

Feeling the way forward: a valence-intensity-duration framework for emotion-driven sensemaking in entrepreneurial decisions

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Abstract

Purpose – To understand how personal sensemaking has evolved in response to the changing conditions where complexity and uncertainty become the norm, the study conceptually explores the emotion-sensemaking relationship at the individual level for entrepreneurs by adding the “duration” dimension to emotion along with its valence and intensity dimensions.

Design/methodology/approach – The authors conceptually built and extended the existing understanding of the emotion-sensemaking model. Specifically, we employed an integrative literature synthesis method by drawing insights from multiple literature streams, including entrepreneurship, individual sensemaking, emotion and decision-making.

Findings – Our theoretical synthesis yielded seven propositions. We propose a novel understanding that sensemaking is often a proactively initiated process by entrepreneurs experiencing positive emotion. We also propose that although the negative emotions of moderate intensity elicited by a disruption put one’s focus on an issue, it is the duration of the felt negative emotion and its subsequent shift to a positive emotion that triggers sensemaking rather than the negative emotion itself. Our arguments also lead to propositions linking entrepreneurs’ internal emotion-sensemaking process to tangible outcomes such as temporal ambidexterity and pivot decisions. We also provide future research directions to test our propositions and the potential theoretical and practical implications.

Originality/value – We introduce a proactive form of sensemaking and its triggers in the context of entrepreneurship. We also add nuance to the current emotion-sensemaking model by adding another dimension (time duration) to emotion. Finally, our study explores the practical implications of linking the influence of emotion and sensemaking to more observable outcomes in entrepreneurship.

Keywords Emotion, Sensemaking, Entrepreneurship, Conceptual, Temporal ambidexterity, Pivot

Paper type Conceptual paper

1. Introduction

Individuals converting chaotic environmental cues into meaningful, actionable situations, coined as sensemaking (Weick, 1995), is an even more necessary tool in entrepreneurship (Wurth and Mawson, 2024; Yi-En Zeng *et al.*, 2025), characterized by uncertainty and ambiguity (McMullen and Shepherd, 2006). It helps entrepreneurs to operate in environments with little structure or precedence by constructing meaning out of chaotic but often limited information, making actions feasible. The influence of entrepreneurs’ sensemaking has been examined in relation to crucial outcomes such as venture creation (Hoyte *et al.*, 2019; Vaghely and Julien, 2010) and venture failure (Byrne and Shepherd, 2015; Cardon *et al.*, 2011; Shepherd, 2009). While sensemaking aids the construction of opportunities through the ongoing interpretation of environmental cues during the early days of venture creation, it is also critical in transforming venture failure into a learning and adaptive experience. However, what is lesser known is its role post-venture creation, leading to venture success or failure. This study conceptually explores this idea by examining the role of entrepreneurs’ sensemaking (individual level) in venture execution decisions, such as temporal ambidexterity – balancing short-term and long-term



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orientations (Smith and Tushman, 2005), and pivoting – strategic change in direction (Kirtley and O’Mahony, 2023). We do so by drawing on the emotional perspective of individual sensemaking (Dwyer *et al.*, 2023; Maitlis *et al.*, 2013), which suggests that emotion is not merely a byproduct of sensemaking but a fundamental component that influences how individuals interpret and respond to unexpected events. We are inspired to adopt this perspective because entrepreneurship is a highly emotional journey (De Cock *et al.*, 2020; Lu *et al.*, 2022), and entrepreneurial action and decision-making are deeply intertwined with entrepreneurs’ emotions (Frese and Gielnik, 2023; Yu *et al.*, 2023). Entrepreneurs ride an emotional roller coaster as they navigate and cope (Schmodde and Wehner, 2024) with the highs of securing funding or procuring their first client, followed by the lows of product failures or rejections, and the cycle continues. Our motivation is further strengthened by previous entrepreneurship literature (Byrne and Shepherd, 2015; Crosina *et al.*, 2024; Shepherd, 2009) exploring the link between emotion and sensemaking, emphasizing the central role of entrepreneurs’ emotional experiences, such as grief, hope and shame, in making sense of business failures. These emotions shape the narratives they construct around failure, influencing the recovery pathway toward learning and renewal. However, the extant understanding of emotions’ influence on sensemaking leaves several conceptual gaps. For example, the current emotion-sensemaking model suggests that only negative emotion triggers the sensemaking process. We challenge the assumption and argue that sensemaking is often proactive in the entrepreneurial context, where entrepreneurs, led by positive or mixed emotions experienced, imagine the future by making sense of ambiguous cues around them even before something disturbing happens (Niemi *et al.*, 2022). Additionally, the model leaves a gap in understanding how the duration of the emotion felt interplays with the other dimensions to trigger and subsequently shape individual sensemaking. We therefore extend the existing model by examining the emotion-sensemaking relationship in the highly emotional context of entrepreneurship, adding the much-needed dimension to emotion, that is the duration of the felt emotion. It adds depth to the existing emotion-based models by explaining not only which emotion is felt and how strong but also for how long – a factor with significant behavioral and cognitive consequences. For example, two entrepreneurs may feel equally intense emotions (negative or positive), but if one’s emotions linger and the other’s fade quickly, their sensemaking, decisions and entrepreneurial outcomes may diverge sharply – highlighting the unique explanatory power of emotional duration (Byrne and Shepherd, 2015; Cardon *et al.*, 2005). To add nuance to our arguments, we considered individual differences of entrepreneurs in perceiving the environmental stressors as a challenge or hindrance as moderators of the emotion and entrepreneurial sensemaking associations. In a nutshell, the main aim of our study is to provide a comprehensive understanding of emotions’ influence on entrepreneurs’ sensemaking process and its subsequent impact on entrepreneurial decisions while running a venture. We believe that such a comprehensive understanding of the emotion-sensemaking model will help advance the topic theoretically and practically, opening new avenues for research and practice. Our study offers three main contributions. Firstly, it extends the emotion-sensemaking model to the complex and dynamic context of entrepreneurship and suggests the plausibility of prospective sensemaking in entrepreneurs, which can be triggered by positive emotion too. Secondly, it contributes to the emotion and sensemaking literature by adding the temporal dimension to study emotions’ influence on sensemaking, opening the scope of a comprehensive understanding of the topic. Finally, our conceptual exploration also bridges the gap between the intangible psychological constructs, such as emotion and sensemaking, to more observable entrepreneurial decisions, such as temporal ambidexterity and pivot.

To accomplish the intended aim of the study, we followed a methodology combining integrative literature synthesis with abductive theorizing, iteratively engaging insights from emotion, sensemaking, broader psychology, entrepreneurship and decision-making literature streams to build logically coherent propositions. The theorizing logic was abductive, with a

back-and-forth movement between observed anomalies and theoretical explanations. The starting point was the widely held assumption in the sensemaking literature that negative emotions or discrepancies trigger sensemaking (Weick, 1995). However, evidence from entrepreneurship shows that entrepreneurs often engage in proactive and future-oriented sensemaking even before disruption occurs, particularly when they experience positive emotions such as hope or passion (Baron, 2008; Foo *et al.*, 2009). Positive psychology literature indicates that positive emotion broadens cognitive flexibility to facilitate anticipatory processing (Fredrickson, 2001; Isen, 1993). These anomalies prompted an abductive approach, and existing models are revisited and reframed. Rigor in conceptual theorizing was ensured by emphasizing construct clarity, logical consistency, causal plausibility and alignment with empirical patterns in the literature. Competing explanations were also explicitly considered. For example, while shaping the sensemaking process, contrasting evidence found in the literature on the influence of positive emotion on meaning-making was considered and explained with the help of the intensity threshold of positive emotion (high-intensity positive emotion becomes cognitively narrowing than low-moderate-intensity positive emotion) (Isen, 2008). The adoption of such a methodology resulted in a set of theoretically grounded propositions enhancing the knowledge of emotion-sensemaking dynamics.

2. A temporal dynamic model of emotion in sensemaking

Maitlis *et al.* (2013) integrated the much-needed emotional element into the sensemaking process by conceptualizing its role in the three steps of sensemaking – triggering, shaping and concluding. They explained the varying role of emotion in sensemaking mainly by considering its valence and intensity. They argued that the variance in triggers of sensemaking in individuals can be explained by what and how strongly they are experiencing negative emotion in response to a stimulus. Similarly, they also suggested that the sensemaking process will follow different paths – generative or integrative—depending on the valence of the actor’s emotion. However, they did not consider the intensity of emotion while shaping the sensemaking process. They also proposed that the consistency of the actors’ felt emotions with the account generated helps conclude the sensemaking process. While their proposed model is undoubtedly robust and one of the pioneers to acknowledge the central role of emotion in the sensemaking process, it leaves many unanswered questions. For example, how does the duration of the felt emotion interact with the other dimensions of emotion to influence the sensemaking process? Duration of the felt emotion may be necessary for determining if the influence of emotion on sensemaking is short-lived or enduring, especially during the shaping of the sensemaking process, as the change of emotion can change the sensemaking type (generative or integrative), resulting in varied outcomes. The current model does not account for these temporal dynamics in understanding how emotion unfolds and shapes meaning-making. Addressing this gap will enrich the current emotion-sensemaking model, which is essential as their interplay eventually impacts crucial organizational processes such as learning, resilience and decision-making. Therefore, we incorporate the temporal dimension of emotion in the current model and reconceptualize the comprehensive impact of emotion on sensemaking for a better understanding of how individuals continuously interpret and adapt in a world of complexity and uncertainty. We do so in the context of entrepreneurship, as complexity and uncertainty are almost synonymous with it (McMullen and Shepherd, 2006). The unpredictable and eventful trajectory of creating and running a venture may be a constant trigger for sensemaking. The emotional ups and downs throughout the entrepreneurial journey make the context even more compelling for exploring the proposed comprehensive emotion-sensemaking model for entrepreneurs.

By duration of emotion, we specifically mean the length of time an emotional state persists. Emotion’s duration is less explicitly explored in the literature. However, several studies subtly acknowledged the importance of the temporal span during which an individual experiences a

particular emotional state. Emotion duration captures whether an emotional state dissipates quickly or persists, thereby altering both magnitude and window of its impact on cognition. Research in affective dynamics demonstrates that emotional experiences fluctuate, decay and transform over time, influencing how individuals interpret and act on information (Javadian *et al.*, 2022; Larsen, 2000). For example, short-lived negative emotion may sharpen attention and enhance vigilance (Baumeister *et al.*, 2001; Grégoire *et al.*, 2010). However, prolonged negative emotions such as anxiety or disappointment impair working memory reduce cognitive flexibility and lead to withdrawal behavior (Kuppens and Verduyn, 2017; Larsen, 2000). This distinction is crucial for entrepreneurship because intense negative feelings are common during uncertainty, setbacks and resource constraints, but only their duration determines whether they facilitate problem-solving or induce cognitive rigidity. For example, Byrne and Shepherd (2015) demonstrate how entrepreneurs process emotions while making sense of business failure. Their multiple case study of eight entrepreneurial narratives found that the interpretation and learning from the business failure varied depending on how long the entrepreneurs felt the initial negative emotion. The difference between entrepreneurs' initial and current emotional states impacted how they made sense of the cues surrounding the business failure. These temporal shifts suggest that the duration of emotional experiences plays a role in how entrepreneurs learn and make sense of events. Similarly, positive emotions result in varied impacts depending on their duration. Momentary spike of positive emotions, such as joy or enthusiasm, may enhance creativity temporally (Baron, 2008; Isen, 2008), but only long-lasting positive emotion of low-to-moderate intensity broadens cognition sufficiently to facilitate generative psychological resources (Fredrickson, 2001). Entrepreneurship studies acknowledge that entrepreneurs' emotions fluctuate frequently (Uy *et al.*, 2017) but have rarely theorized how the endurance of such states influences the depth and scope of cognitive processing. Therefore, by incorporating duration, scholars can distinguish between temporal uplift, which produces transient creativity boosts and sustained emotional states, which shape more stable shifts in cognitive frames. The processes, like entrepreneurial sensemaking through which entrepreneurs interpret ambiguity, assign meaning to environmental cues and construct future-oriented interpretations, offer a compelling domain in which the importance of duration becomes particularly prominent. Duration can determine whether emotions merely spark initial interpretation or actively guide extended cognitive elaboration (Fay and Sonnentag, 2012). Additionally, emotional duration also interacts with entrepreneurial identity and experience in shaping long-term decision patterns. For instance, grief following venture failure may dissipate quickly for some entrepreneurs but remain prolonged for others, leading to distinct learning, re-engagement and recovery trajectories (Shepherd, 2003; Shepherd *et al.*, 2009). Prolonged grief can dampen cognitive capacity and delay opportunity re-entry, while shorter-duration grief allows more rapid re-engagement and constructive sensemaking. Similarly, passion, conceptualized as an intense positive emotion closely associated with identity, has a varied impact when sustained over time compared to when experienced in short peaks (Cardon *et al.*, 2009). Research shows that enduring passion contributes to persistence and deeper cognitive elaboration, whereas short-term emotional enthusiasm may not enable meaningful reflection. These examples illustrate that duration fundamentally shapes the causal pathways through which emotions influence cognition and decision-making; identical emotions of identical intensity can produce different outcomes depending on whether they last minutes, hours or months. We build on this evidence to propose a more comprehensive theorization of emotion's dimensions on entrepreneurs' sensemaking and subsequent decision-making while running a venture. Integrating the duration dimension has also helped this study to adopt a more nuanced lens for theorizing emotional ambivalence and transitions, as entrepreneurs may frequently fluctuate between excitement, anxiety, hope and frustration during even one single decision episode (Foo *et al.*, 2009; Podoyntsyna *et al.*, 2012).

3. Beyond disruption: reconceptualizing the role of emotion in triggering entrepreneurial sensemaking

Maitlis *et al.* (2013) made a significant contribution to the sensemaking literature by introducing the emotional angle of the sensemaking process. They argued the necessity of moderately intense (intensity) negative emotion (valence) to trigger sensemaking in individuals when a disruption or discrepancy occurs. Although it still holds applicability in stable organizational settings, it may require more discussion in unique contexts like entrepreneurship, where uncertainty and change are not exceptions but the norm. Traditionally, sensemaking has been viewed as a retrospective process (Weick, 1995; Weick *et al.*, 2005), that is looking back at events that occurred to create a coherent story explaining what happened and why. However, some studies acknowledge another way of sensemaking, particularly in complex, uncertain contexts where decision makers engage in forward-looking construction of ambiguous cues even before a clear problem or disruption arises (Ancona, 2012; Gephart *et al.*, 2010; Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2015). This less event-driven and prospective form of sensemaking (Rosness *et al.*, 2016; Seidel *et al.*, 2025) is prevalent in entrepreneurs who proactively imagine the future by exploring weak signals and constructing plausible narratives that guide decision-making and opportunity development (Cornelissen and Clarke, 2010; Garud and Giuliani, 2013). It is a deliberate effort to give meaning to the uncertain environment, guiding early action (Hill and Levenhagen, 1995). The explanation for such proactive behavior in entrepreneurs is found in individual entrepreneurial orientation literature, which describes entrepreneurs as autonomous, proactive, innovative, competitive and risk-taking individuals (Martins and Perez, 2025). Being proactive in nature, prospective sensemaking, in contrast to its retrospective counterpart, does not need to be triggered solely by negative emotions. As entrepreneurial orientation and proactivity flourish under positive emotions (Bernoster *et al.*, 2020), we argue that prospective sensemaking can be triggered by positive emotions, too. While interpreting market signals, consumer behaviors or technological trends, entrepreneurs often engage in prospective sensemaking, not in response to an unexpected situation but as a habitual tendency to navigate uncertainty, motivated by positive emotions such as curiosity, hope and motivation. Similarly, the emotions associated with activities such as exploring opportunities, anticipating the future or interpreting weak, ambiguous information are positive or mixed, such as curiosity, excitement, hope and intrinsic motivation (Kashdan *et al.*, 2004; Shepherd *et al.*, 2010; Weick *et al.*, 2005; Youssef and Luthans, 2007). Post-merger integration literature also suggests the possibility of positive emotion (hope) triggering sensemaking (Schlindwein and Geppert, 2020). Entrepreneurial intention literature indicates that positive emotions enhance intention formation, providing support for the argument that positive emotions enable entrepreneurs to foresee opportunities (Chen *et al.*, 2021), an outcome of entrepreneurial sensemaking. Entrepreneurial decision-making literature further supports the argument by suggesting that positive emotions enhance confidence in new entrepreneurs by reducing perceived risk and facilitating proactive behavior to make sense of opportunity exploitation (Cunningham and Anderson, 2018). Positive psychology literature asserts that positive emotions, particularly those of a low-to-moderate intensity, can stimulate cognitive engagement (Fredrickson, 2001) even in the absence of a threat or crisis. These assertions align with the entrepreneurial cognitive literature which shows that positive emotions, such as passion, broaden thought-action repertoires, enhancing cognitive flexibility to pursue opportunity (Shepherd and Patzelt, 2018) by making sense of the environmental cues. For example, the feeling of hope amidst uncertainty might flag an opportunity worth pursuing, prompting the entrepreneurs to make sense of what could be done to make that happen. The intrinsic motivation derived from hope prompts entrepreneurs to project desirable futures, simulate actions and build narratives to turn weak signals into opportunities (Cornelissen and Clarke, 2010). Therefore, the assumption that negative emotion is the sole catalyst of sensemaking overlooks the possibility of a prospective or proactive mode of sensemaking by entrepreneurs that does not necessarily occur in response to disruptions. Considering only the

reactive or retrospective model of emotion-driven sensemaking may oversimplify inherently complex and novel contexts like entrepreneurship and overlook the role of hope, passion and excitement in triggering entrepreneurial sensemaking to imagine and enact future opportunities. Therefore, we argue that positive emotions are legitimate triggers of prospective sensemaking in entrepreneurship. This leads to our first proposition.

- P1a.* Positive emotions, such as hope and passion, will likely trigger prospective sensemaking in entrepreneurs by motivating anticipatory cognitive engagement with uncertain or emerging opportunities.

Additionally, we argue that moderately intense negative emotion can trigger retrospective sensemaking, as suggested by [Maitlis et al. \(2013\)](#) only when the emotion lasts for a short duration and transitions to or is mixed with positive emotion. Recent work by [Portocarrero et al. \(2025\)](#) argues for the need to go beyond valence and intensity and to consider the duration of emotional experiences to fully understand emotions' influence on entrepreneurial behavior. The authors classify emotional phenomena by their duration as fleeting emotions, enduring mood and persistent affective traits. This distinction is crucial in entrepreneurship as different emotional durations may have varying impacts on entrepreneurial decision-making. For example, a fear experienced for a shorter duration has a different impact on entrepreneurial decisions, such as risk mitigation, while prolonged fear of failure could lead to anxiety and paralyze decision-making ([Cacciotti et al., 2016](#)). Therefore, in this study, we respond to the call in the literature ([Portocarrero et al., 2025](#)) to develop further insights on the temporality of emotional constructs and incorporate the emotion's duration dimension to the emotion-sensemaking model. To build our argument, we borrow from the mechanisms described by the ego-depletion literature ([Baumeister et al., 2018, 2024](#)), which suggests that even moderately intense negative emotions can deplete the mental resources one needs to engage in other effortful interpretive tasks. Therefore, individuals may be deterred from engaging in active sensemaking if exposed to prolonged negative emotion (even moderate intensity) due to mental exhaustion. If it gets converted into high-intensity negative emotion, it may overwhelm the decision maker and induce recklessness and impulsivity, further deterring sensemaking ([Bachkirov et al., 2025](#)). The chance of experiencing such prolonged negative emotion is higher in uncertain and complex contexts like entrepreneurship ([Williamson et al., 2024](#)). The variability of the duration of emotional experience also depends on the regulating strategies – rumination prolongs the duration, whereas reappraisal shortens it ([Verduyn et al., 2009](#)). Thus, we argue that entrepreneurs who experience moderate-to-high-intensity negative emotions for a long time will not engage in sensemaking due to mental exhaustion. Furthermore, in line with the work of [Zeelenberg and Pieters \(2007\)](#), we believe that some moderately intense negative emotions, common under uncertainty, such as regret and disappointment, can often prompt avoidance behavior to minimize discomfort rather than reflecting on the cues for sensemaking. In entrepreneurship, persistent moderate-intensity negative emotion can soon transform into despair, further driving avoidance of sensemaking altogether ([Byrne and Shepherd, 2015](#)). [Byrne and Shepherd \(2015\)](#), in their multiple case studies of eight entrepreneurs who experienced business failure, found that entrepreneurs who remained stuck in prolonged negative emotion had trouble engaging in meaningful reflection and reconstruction of their failures. Therefore, unless negative emotion, regardless of its intensity, is timely transformed into positive emotion, which replenishes motivation toward active cognitive engagement ([Fong, 2006](#)), sensemaking may never be triggered. We believe that the emotional shift from negative to positive triggers sensemaking in individuals rather than the mere presence of moderately intense negative emotions, as proposed in the extant literature. However, we also acknowledge that such an emotional shift may not be clean, meaning negative emotions might not entirely transform into positive ones, and the transition would likely be a gradual process. Therefore, during the transition period, experiencing ambivalent or mixed emotions is also possible. Literature on ambivalent emotions links it to better judgment capability ([Firfiray and Gomez-Mejia, 2021](#); [Rees et al., 2013](#)). Entrepreneurship literature on mixed emotions

suggests that it can serve as a cognitive-affective signal (Zhang *et al.*, 2024) for better sensemaking in uncertain conditions by simultaneously alerting and motivating entrepreneurs (Podoyntsyna *et al.*, 2012). Therefore, a timely shift of pure negative emotion to positive or ambivalent emotion is necessary to trigger sensemaking in entrepreneurs. In a nutshell, negative emotion may alert entrepreneurs to a discrepancy and focus their attention on a problem, but it is the subsequent transition of that “alert” to hope, curiosity or even an ambivalent mix of emotion that truly triggers the deep sensemaking process. These arguments lead to the following proposition.

- P1b.* An emotional shift from short-duration negative emotion (moderate intensity) to positive or ambivalent emotion will more likely trigger a sensemaking process rather than a persistent negative emotion of any intensity.

4. Dynamic shaping of the sensemaking process

The extant emotion-sensemaking model advances the literature by theorizing the role of emotion in shaping the sensemaking process, focusing mainly on two dimensions – internal (how generative or integrative) and external (how much it involves other people). The assumptions while discussing the first dimensions are that (1) a fairly linear and consistent link exists between emotion and sensemaking; (2) emotional valence is the primary shaper of the sensemaking process, putting intensity, duration, complexity and ambivalence in the background and (3) emotion is relatively stable during the sensemaking episodes. However, these assumptions may falter in highly vulnerable and complex contexts like entrepreneurship. For example, entrepreneurs experience various states of emotions, sometimes within a single decision episode (Cardon *et al.*, 2012; Zettel, 2025), rendering the relationship nonlinear and highly unpredictable. Therefore, dynamic emotional shifts in entrepreneurship might shape generative or integrative sensemaking over time, depending on the duration of the emotional state. Additionally, the intensity and complexity of entrepreneurship may matter more than just the valence of a particular emotional state (Serna-Zuluaga *et al.*, 2024) in shaping the sensemaking process. For example, deep sensemaking might require adequate intensity of the felt emotion (positive or negative) for entrepreneurs to navigate ambiguity and high stakes (Shepherd, 2015). Similarly, entrepreneurial emotions might be complex. In the same situation, they can simultaneously feel opposite emotions (ambivalence) (Hayton and Cholakova, 2012). Due to the high volatility of the entrepreneurial environment, entrepreneurs’ emotions shift rapidly in response to various cues available (Baron, 2008; Javadian *et al.*, 2022), rendering the whole sensemaking process dynamic and evolving.

In line with the original arguments by Maitlis and colleagues, we build on and extend the positive psychology literature (Fredrickson, 2001) and argue that low-to-moderate intensity positive felt emotion (e.g. curiosity, hope) fosters a better chance for flexible and creative constructions of environmental cues, thus facilitating generative sensemaking. Entrepreneurial intention literature corroborates the argument that low-intensity positive emotion enhances cognitive flexibility and broader attention (Paul *et al.*, 2021) and empirically demonstrates that low-intensity positive emotion strengthens core entrepreneurial cognition scripts such as opportunity arrangements and resource mobilization (Chen *et al.*, 2021). On the other hand, high-intensity positive emotions (such as excitement and euphoria) may narrow the cognitive repertoires (Gruber *et al.*, 2011), hindering any deep sensemaking, as these emotions may lead to overly simplistic heuristic processing. Too intense positive emotions can foster overconfidence and reduce the depth needed for generative thinking. Neuro-cognitive evidence from entrepreneurship literature also shows that intense emotional arousal in entrepreneurs can shift their attention from broad strategic exploration to immediate, impulsive action (Serna-Zuluaga *et al.*, 2024). This logic aligns with the creativity literature, too, which suggests that while positive emotion enhances creativity, excessive arousal, despite being positive, can hinder creativity by reducing openness and promoting premature closure

(He, 2023). Additionally, the duration of the felt emotion also matters, as entrepreneurs tend to have fluctuating emotions (Uy *et al.*, 2017). A short-lived low-to-moderate positive felt emotion may not facilitate generative sensemaking if it gets shifted to a higher intensity positive or any intensity negative emotion. In corroboration with our argument, a meta-analysis of emotions in entrepreneurship suggests that the duration of emotion positively moderates the relationship between positive emotions and entrepreneurial performance, that is the longer the duration of positive emotion, the better the performance (Fodor and Pinteá, 2017), indicating more creative and flexible sensemaking (generative). Based on these arguments, we present the following proposition.

- P2a.* Long-lasting, low-to-moderate intensity positive emotions (e.g. curiosity, hope, mild optimism) will facilitate more generative sensemaking by broadening cognitive repertoires and encouraging exploratory, creative interpretation of ambiguous cues.

Similarly, in the presence of ambivalent emotion, as mentioned earlier, if the low-moderate intensity negative emotion sticks for a longer duration than the accompanying positive emotion of low-moderate intensity, a more careful reflection of the contradictions (Shepherd and Cardon, 2009) will lead to more extensive information processing and a greater focus to details will facilitate integrative sensemaking (Maitlis *et al.*, 2013). On the other hand, if the low-moderate intensity positive emotion's duration is more prolonged, entrepreneurs are more likely to generate novel interpretations and find innovative solutions to ambiguous problems (Isen, 1993), resulting in a more generative sensemaking process. This leads to our following proposition.

- P2b.* Ambivalent emotions, with low-to-moderate intensity negative emotions, sustained over a longer duration, will facilitate integrative sensemaking. In contrast, low-to-moderate intensity positive emotions, sustained over a longer time, will facilitate generative sensemaking.

5. Challenge hindrance framework

Reiterating the importance of individual differences in the original emotion-sensemaking model, we draw on the Challenge Hindrance Stressor framework (CHSF) (Cavanaugh *et al.*, 2000) to add nuance to our conceptual work. The CHSF proposes that not all individuals appraise the stressors similarly. While some perceive the stressors as opportunities for growth (challenge), others perceive them as barriers to achievement (hindrance). These variations in different perceptions elicit different emotions in the actors. Individuals perceiving the stressors as challenges evoke positive emotions because they are seen as opportunities for growth (Cavanaugh *et al.*, 2000; Lepine *et al.*, 2005). Affective event theory (Weiss and Cropanzano, 1996) provides support for the argument that the working environment characteristics, such as work responsibilities and work complexities, act as sources of challenge stressors (Wegge *et al.*, 2006) and result in positive affective reactions such as happiness, hope and pride (Yang and Li, 2021). Similarly, those who perceive stressors as a hindrance experience negative emotions (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984; Lepine *et al.*, 2005). Sources of hindrance stressors, such as role ambiguity and job insecurity (Boswell *et al.*, 2004), are appraised as a threat to personal growth, triggering negative emotions (Lepine *et al.*, 2005). Evidence of such affective appraisal of events is also evident in the entrepreneurship literature (Bennett *et al.*, 2021), which shows that entrepreneurs perceive challenge stressors as promoting valued goals, evoking emotions including happiness, pride, relief and hope, whereas entrepreneurs perceive hindrance stressors as a threat and thus may experience negative emotions, including fear, anger, shame and guilt (Lerman *et al.*, 2021). CHSF has been studied widely in the entrepreneurship literature to understand entrepreneurs' perceptions regarding the various stressors encountered and how these perceptions shaped their performance, decision-making

and well-being (Lerman *et al.*, 2021; Wach *et al.*, 2021). Drawing from the affective appraisal of challenge and hindrance stressors, the dominant view in the entrepreneurship literature suggests that challenge stressors enhance entrepreneurs' performance while hindrance stressors hamper their well-being. Building on this evidence, we argue that entrepreneurs' perceptions of the environmental cues as challenges will evoke more positive emotions in them, while perceiving the cues as hindrances will elicit more negative emotions. As we proposed earlier, prolonged low-to-moderate positive emotions facilitate more generative sensemaking, and sustained moderate negative intensity emotion aids integrative sensemaking. We argue that when entrepreneurs perceive environmental stimuli as a challenge, they are more likely to engage in generative sensemaking, while appraising the stimuli as a hindrance will more likely lead entrepreneurs toward integrative sensemaking. Thus, stress appraisals provide the context in which emotions are interpreted and acted on (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). These arguments led to the following proposition.

- P3. The effect of entrepreneurs' emotional responses on sensemaking depends on stress appraisal: Challenge appraisals strengthen the link between positive emotions and generative sensemaking, while hindrance appraisals strengthen the link between negative emotions and integrative sensemaking.

6. Impact on entrepreneurial decision-making

Extending the derived propositions and examining their role in entrepreneurial decision-making is crucial, as it connects entrepreneurs' internal emotional-cognitive processes to observable actions impacting venture performance. Therefore, we extend our discussion and examine the impact of the emotion-sensemaking process in entrepreneurship on two key decisions of the venture growth stage – temporal ambidexterity and pivot.

Temporal ambidexterity – balancing short-term operational demands with long-term strategic vision – is essential but complex in entrepreneurship, where ventures face high uncertainty, resource constraints and a rapidly shifting business environment (Wang *et al.*, 2019). The successful implementation of temporal ambidexterity yields various positive outcomes for ventures, such as survival (Parida *et al.*, 2016), performance (Prange and Verdier, 2011) and likelihood of getting acquired (Keyhani *et al.*, 2021). However, as resources – human, financial and time are scarce for entrepreneurs, the responsibility of exercising crucial strategic decisions like temporal ambidexterity falls solely on the entrepreneur (Jafari-Sadeghi *et al.*, 2023). Therefore, understanding how entrepreneurs' sensemaking capabilities impact their temporal ambidexterity skills is worth examining.

Temporal ambidexterity requires entrepreneurs to bridge immediate operational demands with future aspirations (Smith and Tushman, 2005), often working under uncertainty. Thus, they must create meaning in uncertain and dynamic conditions by constructing flexible, future-oriented narratives that integrate short-term actions with long-term goals. Such flexibility is often offered by generative sensemaking which involves flexible and creative relationships between cues and frames while constructing new narratives around environmental cues (Maitlis *et al.*, 2013). Therefore, through generative sensemaking, entrepreneurs can dynamically and flexibly reframe environmental cues and draw coherence between seemingly contradictory present actions and future goals. Empirical research further suggests that this flexibility underpins dual innovation in entrepreneurs, enabling them to switch between short-term-oriented activities and long-term ones (Wang *et al.*, 2023). Dynamic reframing of environmental signals through generative sensemaking also helps reassess and allocate attention optimally to immediate survival and long-term vision, facilitating temporal ambidexterity. Generative sensemaking also enables real-time adaptations by continuously reinterpreting cues from the surroundings in response to the demands of the situation (Weick, 1993) – a core competency for maintaining temporal ambidexterity through flexibility between short-term and long-term oriented actions. Taken

together, generative sensemaking becomes a key microfoundational mechanism through which broader attention, cognitive flexibility and imaginative reasoning enable entrepreneurs to fluidly balance short-term exploitation with long-term exploration, forming the cognitive base for temporal ambidexterity. These arguments lead to the following proposition.

- P4. Generative sensemaking enables entrepreneurs to achieve temporal ambidexterity by constructing adaptive, future-oriented interpretations that integrate short-term exploitation with long-term exploration.

Another crucial decision in entrepreneurship is pivot – a deliberate change in strategy, business model, product/service offering, target market or any other core aspect of a startup (Flechas Chaparro and de Vasconcelos Gomes, 2021; Ries, 2011), as a more viable path to achieving venture success. Successful pivoting often results in a better survival rate (Andries and Debackere, 2007) and demonstrates greater adaptability in disruption (Ghezzi et al., 2015). However, mainly pivoting happens in the face of failure and hence is not merely a tactful step but an emotional journey of identity changes and recommitment to new narratives (Shepherd et al., 2011). Thus, it seems logical to examine the pivoting decisions through the lens of sensemaking, which we established as a highly emotional phenomenon.

Pivoting is triggered after new information conflicts or expands an existing belief of entrepreneurial decision-makers (Kirtley and O'Mahony, 2023). It occurs incrementally by adding new narratives and adjusting the old ones accordingly. Maitlis et al. (2013) termed this meaning-making as integrative sensemaking. Integrative sensemaking is shaped by constantly comparing new cues with the emerging narratives of the situation, critically evaluating their relevance in addressing the current problem. It involves heightened sensitivity to whether new cues are consistent with the emerging account. Additionally, pivoting demands entrepreneurs' ability to focus on extensive information processing surrounding a setback and adjust to new information. Since integrative sensemaking involves a more precise construction of any situation (Maitlis et al., 2013), supporting systematic processing and plausibility checks, it will facilitate entrepreneurs toward pivoting decisions grounded in evidence. It plays a central role in pivoting because entrepreneurs critically scrutinize evidence and decide if the existing path remains plausible or must be abandoned (Gabay-Mariani et al., 2024). Anecdotal evidence from the real world reflects such dynamics. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, restaurants engaged in precise sensemaking of the emerging situation, which led to the abandonment of existing business models and a rapid pivot to online services. Therefore, we argue that integrative sensemaking equips entrepreneurs to interpret setbacks, update mental models and reconstruct in coherent ways, making it indispensable for successful pivoting decisions. These arguments lead to the following proposition.

- P5. Integrative sensemaking facilitates pivot decisions in entrepreneurship by enabling extensive cognitive and emotional processing of complex or adverse information, allowing entrepreneurs to reinterpret problems and adapt strategic direction effectively.

7. Theoretical and practical implications

Our conceptual work, extending the current emotion-sensemaking model, has several implications for theory and practice. Firstly, we add a new dimension to the understanding of the sensemaking process by introducing the triggers of prospective and proactive forms of sensemaking in the context of entrepreneurship. Traditionally, sensemaking has been studied as a retrospective and reactive process to an interruption (Weick, 1995) and triggered by moderate intensity negative emotion (Maitlis et al., 2013). Given the prevalence of anomalies and uncertainties in entrepreneurship juxtaposed with the inherent proactive behavior of entrepreneurs, we proposed that sensemaking is often a proactively initiated process by entrepreneurs experiencing positive emotion. This novel source of sensemaking trigger will

enable researchers to study the sensemaking process in contexts where change and interruptions are the norm and not an exception. Additionally, this will establish the role of positive emotion in triggering sensemaking, which is often an ignored topic. Future researchers could empirically test our proposition through longitudinal diary study (experience sampling), controlled experiments or qualitative case studies. For example, the experience sampling method will help researchers track entrepreneurs' emotional states (especially positive emotions) and the starting point of their prospective sensemaking activities (e.g. envisioning opportunity, committing resources) to understand how positive emotions influence them. Such empirical evidence can enhance the entrepreneurship literature associating positive emotion and entrepreneurial cognition (Chen *et al.*, 2021). It will further provide explanations to the immanent sensemaking instances observed without any major discrepancy or disruption (Eckstein *et al.*, 2025; Niemi *et al.*, 2022).

Secondly, we add nuance to the current emotion-sensemaking model (Maitlis *et al.*, 2013) by adding another dimension (time duration) to explore emotion's influence on sensemaking. We argue that although the negative emotions of moderate intensity elicited by a disruption draw one's focus on an issue, it is the duration of the felt negative emotion and its subsequent shift to a positive or mixed emotion that triggers sensemaking rather than the negative emotion itself. A prolonged negative emotion of any intensity may deter one from sensemaking due to fatigue and depletion of mental resources (Baumeister *et al.*, 2018, 2024). The explicit incorporation of the duration of felt emotions in the emotion-sensemaking model addresses the recent call in the literature to include the temporality of emotions to study their influence on entrepreneurial actions (Portocarrero *et al.*, 2025). It opens the door for further research to place it as an equally important dimension of emotion, alongside valence and intensity. Our proposition further provides scope to rethink the whole triggering process of sensemaking in light of the duration of emotion. Future researchers could empirically explore our proposition through a meticulously designed controlled experiment to induce entrepreneurs' emotions (both positive and negative) and capture the point at which sensemaking starts. The duration of emotions can also be captured through experienced sampling methodology by asking participants to report their emotional state in real time at multiple points across the day/week (Verduyn *et al.*, 2015) and calculate the length of time a particular emotion persists. Such empirical evidence can enrich the sensemaking and entrepreneurial decision-making literature, providing the affective-cognitive underpinning of entrepreneurial decision-making (Shepherd *et al.*, 2015). Future studies that empirically link the temporal dynamics of emotion to entrepreneurial sensemaking (cognitive) processes will give a more realistic view of decision-making over time in entrepreneurial contexts, which often involve extended periods of uncertainty and emotional flux (Zettel, 2025).

Thirdly, we also argue that entrepreneurs can experience ambivalence of emotion, even in a single situation, due to the complex nature of the context (Podoyynitsyna *et al.*, 2012). Thus, considering the role of single-valence emotion in shaping the sensemaking process might not represent the complete picture, especially in complex and uncertain contexts like entrepreneurship. Therefore, we propose that entrepreneurs may experience a mixed valence of emotions at a given time and engage in generative or integrative sensemaking depending on which type of emotion dominates for a longer time. For example, suppose they experience prolonged low-to-moderate intensity positive emotion rather than negative emotion of any intensity. In that case, entrepreneurs are more likely to engage in generative sensemaking due to the broadening effect of positive emotion (Fredrickson, 2001). Similarly, a dominating negative emotion lasting longer than a positive one will facilitate integrative sensemaking by igniting entrepreneurs' extensive and detailed information-searching mode. Such arguments will open up avenues of research to examine the role of mixed emotions in entrepreneurial outcomes rather than assuming that individuals feel emotions one at a time. Future researchers could design case studies or an interview method to capture entrepreneurs' various emotional states at any given time and understand through qualitative analysis how

this ambivalence and different combinations of positive and negative emotions (which can be analyzed from the frequency of use of positive and negative valence expressions) shape the type of sensemaking processes (generative or integrative) entrepreneurs are engaged in. The findings can enrich the entrepreneurial action literature by examining the antecedents of entrepreneurial sensemaking (cognition) (Grégoire *et al.*, 2011; Wood *et al.*, 2012) and providing a probable explanation for the variance of risk perceptions (subsequent actions) in entrepreneurs experiencing mixed emotions (Podoyntsyna *et al.*, 2012)

Fourth, in line with the existing emotion-sensemaking model, we acknowledge individual differences in sensemaking. Building on the extant literature and the challenge-hindrances stressor framework, we argue that entrepreneurs who perceive environmental stressors as challenges (rather than hindrances) will engage in generative (rather than integrative) sensemaking. Our propositions added to the conversation on the importance of context in sensemaking (Cornelissen and Clarke, 2010; Garud *et al.*, 2014) and explored entrepreneurial sensemaking. Future researchers could explore the propositions empirically through mixed-method studies. For example, a survey can capture the variations in perception of stressors among entrepreneurs, and a subsequent qualitative study can explain how individual differences impact the sensemaking style in entrepreneurs. Such insights may enrich the entrepreneurial performance literature by providing an explanation for the inconsistent relationship between stress and entrepreneurial performance (Lepine *et al.*, 2005; Lerman *et al.*, 2021) using the sensemaking lens.

Finally, we extend the conversation on the influence of emotion on sensemaking to the observable actions within entrepreneurship. We examine two key decisions during the venture growth stage – temporal ambidexterity and pivot. We argue that the creative flexibility associated with generative sensemaking will facilitate a more balanced approach to short-term survival and long-term goals. On the other hand, comparing and adjusting new narratives with old beliefs to make sense of a problem or interruption and adapt to the same through integrative sensemaking may lead to successful pivot decisions. Our arguments link entrepreneurs' internal emotion-sensemaking process to real outcomes, leading to practical implications. Future researchers could test our proposition through controlled experiments by manipulating entrepreneurs' emotions and capturing their ambidexterity and pivoting performance through hypothetical decision-making scenarios. The findings can contribute to the entrepreneurial decision-making literature by exploring its affective-cognitive antecedents (Michl *et al.*, 2009; Shepherd *et al.*, 2015; Williamson *et al.*, 2024). By empirically linking emotion to sensemaking and then to tangible decisions (e.g. whether to pivot or adapt by balancing short-term and long-term orientation), future studies can help integrate psychological processes into the action-oriented models of entrepreneurship, such as the "action theory process model" (Frese and Gielnik, 2023). The evidence can also contribute by explaining the heterogeneity of the association between emotion and entrepreneurial performance (Fodor and Pinteá, 2017). Emotion-informed sensemaking can become a mediator/moderator in these heterogeneous outcomes.

Adding to the practical implications of our conceptual work is the knowledge that long-lasting positive emotion can also nudge entrepreneurs to reflect, evaluate and reframe environmental cues and may encourage them to tune in to the subtle emotional cues during daily operations. Learning to accept that mixed feelings about a situation are not unacceptable and modulating them toward the kind of sensemaking (generative or integrative) needed according to the situation is a skill that can be acquired, which is powerful information for entrepreneurs. The proposed association of each type of sensemaking to some key decisions while running a venture can also empower entrepreneurs with insight into the direction of their emotions and subsequent sensemaking. Lastly, the moderating impact of entrepreneurs' perception of stressors as challenges or hindrances on the type of sensemaking will further strengthen their awareness of their appraisal of the situations and consequences.

8. Conclusions

Motivated to study emotions' role in the sensemaking process in nuance, especially in a context like entrepreneurship, where prospective sensemaking is more prominent than retrospective, due to the inherent proactive nature of entrepreneurs, our conceptual study explored the influence of positive emotion in triggering the individual sensemaking process. We extend the prior understanding that moderate-intensity negative emotion triggers sensemaking by arguing that the same can be possible by positive emotions, too, especially in a context like entrepreneurship, where constant uncertainty prompts one to proactively make sense of the environmental cues, even without an event eliciting negative emotion. Additionally, in line with the recent call in the literature, we contribute to the comprehensive understanding of emotions' influence on cognition by adding another layer to the emotions' interplay with sensemaking by arguing that the duration of the felt emotion determines its overall impact on triggering and shaping sensemaking. Therefore, we open new avenues to future studies on emotion by emphasizing the importance of the often-ignored temporal dimension of emotion. We further established the moderating role of entrepreneurs' disposition toward perceiving environmental stressors as a challenge or hindrance in the emotion–sensemaking nexus. We finally link the emotional process of sensemaking to practical decision-making in entrepreneurship through two key decisions – temporal sensemaking and pivoting. Our extended emotion–sensemaking model will add nuance to understand emotions' role in sensemaking in complex contexts like entrepreneurship, further opening new research avenues.

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