ABSTRACT

This research seeks to explore how, when and why obsessive passion is good for business. It is argued that successful entrepreneurial action requires entrepreneurs have an obsessive passion for their business. It is the obsessive nature of their passion that makes the entrepreneur willing to accept the perceived uncertainty inherent in entrepreneurship and contributes to successful entrepreneurial action. Thus obsessive passion is a necessary but insufficient determinant of entrepreneurial success. However obsessive passion has a dark side and those entrepreneurs exhibiting self-reflection and insight are able to moderate the less adaptive outcomes of their obsessive passion.

INTRODUCTION

The importance of entrepreneurship to society in general and the economy in particular (Acs and Audretsch 2003; Baron 2002; Casson 2003; Fiet 2001; Minniti and Levesque 2008; Reynolds et al. 2002) is both self evident and clear from scholarly theorising and research. Despite this the field of entrepreneurship scholarship is fragmented, and the conceptual frameworks and theories of several disciplines inform it (Alvarez 2005; Cooper 2003; Hisrich et al. 2007; Reader and Watkins 2006; Zahra and Dess 2001). The importance of entrepreneurship to the quality of life of a society leads its scholars to actively seek to create it as a unique discipline in its own right (Acs and Audretsch 2003; Gartner 2007; Shane and Venkataraman 2000) underpinned by frameworks grounded in well established theories (Segal et al. 2005).

Although the diversity of perspectives on entrepreneurship will continue to generate an array of options or lens through which to view the various phenomena that are identified with entrepreneurship, the call is out to form a coherent body of knowledge (Douglas and Shepherd 2000; Shane 2006) and theory that can be tested by research (Fiet 2001; Gartner and Birley 2002; Zahra 2007). The call for new models and theories is strong, and particularly from the cognition stream of researchers (Baron 1998; Baron and Ward 2004; Gregoire et al. 2008; Shane and Venkataraman 2000; Shepherd et al. 2007). McMullen & Shepherd’s model (McMullen and Shepherd 2006) accommodates the wisdom, opinions and judgments of a range of theorists from two distinct streams of research, and is seen as an example of not so much how the entrepreneur thinks, but how to think entrepreneurially (Mitchell et al. 2007). The model it has had one empirical test - of the relationship between entrepreneurial action and perceptions of uncertainties (Meijer et al. 2007). As a conceptual model, the McMullen & Shepherd framework is effective in its contribution to the discussion around the role of uncertainty in blocking or delaying entrepreneurial action. However, this model is silent on that amorphous yet pervasive variable mentioned in all entrepreneurial pursuits – ‘passion’.

An examination of autobiographies, scholarly articles, interviews with entrepreneurs, and popular press reports reveal passion to be an oft-cited and intrinsic element of entrepreneurial action (Baron 2002; Baum and Locke 2004; Bird 1989; Graham 2006; Locke 2000; McClune 2000; O’Toole and Tarling...
2005; Shane et al. 2003; Torres 2003; Zeitsma 2005). Recently it has been suggested that it is passion not uncertainty that is the tipping point for whether or not an opportunity is acted upon (Brannback et al. 2006). It is ‘passion’ which is the focus of this research – passion in entrepreneurs. Where then would passion fit into McMullen & Shepherd’s conceptual framework? And how does passion help, or hinder, successful entrepreneurial action?

This paper seeks to (a) explore passion in the entrepreneurship literature (b) locate passion within a conceptual framework that relates uncertainty to entrepreneurial action and (c) consider how the dualistic nature of passion may impact successful entrepreneurial action. Below, we describe McMullen & Shepherd’s model relating uncertainty to entrepreneurial action, then consider how Vallerand’s dualistic model of passion could apply in the entrepreneurship context and finally suggest that it is obsessive passion, moderated by self-reflection and insight, that facilitates successful entrepreneurial action.

**A CONCEPTUAL MODEL RELATING PERCEIVED UNCERTAINTY AND MOTIVATION TO ENTREPRENEURIAL ACTION**

McMullen & Shepherd postulate that uncertainty may block entrepreneurial action and only people with a willingness to bear perceived uncertainty are likely to form an intention to undertake entrepreneurial action. They suggest motivation is important to entrepreneurial decision-making, and invite researchers to explore motivation, bringing it back into the discussion of the entrepreneur. By laying out the elements of decision-making they invite an examination of what it is that constructs knowledge and motivation and how the components of these elements interact to contribute to the decision to engage in entrepreneurial action.

Having reviewed the systems- and individual-level theories of entrepreneurship that embraced the action perspective of entrepreneurship, McMullen & Shepherd synthesized these models and developed a conceptual model of entrepreneurial action. It’s pragmatic conceptual framework enables the researcher to examine entrepreneurial action, whilst benefiting from deeper understandings of the predictions, assumptions, limitations and possibilities (McMullen and Shepherd 2006) of their own research.

In their paper, in which they articulate their *Model Relating Perceived Uncertainty and Motivation to Entrepreneurial Action*, McMullen & Shepherd seek to demonstrate that theories of the entrepreneur are theories of action proposing elements (stimulus, motivation, knowledge) that enhance and hinder individuals from acting entrepreneurially; and examine entrepreneurial action at the level of individual analysis whilst being consistent with system level theories of the entrepreneur. (McMullen and Shepherd 2006)

![Figure 1 McMullen & Shepherd Model: A Conceptual Model Relating Perceived Uncertainty and Motivation to Entrepreneurial Action](image-url)

McMullen & Shepherd introduce the reader to two main streams of entrepreneurship research that conceptualise the role uncertainty plays in preventing action (quantity of uncertainty and willingness to bear uncertainty). By combing the key arguments of each stream, a two-stage model of opportunity
recognition and belief formation is developed, in which perceived uncertainty, knowledge and motivation are related to entrepreneurial action. McMullen & Shepherd’s model shows that a decision to act entrepreneurially is dependent upon an individual forming two sequential beliefs: (1) that a third person opportunity exists ie an opportunity exists in the market place for someone (attention stage); and (2) that a first person opportunity exists ie they themselves are willing to bear the perceived uncertainty inherent in the entrepreneurial action to exploit that opportunity (evaluation stage).

McMullen & Shepherd have written a paper that has resonated with entrepreneurship scholars. However, their model has not yet been considered in the context of entrepreneurial passion. This paper takes up McMullen & Shepherd’s invitation to examine the constructs of the model more closely, explicitly the search for passion’s place within the model.

Successful Entrepreneurial Action

The term “entrepreneurial action” is variously understood to be action associated with an opportunity (Shane and Eckhardt 2003) that may or may not be profitable (or successful) (Frese 2007), and that creates value (Foss et al. 2008). It is important to entrepreneurial outcomes as the outcomes are the result of an active process that includes adapting to changing environments (Reader and Watkins 2006). By nature entrepreneurial action is action that is continuous (Frese 2007); episodic (Shane and Venkataraman 2001); creative (Agarwal et al. 2007); and culminating (Butler et al. 2003).

To McMullen & Shepherd, entrepreneurship is dependent upon entrepreneurial action taking place. They subscribe to the Herbert and Link’s (1988) definition that entrepreneurial action refers to behaviour in response to a judgmental decision under uncertainty about a possible opportunity for profit. However, such a definition overlooks innovation as an indicator of that which is entrepreneurial. In keeping with Shane’s observation that “entrepreneurship” will have no useful meaning to researchers without clear limits to the term (Shane 2006) this paper recognises a business as an “entrepreneurship”, and therefore the founder as the entrepreneur, when evidence of Schumpeter’s entrepreneurial profits exists. Schumpeter defines entrepreneurial profit as the profit to which no liability corresponds that arises from carrying out new combinations (Schumpeter 2004). As such Schumpeter’s entrepreneurial profits differs from accounting profit (the surplus of receipts over expenses) or economic profit (the measure of value creation). Explicitly including innovation as a part of the definition allows the researcher to draw a distinction between a business and an entrepreneurship.

Success occurs when an event takes place that accomplishes its intended purpose (Miller et al. 2006). Thus entrepreneurial action could be deemed to be successful if it accomplishes the action intended by the entrepreneur. Other measures of entrepreneurial success or successful entrepreneurial action: vary according to the phase of the entrepreneur’s life cycle (van Gelderen et al. 2006); include the range of business behaviours such as starting a business (i.e., new venture creation), innovation, business ownership, business growth and size achievement, and managing a large business (Verheul et al. 2005); are inferred through opportunity recognition and exploitation (Ardichvili et al. 2003); are evidenced through venture growth (Baum and Locke 2004). Interestingly, there is evidence in the literature that the desire for wealth is not always the dominant reason for an entrepreneur’s engagement in entrepreneurship (Alstete 2008), the attainment of wealth also being an indicator of success (McMullen and Shepherd 2006). Thus successful entrepreneurial action could be defined broadly and exclude typical business and economic measures of success such as profit and growth. Including Schumpeter’s profit as part of the definition of entrepreneurial success enables a common measure of success identifiable across all types of entrepreneurship. As such it acts as a starting point to indicate the attainment of entrepreneurial success, to which other types or measures of success can then be added.

For the purposes of this paper entrepreneurial action is any action, or decision leading to action, taken or instigated by an entrepreneur as part of the process of entrepreneurship. Evidence of the attainment of Schumpeter’s entrepreneurial profit will be used as a proxy for having achieved success, which itself could logically be said to occur as a consequence of successful entrepreneurial action.
McMullen & Shepherd’s model describes only one part of the process of entrepreneurship – the opportunity recognition process. Whilst the model contains individual level variables, as a description of a process it is largely a systems level model. Passion is a wholly individual level phenomenon and as such is in evidence within each part of the process as well as across the process of entrepreneurship. Passion is part of behaviour not part of process, and a fuller exploration of passion in entrepreneurship requires a detailed examination at the individual level, before it’s place can be comfortably articulated within the McMullen & Shepherd model.

THE DARK SIDE OF ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Kets de Vries coined the expression the “dark side of entrepreneurship” (Kets de Vries 1985) to encapsulate the negative or unpleasant aspects of entrepreneurship. Entrepreneurship and being an entrepreneur are held up as desirable and positive, but both have a very clear and notable dark side (Alstete 2008; Hisrich et al. 2007).

The process of entrepreneurship has been found to contribute to a diminution in psychological well being - whilst satisfying the inherent human desire for distinctiveness; entrepreneurship gives rise to a reduction in feelings of belonging, a feature of psychological well-being (Shepherd and Haynie Forthcoming). The interface between family, play and work can be blurred by an inability to separate the areas or by a feeling that the work is itself such a source of personal reward that they are disinclined to separate the boundaries (Bird 1989; Kraar and Rea 1985) and consequently behaviour exhibited by entrepreneurs has been described as “Type A” or ‘heart-attack prone’ (Begley and Boyd 1985). The intense pressures linked to uncertainty are constantly spoken of in the writings on entrepreneurship, the implication being that these pressures and uncertainties are experienced intensely and personally by the entrepreneur, and to a far greater extent that would be experienced by a manager or a non-founder of a business (Branzei and Zeitsma 2004). The entrepreneur invests of themselves so heavily in their business that they identify closely with it, and thus the ups and downs of the business are identified with the entrepreneur’s own sense of self (Cardon et al. Forthcoming; Cardon et al. 2005). For example the bankruptcy of a business can be so personally and intensely felt that it leads to a process of grieving (Shepherd 2004) akin to that experienced through the loss of a loved one.

There is suggestion that the early life or socialisation experiences of entrepreneurs contribute to their pursuit of entrepreneurship (Goss 2005; Kets de Vries 2001; Krueger 2007; Langan-Fox 2005) that these experiences equip a person with some or all of the skills and motivations to engage in entrepreneurship. These early experiences could form a dark wellspring in which sadness, anxiety, deprivation or disadvantage evidenced in patterns of security and insecurity (Collins et al. 1964), difficult relationships with parents (Kets de Vries 1996), or financial, physical or emotional deprivation (Bird 1989) contribute to capacity for later entrepreneurial behaviour. It is acknowledged that entrepreneurs display behaviours that differentiate them from others (Baron 1998) and there appear to be personality characteristics or traits particular those who engage in entrepreneurial activity (Baron 2002; Korunka et al. 2003; Nicolaou et al. 2008; Shane 2008). Recently it has been suggested that both sociological and biological factors combine to influences entrepreneurial behaviour (White et al. 2007).

It is suggested that entrepreneurial passion represents another example of the dark side of entrepreneurship, and that passion derives from a combination of socialization experiences and particular personality characteristics or traits.

EMOTION AND PASSION IN THE ENTREPRENEURSHIP LITERATURE

In whatever manner emotion is experienced by the entrepreneur, or operationalised by the entrepreneurship scholar, there is no doubt that new venture creation involves intensely emotional experiences (Bird 1989 p. 187). We know from past research and from the anecdotes of entrepreneurs that it is their passion that sustains them through the turbulent process of opportunity recognition, and venture creation and exploitation – the fire in the belly that makes the improbable possible (Smilor 1997). Entrepreneurs are described as being passionately committed to their ventures (Bradley et al. 2008; Branzei and Zeitsma 2004) and metaphors used to describe the relationship between the
entrepreneur and their business include those of romance, love, and passion (Ashton and O’Toole 1999; Cardon et al. 2005; Dodd 2002).

The role of passion and emotion in decision-making has been explored with varying results. Support is found for the contention that passions impact decision making in the face of negative outcomes (Vallerand et al. 2003); both positive and negative emotions can impact decision making; and baseless or well founded overconfidence can impact on venture failure or success (Sundararajan and Corbett 2006). Confidence has been described as an “emotion of assured expectation” that encourages action and may moderate the influence of other emotions (Brundin et al. 2008).

Passion’s impact on motivation shows similarly mixed results – it is the one variable that impacts positively on venture growth (Shane et al. 2003), its impact is indirect through non-trait mechanisms such as goals, self-efficacy and vision (Baum and Locke 2004), counter intuitively there is only an indirect link between passion and self-efficacy not a direct link to intentions and its antecedents (desirability and feasibility) (Brannback et al. 2006); emotions shape the entrepreneurial motivations that lead to entrepreneurial behaviour (Goss 2008); particularly when the entrepreneurial process is a positive one (Schindehutte et al. 2006).

Passion has been shown to have a positive effect on self-efficacy (Baum and Locke 2004; Brannback et al. 2006; Branzei and Zeitsma 2004), and in an empirical study in which it was found that emotional elements play a prominent role in entrepreneurship, ‘passion’ was one of the key criteria used by entrepreneurs to define their high performance (Schindehutte et al. 2006).

A MODEL OF PASSION FOR ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Vallerand and colleagues have proposed a new conceptualisation of passion for activities – the Dualistic Model of Passion. More recently Cardon and colleagues have produced a definition of entrepreneurial passion, which has yet to be empirically tested (Cardon et al. 2009 in press), and extends the definitional work of Vallerand et al including self-identity as a key definitional element whilst bypassing the dualistic nature of passion.

Empirical research studies by Vallerand and colleagues since 2000 have consistently demonstrated positive correlations between ‘harmonious’ passion and adaptive outcomes, and between ‘obsessive’ passion and less adaptive outcomes (Vallerand 2008). Obsessive passion could suggest a relative lack of control over the passionate activity, rigid persistence with the activity and conflicts with other activities within one’s life (Vallerand et al. 2003), yet there is also research evidence that obsessive passion facilitates success in competitive environments (Amiot et al. 2006). Informally, ‘obsession’ is a word that is often used to characterize the nature of the entrepreneur as seen in popular press articles (Allen 2008) and in web blogs (Hornik 2008).

Although Vallerand et al have conceptualised passion and tested it across a range of environments, it has not been tested in the field of entrepreneurship. Furthermore, Vallerand et al, whilst highlighting the existence of ‘obsessive passion’ are silent on how it is that people with an obsessive passion for an activity apparently continue with that activity, and are successful, despite the less adaptive outcomes that characterise obsessive passion.

Scholars in the field have responded positively to the suggestion that entrepreneurship research focus on answering three key questions (Alvarez 2005; Baron 2006; Gartner 2008; Harper 2008; Hindle 2004; Hisrich et al. 2007; McMullen et al. 2007; Mitchell et al. 2005; Shepherd and DeTienne 2005): "(1) Why, when, and how opportunities for the creation of goods and services come into existence; (2) why, when, and how some, people and not others discover and exploit these opportunities; and (3) why, when, and how different modes of action are used to exploit entrepreneurial opportunities" (Shane and Venkataraman 2000). The study of the obsessive passion of entrepreneurs is important as it may contribute towards understanding why, when, and how some people and not others discover and exploit entrepreneurial opportunities.

Dualistic Model of Passion

In Vallerand’s Dualistic Model of Passion, passion for the activity becomes a central feature of the individual’s identity and is one of two distinct types of passion.
Obsessive passion entails a relative lack of control over the passionate activity, rigid persistence with the activity and conflicts with other activities within one’s life (Vallerand et al. 2003). However, all is not negative for obsessive passion, as Vallerand suggests that obsessive passion may also give rise to positive outcomes, since it promotes persistence and long-term commitment to the activity (Vallerand et al. 2003).

Through research Vallerand and others have shown that harmonious and obsessive passion have different outcomes that enhance and detract from the quality of life for an individual, sometimes directly sometimes indirectly. For example, harmonious passion facilitates positive emotions and Fredrickson’s research (1998, 2001, 2003) cited in Vallerand 2003 shows positive emotions broaden people’s thought-action repertoires leading to the use of more adaptive behaviours. Obsessive passion can lead to engagement in risky behaviours such as cyclists riding on ice covered roads the Canadian winter and dancers continuing to dance whilst injured leading to the prospect of chronic injury (Vallerand 2008; Vallerand et al. 2003). Obsessive passion may facilitate psychological adjustment in competitive arenas and not facilitate it in less competitive arenas (Amiot et al. 2006).

To date the dualistic model of passion has not been investigated in entrepreneurship studies, nonetheless scholars have noted Vallerand’s work on obsessive passion (Brannback et al. 2006; Cardon 2008), suggesting it may be interesting to examine this model with respect to passion in entrepreneurship (Murnieks 2007).

Passion and the Entrepreneur

Vallerand et al identify individuals with an obsessive passion as having ego-invested self-structures, displaying a rigid persistence towards their passionate activity, and consequently experience sub-optimal functioning within that activity and when they are prevented from engaging in that activity (Vallerand et al. 2007). They engage in the passionate activity because they both like the activity and feel compelled to engage in it. Vallerand and colleagues find that obsessively passionate people are controlled by their passion, must let the passion run its course, and that the passionate activity takes up a disproportionate space in their identify. They suggest that such pressured engagement in the activity should interfere with an both ability to focus on the task at hand and positive affect; should facilitate negative affect during task engagement and lead to negative emotions when engagement in the activity is terminated; make it difficult to disengage from thinking about the activity and lead to persistent engagement in the activity in the face of important personal costs such as damaged relationships, failed work commitments and lack of positive emotions (Vallerand et al. 2007).

In an almost diametrically opposed summary, Vallerand and colleagues have found that individuals with a harmonious passion for their activity freely choose to do the activity, are open to positive experiences through the integration of the activity with other activities in their lives, are more flexible in their task engagement and thus experience better concentration, positive affect, absorption and flow whilst engaged in the activity. They suggest the control such individuals experience over their activity leads to flexible persistence, persisting in the passionate activity only if positive returns are expected, and cessation of the activity when conditions become negative (Vallerand et al. 2007).

Passion is dualistic: harmonious passion would lead to disengagement in the face of less adaptive outcomes. It is suggested that it is the obsessive nature of the entrepreneur’s passion that enables them to continue in the face of uncertainty and despite less adaptive outcomes they experience as part of the process of entrepreneurship.

Obsession’s Place in Entrepreneurial Action

Obsession has long been recognized as having a place in, and being a feature of, entrepreneurial action (Bird 1989; Collins et al. 1964; Timmons et al. 1990). The term “obsessive” has a pejorative meaning, and its connotation in common usage is not entirely consistent with the clinical definitions of obsession – “intrusive, repetitive thoughts, images or impulses that are unacceptable and/or unwanted and give rise to subjective resistance...” (Rachman 1997). Dictionary definitions for “obsession” include an unhealthy and compulsive preoccupation with something or someone (Miller et al. 2006). In common usage, the term “obsession” is linked with meanings to do with persistent inflexible following of a course of action or view; a description of the level of focus and commitment exemplified by athletics,
musicians, and others who through perseverance, repetitious training and/or extreme effort attain the 
elite levels of their activity; and implicit in its use is an association with some form of personal,
physical or mental hardship, pain or sacrifice undertaken in order to, and as a trade-off for, achieving 
the upper echelons of success.

Many individuals display to varying extents obsessive behaviour without being obsessive to the point 
of having a personality disorder, and obsessions are thought to contribute to the normal repertoire of human behaviour (Mudrake 2004). “Obsessive” is a term well suited to describing the entrepreneur – 
that Schumpeterian heroic figure with the will to found a private kingdom, captain industry, destroy old patterns of thought and action in order to create new ones (Schumpeter 2004) whilst experiencing 
the evident downsides of entrepreneurship.

Kets de Vries observes that individuals need to commit to issues and actions that are subjectively 
valuable and have a positive impact, and that true meaning is derived only from commitments to particular emotionally invested objectives and causes and it is these that drive a person to transcend their own abilities (Kets de Vries 2001). The process of successful entrepreneurship is clearly a process in which the individual must transcend his or her own abilities in order to create and exploit the opportunity successfully. Thus, it is the emotional investment in the opportunity, then venture, that gives the entrepreneur’s life meaning and we suggest that it is the pursuit of this meaning that stimulates the entrepreneur’s obsessive passion and thereby continued entrepreneurial action.

Obsessive passion may be the source of both positive and negative outcomes for entrepreneurs both personally and through their ventures. The negative outcomes, the dark side of obsessive passion, might include poor or less effective personal relationships, engaging in risky/ineffectual business decisions, ill health, business failure and the subsequent problems and issues arising from business failures. However, obsessive passion may also be a requirement for success in highly competitive business environments and, based on anecdote, is likely to be the type of passion that sustains both the entrepreneur and the venture. How can it be that the obsessively passionate entrepreneur can continue to be successful despite the obvious dark side of that passion?

**Moderating Obsessive Passion**

There are entrepreneurs in whom observers could suggest the dark side of obsessive passion is evident yet the entrepreneur is both personally and entrepreneurially successful, and those whose experience of the dark side creates obvious difficulties. It is suggested that one moderator of the dark side of obsessive passion is the capacity of the entrepreneur for self-reflection and insight.

Self-reflection is the inspection and evaluation of one’s thoughts, feelings and behaviours, and insight is the clarity of understanding of one’s thoughts, feelings and behaviour, both are central to self regulation of behaviours (Roberts and Stark 2008). It is suggest that the combination of (1) self-reflection will enable an entrepreneur to: have an awareness of their own performance, that of other others and capacity to reflect on both in order to make appropriate judgements; and (2) insight will enable the entrepreneur to integrate theory and experience into their own entrepreneurial activities (Roberts and Stark 2008); thus through self-regulation be willing to, and act to, improve their own performance. That is, the entrepreneur who exhibits self-reflection and insight is able to recognise and take action to moderate the negative effects of obsessive passion. Those who are low on self-reflection and insight would be unable to moderate the negative effects of obsessive passion and the maladaptive outcomes they experience may well be personally or in a business sense catastrophic for them.

**CONCLUSION**

The literature gives clear support to the idea that passion and emotion have a place within entrepreneurship. In particular entrepreneurial passion is seen as a motivating intense emotion, not under the control of the individual, which facilitates entrepreneurial action often through cognitive processes, and could moderate uncertainty. An argument can be advanced to suggest that passion exists within the desirability constructs of the McMullen & Shepherd model, but it may emanate from a combination of early life experiences coupled with particular personality traits. Furthermore, passion is dualistic in nature. It can be suggested that an obsessive passion could: compensate for lack of knowledge; shape motivation; overcome doubt thus leaving an actor willing to accept the perceived
uncertainty inherent in the entrepreneurial action; and be a prerequisite for the attainment of successful entrepreneurial action.

Thus we suggest that obsessive passion is the right passion for the entrepreneur. It facilitates the entrepreneur continuing in the face of the highs and lows, stressors and strains, costs, demands and sacrifices required in exploiting an entrepreneurial opportunity. However, it is the entrepreneurs with the capacity for self-reflection and insight who are most likely to be able to moderate the dark side of obsessive passion, and so enable the achievement of successful entrepreneurial action. Further research is needed to examine the nature of entrepreneurial passion. We may find that moderated obsessive passion is good for business, and exactly what we need to see in our entrepreneurs.

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