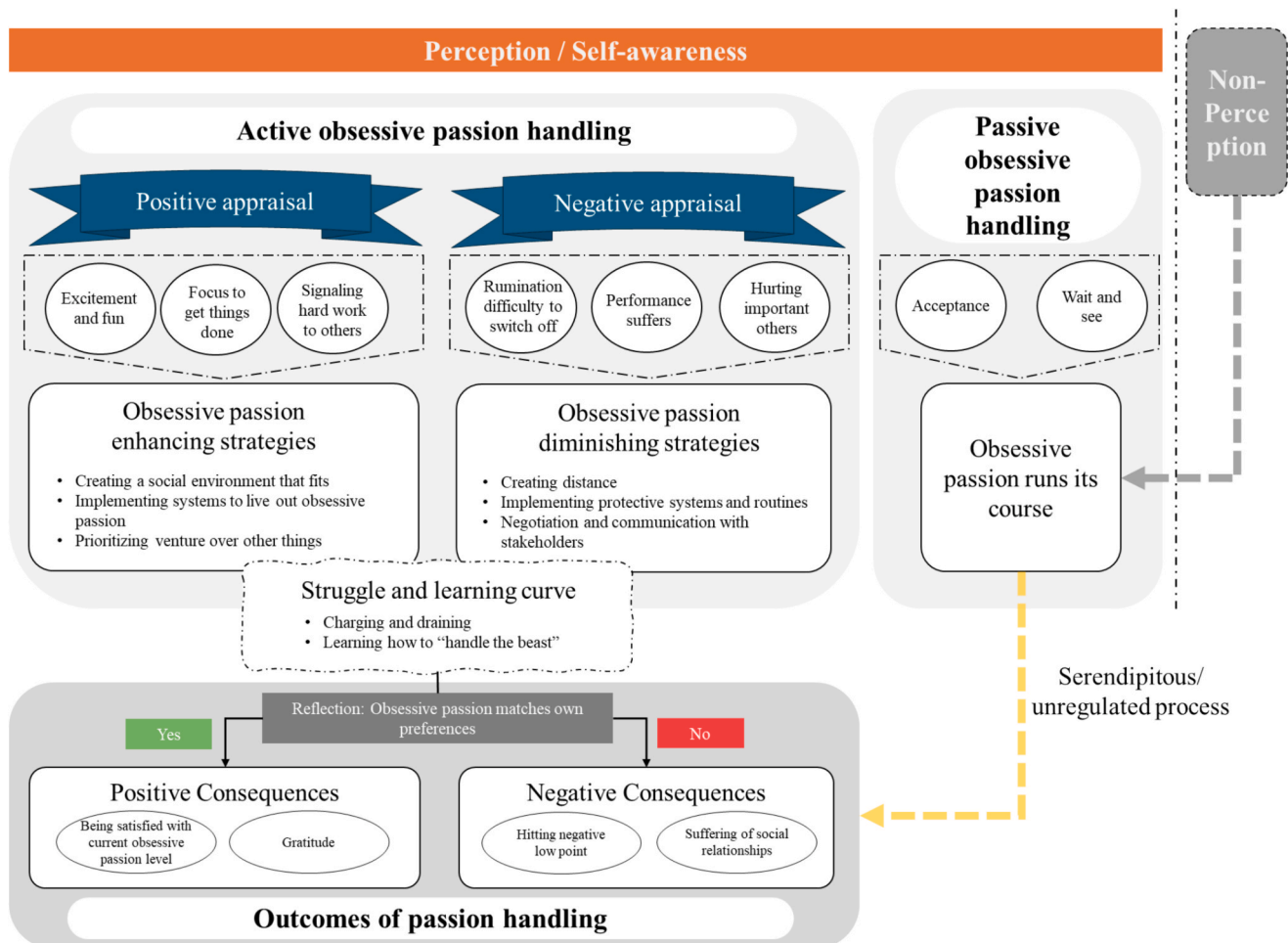


Fig. 2. How entrepreneurs regulate obsessive passion.

creates a narrow cognitive focus that helps entrepreneurs move quickly and persist despite pressure. Several participants described these intense work phases as highly stimulating and productive, allowing them to carry heavier workloads and advance faster. They therefore saw obsessive passion as a valuable resource for surviving a high-demand environment. "I think [a hamster wheel] can be quite useful because once you are on it, you can get more stuff done more quickly. Like, once you're in the chain." (I29:124).

Obsessive passion also serves as a signal to others. Participants noted that strong visible obsessive passion helps convince employees and investors that they are worth backing:

"You have to be obsessive about what you are doing and why are you doing it, because you need to convince people to join your cause. And if they feel that you are just like, 'Oh, it doesn't matter, it's all good, like everything is cool,' then they are not gonna be like, 'Oh, we are giving this person 100 000 dollars or we are gonna join this person's team and work with them' and spend their precious time working on your startup project. So, I mean, you have to be obsessive in some way." (I33:132).

Other participants appraised obsessive passion negatively because of its costs. These costs can have adverse impacts on the venture, the individual, employees, business partners, and loved ones. Many described how their obsessive work patterns strained relationships, displaced their time with their families, and created guilt and conflict. Others emphasized mental and physical personal costs:

"You're constantly on the edge. You sometimes sleep poorly. And your social environment suffers because basically the company is more important than family, relationships, and so on." (I16:14).
 "I have to do everything. And it is very difficult to switch off. And I don't think I've really had a holiday, this year. I went in the hospital for an operation, and I had a couple of days off, then. But, honestly, I didn't really have a holiday, because it is obsessive and it is consuming." (I29:14)

Several participants pointed out the performance costs, including the gradual reduction of creativity and effectiveness when recovery is neglected. As the same participant puts it "it (obsessive passion) doesn't allow you to be creative. It allows you to be like a machine, but not creative. And I think, that is a problem in this job when you do need to be creative." (I29:124).

When these negative consequences accumulate, it may lead to consequences such as severe exhaustion or relationship breakdown. Some interviewees described their low point as "hitting a big wall" (I33:126) or "standing in front of burnout" (I35:69). For many, this becomes a turning point that triggers a more conscious management of obsessive passion and a search for a more sustainable level of obsessive passion.

4.2.3. Passive obsessive passion regulation

Passive regulation is characterized by cognitive suppression of alternatives and self-reinforcing momentum. Participants who handled obsessive passion passively described a state of cognitive shielding, in which the venture is prioritized without any doubt or reflection:

"I don't question it at all if I am honest, not at all, absolutely. I don't think about it. If I get an offer, then the decision is already made for me. And there is no cognitive processing taking place, to evaluate it. In the case of entrepreneurship, this is completely blocked." (I17:34)

This tunnel vision suppresses alternative goals and information and can become so strong that entrepreneurs feel completely absorbed:

"For instance, when I wrote 3 days from 8 am to 12 pm for the Bavarian business plan competition, day in and day out. It was extensive, 30 pages [...] that was an amazing feeling and an awesome experience. That means I am very well and I need nothing else." (I17:54).

In this state, obsessive passion strongly directs cognition and behavior. Passive regulation may stem from limited self-awareness but can also persist despite awareness of either its benefits or its costs. Instead of shaping obsessive passion actively, entrepreneurs who engage in this strategy simply accept its course and consequences. Some follow its immediate pleasure and euphoria; others endure it and wait for external conditions, such as the end of a stressful project, to naturally slow them down:

"Well, of course there are phases where you know that it will be over in 3 weeks, that the project will be over, and then there are fewer topics and so on, then it's quieter. Then you just wait until the time is over." (I26:102).

4.2.4. Active obsessive passion regulation

Active regulation is intentional. Participants who engaged in active strategies consciously evaluated their situation and decided whether to reduce or strengthen obsessive passion salience. Sometimes this decision takes a clear form, such as a New Year's resolution:

"I noticed that I always feel guilty when I take time off and I also see that I hardly have any time with my friends or if I do, I feel it's a disruptive time away from my company. And I just didn't want that. And then I made the decision very consciously and I made that as a New Year's resolution." (I20:42)

These decisions can take either an avoidance or an approach form. Some sought to avoid repeating harmful consequences, such as exhaustion, strained relationships, or the negative family patterns they observed in childhood. Others attempted to move closer to a desired self-image (e.g., being a good parent, partner, or friend, or preserving valued activities outside work). Several handling strategies help entrepreneurs develop a sustainable level of obsessive passion and try to regulate it accordingly. Notably, our findings do not suggest one but multiple optimal levels depending on the individual's needs.

One common strategy for intentionally reducing one's obsessive passion is negotiation and communication with stakeholders. Entrepreneurs delegate tasks, ask for support, and communicate their boundaries to employees, customers, or investors to reduce pressure and prevent themselves from becoming the bottleneck, which fuels their obsessive passion. Although letting go of control can initially feel uncomfortable, sharing responsibility reduces obsessive engagement in a healthy way:

"It hurts when you let go [...] but the more trust you grant your employees, the more they give you back. And I notice it again and again when I thought: Boy, do I have to be present in that meeting, or is it sufficient when they report to me later?" (I15:62).

Others also described adjusting expectations with external stakeholders to create room for recovery and other life domains.

"There was a phase where, these four teams were working in parallel and I also had a large event, and it all developed from there [...] So, you could talk to them and say, folks, at this point I'm going to do things differently, and yet we accomplished a great deal." (I31:69).

A second strategy is to implement protective systems and routines. Because participants often felt that they could not directly control obsessive passion in the moment, they created external structures that make over-engagement less likely. These include fixed stopping rules, time boundaries, and technical arrangements that reduce access to work. One participant explained an indirect self-regulation mechanism: "I say after certain hours the laptop is closed. And I, therefore, bought myself a private laptop, so that I cannot be distracted by some open [work-related] things." (I34:57).

A third strategy is creating distance between the self and the venture. This distance may be geographical, spatial, temporal, or emotional. Participants described deliberately separating their workplaces from their home, diminishing or limiting their exposure to the venture, or working to define themselves by more than just their entrepreneurship. As one interviewee explained, creating some distance helps prevent burnout while preserving high passion:

"You realize that you should make the company independent of the person [...], in order to not eventually work yourself up and burn out in the process. There is still a very high passion involved, without which it wouldn't work for me neither. But you have still been able to create a certain emotional distance between your baby company and yourself." (I16:10).

When participants evaluated obsessive passion positively, they may instead try to preserve or strengthen it. Some shape their social environment accordingly by seeking unconditional understanding and surrounding themselves with people who accept or support their way of working: "She is my mother; she needs to deal with it [the obsessive working style]." (I17:82).

If entrepreneurs do not experience unconditional understanding, they may ask themselves if these are "real" friends or if they still "fit" them (I15:40). Thus, entrepreneurs create a social environment that fits their obsessive passion. They consciously choose their friendships and deliberately surround themselves with like-minded people who could advance their journey and distance themselves from those who do not support their entrepreneurial activities to the fullest. Others consciously prioritize the venture over competing life domains. I24 gave an especially extreme example of this strategy:

"I went to an event of a project, where I believed that I had to be present at this event [...] that's why I canceled the funeral of my grandfather and my great-aunt [...] and if that would happen now, I would maybe do that again. I let my work determine a lot." (I24:36)

Obsessive passion is thus actively enabled. The entrepreneur said that they "let" their work determine a lot, indicating a conscious choice, rather than saying "my work determines a lot," which would suggest unmanaged obsessive passion. Some participants also build systems that free them from non-work responsibilities, such as outsourcing household tasks, so they can focus more fully:

"So, he (boyfriend) is quite job obsessed as well, so I think from that perspective we are like pretty well matched [...] it is quite intense and we have everything set up, so our shopping is delivered [...] there is a really nice guy, who does our cleaning, [...] like it's so regimented, it's all scheduled. We have a hoover, which is programmed. We've build all these systems into our lives, which means that we can just focus on our jobs and that makes it possible." (I29:84).

Most participants did not apply these enhancing strategies uniformly. Instead, they use them selectively when intense focus was especially valuable, such as in the early stages of a venture or during critical tasks. As I33 put it:

"I am obsessed with how we spend our time, and what is the priority. Because I think focus is extremely important on a small early-stage startup, you don't have so many people, you don't have so much

money, virtues, the time, or whatever. [...] I think [...] it really falls back on you when you lose track of something. And that's all we have, trying to build a reputation as an early-stage company.” (I33:52).

5. Discussion

Passion is a key driver of entrepreneurial action and business performance (e.g., Adomako & Ahsan, 2022; Murnieks et al., 2014), and prior research has examined the antecedents and consequences of obsessive passion (Newman et al., 2021; Pollack et al., 2020; Schwarte et al., 2023). Yet we know little about how obsessively passionate individuals actively monitor and shape their obsessive engagement. Our findings explore how entrepreneurs appraise obsessive passion as positive or negative and, based on these appraisals, often choose to strengthen or reduce its salience through self-regulatory strategies. This helps them capture the benefits, limit the costs, and reach a personally fitting level of obsessive passion. However, entrepreneurs do not always respond actively. Sometimes, they may not even recognize their obsessive passion or accept its current level without trying to change it. In such cases, positive outcomes may still occur, but are more likely to depend on serendipity.

5.1. Theoretical implications

Entrepreneurs can shape obsessive passion and reduce its harmful effects, which extends prior work on its downsides (De Mol et al., 2018; Ho & Pollack, 2014). Consistent with self-regulation theory, discrepancies between the current and desired state trigger action (Carver & Scheier, 1998). We explain why obsessive passion salience changes and how obsessively passionate individuals become active handlers of their passion. More broadly, we add to the emerging view that passion is dynamic and subject to self-regulatory processes (Bredehorst et al., 2024; Gielnik et al., 2017; Lex et al., 2022; Zhu et al., 2024) by presenting passionate individuals as active agents rather than passive recipients.

Moreover, our findings help explain the mixed evidence on obsessive passion. Research has highlighted its risks (Ho & Pollack, 2014; Pollack et al., 2020; Vallerand, 2015) and benefits for entrepreneurs (Fisher et al., 2018; Fu et al., 2022; Murnieks et al., 2016). Entrepreneurs use strategies such as creating distance, prioritizing, and implementing systems to align obsessive passion with their preferred level. This explains why obsessive passion can be harmful when left unchecked but useful when consciously managed.

Perception and self-awareness are prerequisites for active obsessive passion regulation (Bandura, 1989; Carver & Scheier, 1998; Lord et al., 2010). Entrepreneurs must first become aware of their obsessive passion and its consequences before they can regulate it. This awareness initiates evaluation, helps to define a desired level, and enables corrective action. Thus, active obsessive passion regulation depends on perceiving obsessive passion and evaluating it against a desired state.

5.2. Practical implications

Obsessive passion can be a powerful driver when its salience is consciously managed rather than passively experienced. Entrepreneurs who recognize obsessive passion as a motivator and potential source of strain can apply handling strategies more effectively. Entrepreneurial training and workshops may foster self-awareness and help entrepreneurs reflect on their passion and its consequences. Entrepreneurs benefit from supportive communities wherein they can share experiences and strategies for managing fluctuations in obsessive passion's salience.

Table 2 summarizes the strategies entrepreneurs use to harness the benefits of obsessive passion while limiting its downsides. To

Table 2
Regulation strategies and their practical implementation.

Strategy type	Strategy	Practical implementations
Enhancing strategies		Surrounding oneself with supportive, like-minded people Seeking acceptance for obsessive passionate pursuit Adjusting one's social circle to venture demands
	Creating a supportive social environment	
		Outsourcing nonventure tasks Automating private-life demands Aligning daily infrastructure with work engagement
Diminishing strategies	Implementing enhancing systems	
		Prioritizing venture over competing demands Letting the venture shape daily decisions Normalize sacrifice as necessary
	Prioritizing	
		Creating spacial or temporal separation from work Reducing exposure to venture cues Cultivating emotional detachment
	Creating distance	
		Installing external limits and hard stops Separating work and private tools Using routines to reduce triggers
	Implementing protective systems	
		Delegating responsibility Redistributing workload Renegotiating expectations with stakeholders
	Communicating and negotiating	

productively strengthen obsessive passion, they can create supportive social environments, implement systems that free their resources, and deliberately prioritize the venture. For this, they can create spatial or emotional distance and establish protective systems that prevent excessive salience, rigidity, and difficulty switching off. Communication and negotiation with employees and external stakeholders help reduce pressure, avoid bottlenecks, create room for recovery, and keep obsessive passion within healthy boundaries. Overall, our findings underscore the value of a personalized approach. By tailoring their set of strategies, entrepreneurs can operate at their own optimal level of obsessive passion that supports their productivity.

5.3. Limitations and avenues for future research

Our research offers a first step toward understanding the conscious regulation of obsessive passion. Future research may further examine the different regulation strategies across different types of entrepreneurs and investigate how regulating obsessive passion differs across

entrepreneurial activities and how this affects success (Adomako & Ahsan, 2022; Guercini & Cova, 2018; Milanese, 2018). Because the findings are based on individual-level analyses, future research may examine interindividual mechanisms of obsessive passion regulation. Prior work highlights the relevance of passion transfer and team dynamics within new ventures and leader–subordinate relationships (Hubner et al., 2020; Taggar et al., 2024). In addition, future studies may extend the present model to include workaholism, given its close link to obsessive passion, and examine how self-regulation strategies shape both constructs (Astakhova et al., 2022).

6. Conclusion

Building on the dualistic model of passion and a self-regulatory perspective, this study examines how entrepreneurs manage their obsessive passion salience. Herein, entrepreneurs use different handling strategies to purposefully adjust obsessive passion to retain its benefit while limiting its harmful effects.

Appendix A1

Representative quotes for entrepreneurs’ obsessive passion regulation

Representative quotes	Second-order themes	Aggregated dimensions
“If I decide against going out for drinks with friends [to keep working on the venture idea] and they are mad at me or something, then I have to ask myself: Are these still the right ones or do they still fit with me?” (I15:40)	Creating social environment that fits	Obsessive passion enhancing strategies
“And I claim it from the people I surround myself, that they understand it (prioritizing the venture over anything else). And they normally understand it.” (I17:30)		
“Now you surround yourself much more deliberately with people, and those are more likely people who are similar to you and can help you advance. For someone, it could be that it’s not always about the business; it could also be someone who helps you grow personally and humanly because they greatly assist you in your spiritual self-discovery, if that were important to someone as an example” (I34: 95)		
“It is quite intense and we have everything set up, so our shopping is delivered like we have lists of our shopping lists, and the week before we are like, ‘we’re gonna eat this, this, this and this,’ and we set up our lists and we just order it. It takes 5 min, that’s delivered it takes 10 min to put away. Like, there is a really nice guy, who does our cleaning, obviously, we pay him, like it’s so regimented the washing goes in on a certain day, like the cleaning, it takes 15 min all our shopping is done for the week. So, there is never discussion, like, we never have a discussion about how to clean the house, who cleans the house, anything like that, because it is just done. Like, it’s all scheduled. We have a rowbar hoover, who is programmed. Like it’s so freaky and weird. I think, cause we’re the same. We’ve like built all these systems into our lives, which means that like, we can just focus on our jobs at the moment (I29:43)	Implementing systems to live out obsessive passion	
“Every phone call date gets a number, and I transfer it to Excel to make it easier to find. I create my own processes. And the other thing is, what I started this summer, is a small Kanban board, where I have a bit of color coding, I have to do this daily, anyway. So certain processes that I actually do on LinkedIn and I could do that all online before. And at the moment, it’s just that ideas pop up, and I’m faster with a piece of paper. Also, that I say, I won’t start up the PC in the evening. But if an idea still comes, I have (laughs) a piece of paper next to my bed. It’s just like that, then you can quickly write something down. Because otherwise, it’s gone the next morning. So, I’ve created this mix of online and offline systems for myself.” (I28:21)		
“My boyfriend is a corporate lawyer, he is basically quite job obsessed as well, so I think from that perspective we are like pretty well matched and he also, before he got his job, he helped me build the company as well like, he is quite interested, so in my private life, I feel, that we are really settled like we are really happy. And we are very tight together. Like his office is the office next door to mine [...] we planned stuff together in order to make this possible. I could get an office like right next door, so we can drive in together, because I am flexible, we can leave together and then I have an office at home, like we have designed it. So, we can lead our lives around this. And, because everyone I work with, is working remotely, so I schedule calls when I know that I am in the office either in my home office or in here. But mainly in my home office and then I know that I’ll free to take them and then I set them deadlines, where I know I am free to catch up on them. And then everything else, I can do very remotely, like the watch honestly is amazing, because I can literally just dictate a reply and half that time when I am not in the office I am filtering emails and stuff and then if I’ve got it on my watch I can do it quite quickly. That, I mean, obviously, the downside of that is, that you don’t switch off (I29:82)		
“I really had to prioritize and see where the urgencies lay and whether something could be done. But leisure time has been pushed to the back since we founded the company.” (I5:24)	Prioritizing venture over other things	
“For example, I can share a concrete story. I went to an event for a [entrepreneurial work-related] project into		

(continued on next page)

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Mirjam N. Streeb: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Sonja K. Franzke:** Formal analysis, Methodology, Visualization, Writing – review & editing. **Matthias Baum:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Project administration, Investigation, Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Methodology, Resources, Visualization.

Funding

This research did not receive any funding.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

(continued)

Representative quotes	Second-order themes	Aggregated dimensions
which I had put a lot of time, where I believed that I had to be present at this event, which lasted several days, in order for the project to be implemented. And, that's why I canceled the funeral of my grandfather and my great-aunt, who passed away 2 years ago. I canceled them for that reason And [...] if that would happen now, I would maybe do that again. I let my work determine a lot" (I24:36) "That's how it is in my business. The hobby, whether it's sports or whatever, often gets pushed frequently to the background. Just to keep pushing the business forward. I believe you should never stop moving forward. A bit of stagnation is more like regression. And yes, I would try to catch up on my hobby later, but first work on the new product idea and whether I regret it later because I couldn't pursue my hobby, well, then that's how it is. But I would definitely prioritize working." (I6:37) "So, it was a process that we also had to go through a bit. We had our office here in the apartment. Then, it's difficult, because the office room is next to the bedroom. You come over here. You don't really have a separation or you're always at work, sitting there in the evening [...] It's different when you have this spatial distance. And that's now given because we have another office outside. That was a process." (I6:57) "Of course, I need to set boundaries, so my clients don't enter my private life. I keep them out. Or also topics from my clients, in terms of content, I set boundaries there. I've learned that otherwise, I would somehow go crazy because that's just not possible." (I26:112) "Private life and business sometimes blends a bit, especially because my co-founder is my best friend. And we see each other at the office and then also in our free time. And then, we often notice that some topics get lost in our private life because we mostly talk about our venture. And yes, then we often say 'Okay, today we'll take some time for ourselves and then go to the sauna. Or go out for breakfast and also chat about private matters, dating or relationships or whatever,' because you notice that this naturally sometimes gets lost because there would always be some topics to discuss. You really have to pull yourself together and consciously take the time for it." (I9:16) "My phone screen turns completely gray at 9 pm, which signals to me, 'hey, it's 9 pm, you can put the thing away now. Nothing more will happen' [...] and clearly to say, now it's couple time." (I28:72) "You implement certain systems. To say, I set various reminders for myself with the family, that remind me of the family, yes (I34:137) "Consciously take time, yes, I say from a certain hour on, the laptop is closed. And I got myself a separate private laptop so that I don't let myself get distracted and open tasks from the work laptop." (I34:57) "So, if you're really in a phase, like I said, with those four teams running in parallel and I also had a big event, and it all just evolved from there, but it was manageable. You could talk to them and say, 'folks, I'm going to do things differently at this point,' and yet we still accomplished a great deal." (I31:69) "We now also have investors on board, who exert pressure and want to see the numbers add up. And then maybe things aren't going so well, and you think 'Oh, God, this isn't going to work. How do we make the numbers work?' And, well, now, we've somehow, or I've realized that you tend to look more at. 'How can I argue understandably that it didn't work, instead of beating myself up and stressing out to make it happen? Because I actually know it's not possible.' And I believe it's often like that, you think, 'I just have to give it my all and make it happen and achieve it. And, even though you know it's almost impossible.' And I've now reached a point where I think 'Okay, we're all human, even investors.' And they also understand when you tell them what's going on." (I9:28) "My network is very good, I have the thousand percentage-support of my husband, including with childcare. He's actually one of the men who have no problem taking care of their own children and are not overwhelmed by it. I also think that's the only reason it works so well. And, it must be said, we're both entrepreneurs. We both know what it's like to have to work sometimes in the evenings. And this mutual understanding, I believe that's what makes it work. Having a partner who understands and isn't immediately offended by if for example, on Monday, I worked until 1 am, the client left then. And he wasn't offended because I got home at 2 am. I just said 'Well, it was just like that this time, and we'll see how we do it next time.' But this understanding, I believe, is also a decisive factor." (I13:36)	Creating distance Implementing protection systems Negotiation and communication	Obsessive passion diminishing strategies

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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