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Connecting passion: Distinctive features from emerging entrepreneurial profiles

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ABSTRACT

The article explores passion as a connecting force between entrepreneurship and consumption. Although a rising interest within the academic debate, the issue of how passion can be interpreted as a bridge between consumption and entrepreneurship still needs to be investigated.

Hence, the main purposes of this paper is to propose the concept of “connecting passion” by identifying a) the factors that combine consumption as self-expression (being consumer) and entrepreneurship (being entrepreneur) through passion and b) the resulting entrepreneurial profiles. Both emerge from an empirical investigation based on the case analysis of emblematic companies. The concept of “connecting passion” is characterized by the following fundamental features: passion as game, passion as self-continuity, the search for uniqueness through self experimentation, and cohabitation with the consumer community. The paper discusses the concept relating it to the existing literature. Finally, it advances the main managerial implications of the research.

1. Introduction

The recent literature explores new forms of entrepreneurship, which are born of passion in the sphere of consumption (Cova & Guercini, 2016; Shah & Tripsas, 2007). Consumption is indeed rich in gratifying experiences (Belk, Ger, & Askegaard, 2003; Wallendorf & Arnould, 1988) that can pave the way for the unfolding of one's own passion through the creation of new enterprises (Jones & Rowley, 2009). However, this does not necessarily mean that passion (as consumer) is reconcilable with the setting up of a business. We could ask how in a business context, it is possible to combine the passion for consumption and the ensuing entrepreneurship. The issue is intriguing if we consider that the combination consumption-passion-entrepreneurship is explored as a basis for new businesses and that a trade-off between practicing passion for consumption and doing business might follow. In this paper we propose to examine how it might be possible to overcome this trade-off by identifying the features of “connecting passion” that we define as an entrepreneurial passion that incorporates passion born of consumer experiences while succeeding in binding the practice of the passion (as consumer) with business.

This matter has not yet received adequate scientific attention, in part because passion is investigated within the dichotomies of consumption-passion and of entrepreneur-passion (Cardon & Kirk, 2015;

Cardon, Wincent, Singh, & Drnovsek, 2009) as distinct research fields, and in part because research into entrepreneurship born of passionate consumption is relatively recent (Cova & Guercini, 2016; Haefliger, Jäger, & Von Krogh, 2010; Shah & Tripsas, 2007). This said, the present article offers an original contribution to the study of entrepreneurship by investigating a passion that intertwines the identity of consumer with that of entrepreneur. It explores entrepreneurial profiles resulting from this intertwining and introduces the concept of “connecting passion”, relating it to the existing literature. To this end it is structured as follows. The following section presents a review of the literature on passion from consumer and entrepreneurial perspectives and focuses on the role of entrepreneurship born of passionate consumption as a bridge between the two perspectives. Then, the authors show the results of an empirical analysis based on emblematic entrepreneurial stories. The narratives are analyzed by means of a qualitative method, which makes it possible to examine how passion can combine consumption with entrepreneurship. In the last sections, the article discusses the concept of “connecting passion” and includes theoretical and managerial implications.

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2. Literature review

2.1. Consumption and passion

Within the context of consumption, scholars share the idea that passion expresses a feeling toward an object that is pleasurable and that one loves or desires. In this regard a significant contribution comes from Wallendorf and Arnould (1988). They explore the relation between consumers and “favourite things”, that is, things that reflect personal meanings and attachment. All these things play an important role in consumers' lives: “they do provide individualized cues for self-expression” (p. 542) but also “they serve to solidify and represent both one's connections to and differences from others” (p. 543). Belk et al. (2003) focus on one special favourite thing: the desired object as expression of embodied passion. They report that “desire is experienced by our informants as an intense and usually highly positive emotional state best characterized as passion” (p. 333). This latter can pave the way for change, since the desired object or experience is seen as something that promises a transformation and offers escape from present conditions. There follows a relation with the object that becomes unique. This uniqueness, however, does not exclude others. The desired object is in fact, social as “it is hoped to facilitate social relations joining with idealized others and directing one's social destiny” (Belk et al., 2003, p. 337). As Sternberg (1997) had noted, the main point is that passion, fostering a persistent yearning, acts as a motivational power and can generate an energetic engagement. This can also act collectively. Lovers of rafting share their passionate experience generating a communion with the natural environment (Arnould & Price, 1993). The participants in the “Mountain men myth” share fantasy experiences of a primitive alternative reality reproduced within the bounded ritual space of a modern fur-trade rendezvous (Belk & Costa, 1998). Their involvement is facilitated by the choice of the site, by the clothes they wear, and by the activities they engage in. All these experiences do not constitute an end in themselves, but the naturalistic immersion and the sense of *communitas* they foster, allow them to be lived as free contexts where one can express one's own nature and get to know oneself more deeply. Rafting provides a simple, encapsulated world that triggers “personal growth and renewal of self” (Arnould & Price, 1993, p.36). And being part of a re-enacted event, “it is a form of identity work aimed at creating a more significant, noble, exciting and confident self” (Belk & Costa, 1998 p.234). This implies that passion is not disconnected from one's way of being. As Belk (1988) points out, consumers use objects (persons, places and things) to which they feel attached to expand and strengthen their sense of self. In this regard, he remarks that it is “when the object is known passionately [that] it becomes subject rather than object”, that is, consumers are able to integrate self and the object's symbolic properties. Thus, consumption of passion is “consuming as integration” (Holt, 1995) and intimate knowledge is a way to incorporate possessions into an extended self. The relation consumers develop with the objects can be so deep that they become spiritual mediators of a personal path. By exploring loved possessions and activities, Celsi, Rose, and Leigh (1993), and Ahuvia (2005) demonstrate that loved items are a means to “find yourself”, discover your inner self and live authentically in accordance with a given inner nature (Bammel & Burrus-Bammel, 1982).

2.2. Entrepreneurship and passion

Just as the consumer can express himself through his passion, in the same way, in the literature on entrepreneurship, one finds that passion is a theoretical construct correlated with the role of the entrepreneur within the company as expression of his own personal identity. Passion is described as intense positive emotions that fuel motivations (Brännback, Carsrud, Elfving, & Krueger, 2006) and mobilize energies. It enhances mental activity (Bierly, Kessler, & Christensen, 2000), unflagging pursuit of challenging goals (Smilor, 1997) together with

tenacity and willingness in human behaviors. Thus, it produces high levels of commitment and of initiative and provides meaning to everyday work life (Cardon, Zietsma, Saporito, Matherne, & Davis, 2005); and as Thorgren and Wincent (2015) explain, it can be experienced both in a harmonious and in an obsessive way. Passion is an invisible but volatile force that impacts on the entrepreneurial outcomes. These outcomes emerge not only as effect of the energies and emotions inherent to passion. Rather, they also imply a self-recognition of the entrepreneur in his business. More specifically, they reside in the “engagement in entrepreneurial activities [that are] associated with roles that are meaningful and salient to the self-identity of the entrepreneurs” (Cardon et al., 2009, p.517). The roles are those of the inventor, founder and developer; these roles favor an entrepreneurial self-recognition in variegated activities. It is the interaction between the centrality of the entrepreneur's self-identity in the entrepreneurial activities, together with the ensuing positive feelings, that generates a positive relation between entrepreneurial passion and relevant outcomes (Cardon, Gregoire, Stevens, & Patel, 2013). This interaction impacts on the outcomes through the “entrepreneurial efforts” that the passion fuels. Seen as the intensity of work on entrepreneurial tasks (Foo, Uy, & Baron, 2009), they can be read in terms of duration or of level of task involvement. Cardon et al. (2009) employ the terms “persistence” and “absorption”, respectively. Persistence is the “continuation of effortful actions despite failure, impediments or threats, either real or imagined” (p.518). Absorption is defined “as being fully concentrated and deeply engrossed in one's work” (p.520). Gielnik, Spitzmuller, Schmitt, Klemann, and Frese (2015) show that passion is both antecedent to and consequent to entrepreneurial efforts. These efforts, in fact, if driven by free will, “reduce the discrepancy between the current state and their desired goal” (p.1014) and produce positive emotions fueling at the same time passion. This discrepancy is reduced thanks to the entrepreneur's creative problem solving skills, that is, the ability to engage in novel and creative paths of action (Fredrickson, 1998) when “problems stand in the way of dreams, desire and purpose deeply rooted in the self-identity [of the entrepreneur]” (Cardon et al., 2009, p. 520). Entrepreneurial passion is not a static force, but evolves over time (Cardon & Kirk, 2015; Murnieks, Mosakowski, & Cardon, 2011). Indeed, it has been noted how the “choice overload” (Nordström, Sirén, Thorgren, & Wincent, 2016, p. 169), that is to say, the emerging need to dedicate time to different tasks within the company in addition to one's preferred activities, may act as reducer of the passion during the development of the company (Jahanmir & Lages, 2016). What is more, passion is not a purely individual force. It fuels itself but also draws on environmental factors. Cardon, Wincent, Singh, and Drnovsek (2005), adopting the metaphor of business as a baby, show how certain behaviors characterizing the impassioned entrepreneur are conditioned by the network of social relations of which he is part. More specifically, just as the development of a son is influenced by social contacts outside the family, so is the development of a company conditioned by the context in which the entrepreneur moves. The entrepreneur's passion, then, could be interpreted in social terms, that is, as a force that could be extricated from the restricted personal sphere.

2.3. Bridging consumer and entrepreneurship through passion

Entrepreneurs and consumers are entities which need not be distinct. Passion, in fact, can bring them together. This may take place when the consumer decides to turn his passion into a business activity and become an entrepreneur. In this connection, recent studies focus on the passion that stems from consumption and explore its influence on the creation of a new venture. One of these is that of Shah and Tripas (2007). They do not explicitly investigate passion but rather leisure activities and show how in practicing these activities, the end-users, that is persons “who have personal experience with a product or service” (p. 124), can become entrepreneurs in the event they decide to

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