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The great pretending: artistic logic for entrepreneurial action

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The great pretending: artistic logic for entrepreneurial action

Abstract

Purpose: We propose an *artistic logic* of entrepreneurial action whereby individuals undertake entrepreneurial acts even without entrepreneurial intentions, creating a pretended reality through performance-like processes. We explore how these actions impact real-world entrepreneurship, challenging conventional venture creation and evaluation paradigms.

Methodology: *Artistic logic* is developed and illustrated through an in-depth analysis of a qualitative case study of a pretend airline employing a constructivist-interpretive approach.

Findings: We identify four dimensions of *artistic logic* in entrepreneurial action, which underscore the capacity of artistic entrepreneurial performances to simulate real entrepreneurial experiences: leveraging a socio-economic situation, building an evocative image of a venture, attracting engagement, and pretending.

Originality: Framing entrepreneurial action within the context of performance art as *artistic logic* bridges theoretical gaps between creativity, subversion, and entrepreneurship, offering a novel perspective on venture simulation, creation, and opportunity evaluation.

Introduction

In 2019, WOW Air, Iceland's only low-fare airline, went bankrupt. In the wake of this, several enigmatic entrepreneurs promised to establish new airlines, but nothing happened. Then, out of the blue, MOM Air announced its entry with audacious promises that attracted immediate attention. Its website conveyed a radical low-fare strategy, making all services on board optional, including toilet paper, hand soap, and life jackets; it offered free seat cancellations and two free seats on every flight. MOM Air also pledged to gender equality and a greener future. The logo was a cheeky nod to WOW Air, with the name and logo flipped upside down and a gallery of visual designs that resembled the fallen airline. In a whirlwind fortnight, about 10,000 bookings rolled in, social media buzzed with 15,000 followers, several influencers and suppliers were eager to collaborate, and local and international media enthusiastically reported on MOM Air. After two weeks of intense speculation, MOM Air was revealed as an artistic happening.

The MOM Air (hereafter, MOM) story enabled both its instigator and the wider public to experience what it is like to launch an airline. While the entrepreneurial intention was pretended, the experience it generated was real. The story illustrates a shift for entrepreneur and venture from abstract functions to concrete experiences. In functional terms, entrepreneur refers to a distinct role within the economic system (Kirzner, 2009) related to introducing future products and services (Venkataraman, 1997). Similarly, we can describe pilots as flying airplanes. In experiential terms, entrepreneur conveys what being an entrepreneur is like, i.e., making decisions under uncertainty (McMullen and Shepherd, 2006) or dealing with resource

constraints (Baker and Nelson, 2005). Similarly, being a pilot entails operating the cockpit and coping with the vagaries of air space.

Experience is an indelible part of being; sometimes, one must experience something before becoming it, e.g. flying a plane before one becomes a pilot. A flight simulator creates such an experience—a cockpit with real sensations (of turbulence, sudden loss of altitude, nosedive, etc.) that trigger real emotions (stress, anxiety, fear, etc.). This poses interesting questions for entrepreneurship scholars: (1) can one experience being an entrepreneur before one becomes an entrepreneur? (2) can people experience a venture before it is launched?

In exploring these questions, we propose a new *artistic logic* of entrepreneurship as a way of evoking entrepreneurial experience and, in turn, influencing entrepreneurial thinking and acting more holistically. Artistic logic conveys that people can perform entrepreneurial acts, pretending to be entrepreneurs without necessarily having entrepreneurial intentions. In this way, they create a simulated, subverted reality in which people experience a suggested alternative verity and react in real ways. Such logic operates in the spirit of sensible foolishness or playfulness as “*the deliberate, temporary relaxation of rules in order to explore the possibilities of alternative rules*” (March, 1971, p. 261). It shares the logic of art and fictional discourse, whereby the utterance act is real, but the illocutionary act is pretended (Searle, 1975). One can perform simpler actions constituting a complex action and pretend to be performing the complex action. Not privy to the pretence, an observer is subverted into experiencing and reacting to the complex action.

We illustrate the artistic logic of entrepreneurial action with a deep dive into the MOM case introduced above. Our analysis highlights how MOM’s instigator created a venture experience with global impact and offers three important implications for entrepreneurship theory. First, through its impact, an artistic logic of entrepreneurship highlights the productive role that art can play in entrepreneurship, including pretending, subversion, and playfulness. Second, our

work shows that leveraging artistic logic can enhance preparation for entrepreneurship, making its imaginary ends tangible and thus an effective source of learning. This can be particularly relevant for first-time entrepreneurs. Artistic, entrepreneurial performance can help simulate real experiences. In this way, one can experience and learn from the “buzz” of entrepreneurship before taking the plunge. Third, our work helps expand the notion and practice of prototyping from the relatively narrow setting of product development to the broader scope of an entire venture. Unlike a prototype serving as a temporary object for the development of a new product (Beltagui *et al.*, 2023), MOM simulated an entire venture, not just its individual elements. This type of simulation prototyping can provide valuable signals for the feasibility of venture ideas, enabling testing the totality of their conditions. Such insights directly impact venture creation and pedagogy.

Theoretical background

James March’s (1971) seminal work challenged traditional decision-making by advocating for a degree of *foolishness* to spur creativity and innovation, a fresh perspective on entrepreneurial activities (Packard, 2017). Recent research in entrepreneurship has expanded to include social context and impacts, moving beyond profit motives (Steyaert and Hjorth, 2006; Welter and Gartner, 2016), criticizing the narrow focus on high-growth ventures (Welter *et al.*, 2017), and recognizing the value of *everyday entrepreneurship* and diverse approaches (Dilli *et al.*, 2018). Entrepreneurship has been likened to art, as both benefit from diversity, imagination, social experimentation, and subversion (Scherdin and Zander, 2011; Bureau and Zander, 2014). Building on these insights, our study views entrepreneurship as a performative, iterative activity that, like art, can have subversive real effects. We draw on the logic of fictional utterances to propose an artistic logic of entrepreneurship, where one enacts a pretended situation that produces real (subversive) impacts.

The role and art of subversion in entrepreneurship

A growing stream of research draws on the fields of art, artists, and artistic processes to provide insights into entrepreneurship (Callander and Cummings, 2020). Creating art—namely, developing ideas into tangible objects or observable actions and convincing an audience of their value—captures the essence of entrepreneurship (Scherdin and Zander, 2011). This analogy highlights the similar roles that entrepreneurs and artists play when working to manifest their visions in ways that resonate with others (Kackovic and Wijnberg, 2022; see also Werthes *et al.*, 2017 on the entrepreneurial identities of artists). These parallels emphasise that entrepreneurial activity is not only driven by profit but is also deeply entwined with social creativity, as Hjorth and Holt (2016) illustrate through the example of Ai Weiwei. Similarly, social and artistic traits and expressions are elementary attributes of creative entrepreneurship (Chen and Tseng, 2021). The notion of *artistic entrepreneuring* thus emphasises that art and entrepreneurship share a propensity for social experimentation (Holm and Beyes, 2022). This perspective resonates with various art practices such as poetry, visual arts, and processes like imagination, enriching the understanding of entrepreneurship through art practice and theory. Art can induce emotions and galvanise its audience (Nummenmaa and Hari, 2023). In practical terms, art and artefacts can shift context and challenge habitual ways of being, working, and organising to evoke new distinctions and insights (Barry and Meisiek, 2010; Beltagui *et al.*, 2023).

Subversion, a concept integral in the arts, has remained under-explored in entrepreneurship studies. However, in light of Schumpeter's (1942) *creative destruction*, entrepreneurship is akin to a subversive activity with the potential to undermine current situations and introduce something different (Bureau, 2013; Smilor, 1997). Art and entrepreneurship arguably share subversion and resistance as core aspects (Bureau and Zander, 2014; Kauppinen and Daskalaki, 2015). This interest in subversion in entrepreneurship conveys curiosity about boundaries and

the ability to move beyond them, to imagine and actualise something new. Subversion has thus been associated with an activist approach to entrepreneurship—an imaginative practice that thrives on ambiguity, is tied to social practice and performance, produces emotional perceptions, and challenges existing representations and expectations (Bureau, 2013; Bureau and Zander, 2014; Kauppinen and Daskalaki, 2015).

A performance of subversion and resistance in the arts is sometimes called *culture jamming*. It involves disrupting aspects of culture and markets by playfully acting on media culture, expectations, and established institutions (DeLaure and Fink, 2017). Culture jamming tactically utilises fake advertisements, bogus news stories, pastiches of company logos and labels, and social media. While the activity is intentionally subversive and critical, it can reveal and bring attention to new entrepreneurial opportunities (Carducci, 2006). Famous examples of culture jamming include the French *Situationists International* and *Yes Men*. Both groups have stimulated entrepreneurship research and an interest in the arts (Dey and Mason, 2017; Marcy, 2015).

Dey and Mason (2017) develop the concept of *possible worlds* based on the subversive actions of the activist group *Yes Men*. The group distributed bogus but convincing editions of the *New York Times* with provocative news, such as a new maximum wage law passed by the US Congress. The authors describe this as disruptive truth-telling—a fictive but reimagined reality challenging the limits of collective imagination while envisioning new paradigms aligned differently with societal interests.

Similarly, entrepreneurs can use *fabulation* – a fictional, narrative expression of imagination and creativity - to move beyond the limits of experience and create new opportunities, attracting resources and engagement to bring new possibilities to life (Hjorth (2007; 2013). Such an ability to ‘charge’ an entrepreneurial situation by creating a story, a vision, or an image that attracts

collaboration lies at the core of leading an entrepreneurial and innovative process (Hjorth and Gartner, 2012).

The origin of entrepreneurship is often shrouded in mystery and frequently subject to *post hoc* rationalisation. It may be more about what an entrepreneur has and does than where exactly she wants to go (Sarasvathy, 2001). Building on existing means, she then acts “as if” a possible outcome will be successful (Gartner *et al.*, 1992). This can involve communication and the presentation of incomplete prototypes or mock-ups (Beltagui *et al.*, 2023), aimed at attaining legitimacy through the sense that things are more developed than they are. In acting “as if” something imagined is real, the entrepreneur may begin taking such reality as true. The underlying pretence or non-seriousness creates a subversive and even deceptive effect of an imagined reality but arguably has become an accepted practice in entrepreneurship (Wood *et al.*, 2022).

Subversion in entrepreneurship, much like in the arts, involves a creative disruption of existing structures to make space for new ideas and opportunities. Through tactics like culture jamming, imaginative performance, incomplete prototypes, and fabulation, entrepreneurs can challenge the status quo, generate new visions, and mobilise resources to bring those visions to life.

Fiction and performance in venturing

Simulating the experience of a venture launch calls for going through motions that are indistinguishable from a real launch, just as the motions of a trainee pilot in a flight simulator are indistinguishable from those of a pilot in a real cockpit. For the totality of the activity, we can say that it is simulated or pretended. While an actor can say, “I am launching a venture” or “I am flying an airplane,” there is a sense in which these statements are fictitious.

The analytical framework of fiction as a particular illocutionary act has found fruitful applications in business settings, helping illuminate the reality of organisations (Savage *et al.*,

2018) and of entrepreneurial visions (Liuberté and Dimov, 2021). It arises from a seminal idea in language philosophy that what we say is performative in nature (Austin, 1962). Indeed, much of what entrepreneurs do involves speech: they talk about what they aim to do and the future they seek to bring about (Dimov, 2020). In sayings, we can distinguish: (1) propositional content (utterance or locution—what the speaker is talking about); (2) illocutionary force, or to what purpose the speaker deploys their speech (Searle, 1969), such as state, ask, promise, express or declare something (Searle, 1979); and (3) perlocutionary force, reflecting the intention of the speaker to produce certain feelings, thoughts, or actions in the audience (Austin, 1962).

The distinction between serious and fictional utterances is of particular interest, whereby the latter involves pretending to perform a series of illocutionary acts (Searle, 1975). In complex, higher-order actions that entail simpler constitutive parts, one can pretend to perform the complex action by performing the simpler constitutive parts. For example, a child sitting in the driver's seat of a car and saying, "I am driving the car," while turning the wheel and pushing the pedals (actions that are constitutive of driving a vehicle) is seen as pretending to be driving the car, despite their proclamation and actions being real. In this regard, the utterance act is real, but the illocutionary act is pretended (Searle, 1975).

Words can have their ordinary meaning in a fictional story, but the rules used to determine their meaning are not necessarily complied with. Thus, the assertion "the plane landed at JFK airport on 15 January 2012", when used in a newspaper article, would prompt people to expect facts that substantiate its truth, but when used in a fictional story, it does not imply that any such thing happened in the real world. What distinguishes fiction from lies is "*the existence of a separate set of conventions which enables the author to go through the motions of making statements which he knows to be not true even though he has no intention to deceive*" (Searle, 1979, p.67).

Plays are fascinating examples of pretence in that playwrights pretend while providing instructions, akin to writing a recipe. Thus, while a fictional story is a pretended representation of a situation, a play is not a pretended representation but the pretended state of affairs itself, with the actors pretending to be its characters (Searle, 1975). A good play subverts the spectators' world by transporting them into the pretended world of the play, whereby they temporarily forget about the world outside of the play.

Venture creation is a complex action with many simpler constitutive parts—engaging customers, creating a website, deploying payment interfaces, etc. This enables one to claim, “I am starting a new venture,” and to engage in lower-level actions, such as creating a website and creating brand collateral while pretending to be starting a venture. The utterances and actions are real, but the illocutionary act behind them is pretended. In this sense, one can pretend to act entrepreneurially (act “as if”) to create new simulated, immersive realities that elicit actual audience responses. One does this by engaging in a fictional utterance, whereby one enacts a pretended situation, similar to a play, without an intent to deceive.

In its most transformative sense, (artistic) pretence in venturing can have as its perlocutionary effect the creation of an immersive, simulated reality that, in effect, subverts the audience's current reality. The artistic venturing performance thus becomes a vehicle that transports individuals into an alternate reality, where they may vividly experience a different world. In such an enactment of a pretended reality, usual norms and expectations are suspended. The simulated experience is a creative act of imagination, where participants engage in a form of play, enacting scenarios and roles that might radically differ from their everyday experiences. This performative aspect of artistic logic underscores its power, not just as a tool for critique or dissent but as a means of imaginative exploration, where the boundaries of reality are stretched to envision new ways of being and thinking. Artistic logic thus creates a context for experiential learning (Kolb, 1984; Motta and Galina, 2023) and practice-based learning (Neck *et al.*, 2014;

Neck and Corbett, 2018), which have gained prominence in cultivating an entrepreneurial mindset and skills through entrepreneurial practice and learning by doing.

Method and data

A qualitative case study of the MOM phenomenon was conducted using a constructive-interpretive approach. This approach positions researchers as the primary instrument of data collection and analysis, allowing them to co-construct meaning and understanding through an inductive investigative strategy (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016; Yin, 2018).

Primary and secondary data were collected and analysed. Semi-structured interviews were the main data source (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2014). The interviewing drew on Spradley's (1979) guidance for ethnographic interviewing, using a combination of descriptive, structural, and contrasting questions to elicit interviewees' experiences and views. The questions focused on how individuals encountered, reacted to, and engaged with MOM.

Data collection

Using a strategy of purposeful or theoretical sampling (Eisenhardt, 1989; Miles and Huberman, 1994), interviewees were identified based on information from MOM's instigator (the "artpreneur") and were people he had interacted with during the happening or had expressed interest in MOM. These included suppliers, journalists, social media influencers, and people knowledgeable about aviation, including senior industry managers and CEOs.

Twenty interviews were conducted a few months after the MOM happening (see Table I), recorded, transcribed verbatim, coded, and analysed. Additionally, one of the authors had several informal conversations with the artpreneur to gather more details about, e.g., background and context, and specific events and perspectives that came up in the interviews.

Prospective interviewees were contacted via email or messaging, and about half agreed to participate. Most interviews were conducted in person, except for two held online, typically within two weeks of initial contact. The semi-structured interview protocol allowed for questions to be adapted as needed, with follow-up questions added for clarification or when unexpected information arose.

A consistent interviewing structure was followed. After providing their consent, interviewees were then asked to describe their background and occupation briefly, followed by questions about how they learned about MOM and their initial reactions to the happening. If the interviewee had interacted directly with MOM, they were asked to describe the interaction in as much detail as possible and to reflect on the experience. Questions also related to interactions with other people regarding MOM, how the reactions of others were perceived, and how believable MOM was compared to other local entrepreneurial aviation ventures. Finally, informants were asked to reflect on the connection between art and entrepreneurship and how MOM might have influenced their views.

| Pseudonym | Age | Gender | Occupation |
|------------------|------------|---------------|--|
| Charles | 40-49 | M | Aviation Professional (Senior Manager) |
| David | 40-49 | M | Aviation Professional (Pilot) |
| Eric | 60-79 | M | Aviation Professional (Senior Manager) |
| Harry | 50-69 | M | Aviation Professional (Senior Manager) |
| Scott | 50-59 | M | Aviation Professional (Senior Manager) |
| Vincent | 40-49 | M | Aviation Professional (Lawyer) |
| Linda | 60-69 | F | Aviation Professional (Senior Manager) |
| Ian | 50-59 | M | Journalist |
| Paul | 30-39 | M | Journalist |
| Richard | 20-29 | M | Journalist |
| Scott | 30-39 | M | Journalist |
| Tyler | 20-29 | M | Influencer |
| Beth | 40-49 | F | Entrepreneur (Marketing Professional) |
| Winston | 20-29 | M | Influencer |
| Arthur | 20-29 | M | Influencer/Entrepreneur |
| Sandra | 20-29 | F | Influencer |
| Blake | 30-39 | M | Supplier (Marketing Professional) |
| Ingmar | 40-49 | M | Supplier/Entrepreneur (Marketing Professional) |
| Gavin | 40-49 | M | Supplier/Entrepreneur/Influencer |
| The artpreneur | 40-49 | M | Artist/Entrepreneur |

Table I: List of interviewees

MOM made over 150 media appearances (Friðriksson, 2023). Secondary sources that emerged during the two weeks of the MOM happening were gathered and included in the analysis (see Table II).

| Source | Quantity |
|--|----------------------------|
| Nationwide radio interviews with the artpreneur during the MOM Air happening | 2 live interviews |
| Radio reports of MOM Air during the happening | 2 |
| Online national news about MOM Air | 20 |
| Online international news about MOM Air | 50 |
| Job applications to MOM Air | 36 |
| Social media statistics | 2 MOM Air profiles |
| Online complaints to MOM Air | 185 |
| Social media profiles | 2 (Instagram and Facebook) |
| List of email registrations on MOM Air's website | 860 |
| Press conference participant list | 25 registered participants |
| Selected emails to and from MOM Air | 49 |

Table II: Secondary data sources

Data Analysis

Inductive thematic analysis is an effective methodology for recognising common patterns within qualitative data (Bell *et al.*, 2022). After familiarising themselves with the data, using NVivo software, the researchers generated initial codes inductively and in close alignment with the informants' terms (Saldana, 2021). Afterwards, an abductive approach was applied to develop themes, combining the assorted codes into potential themes and considering the data and theoretical abstractions to gain insights into the unfolding phenomena. The researchers then evaluated these themes relative to the coded extracts and the entire data set (Bell *et al.*, 2022).

The third step involved creating aggregate dimensions as categories for two or more themes (Eisenhardt, 1989; Gioia *et al.*, 2013). Again, this involved an iterative process moving back and forth between the data, the coded extracts, and the thematic analysis. The final stage entailed refining the aggregate themes and the overall narrative (Saldana, 2021). The results of this analytical process are illustrated in Figure 1.

MOM – "The future of flying?"¹

On November 5, 2020, national and international media outlets received a press release about MOM, a new low-cost airline. Concurrently, a website and social media profiles were launched, quickly gaining widespread attention (Íslandsstofa, 2021)². This occurred approximately 18 months after WOW Air's bankruptcy.

MOM promoted all onboard services as optional, including meals, reading materials, electric charging, internet, luggage space, toilet paper, hand soap, seat selection, and life jackets. Reacting to the Covid pandemic, it offered Covid and non-Covid flights. The airline's booking system claimed to offer unprecedented flexibility. Passengers could cancel or change flights at short notice without cost. To fill vacant airplane seats, customers could sign up for a given period and destination and receive a notification, at short notice, if seats would become available. MOM also promoted gender equality, emphasising opportunities for women to become pilots and managers. It claimed it would offset carbon emissions, operate environmentally friendly aircraft and a paperless business.

The initial press release was anonymous. However, after an error on MOM's website, journalists suspected art student Odee's involvement. Odee initially denied it, but a couple of days later, he admitted to representing a group behind MOM and became its public face. He conducted multiple media interviews and negotiated with suppliers and social media influencers, before calling a press conference, revealing MOM as an artistic happening.

¹ (Buckley, 2020)

² By July 2021, the online readership of content involving MOM was close to 1 billion views, and a CNN report from December that year, discussing MOM, had 270 million views (<https://edition.cnn.com/travel/article/winter-aviation-covid-airlines/index.html>, accessed 25/03/2024; Íslandsstofa, 2021).

During the two weeks from November 5 to 19, MOM received approximately 10,000 booking requests, 185 complaints, 15,000 social media followers, 36 job applications, and collaborated with several suppliers and social media influencers, engaging people worldwide.

Findings – dimensions of artistic logic of entrepreneurial action

This research aims to theorise an artistic logic of entrepreneurial action. Four aggregate dimensions (see Figure 1) are developed, drawing on the empirical case. Entrepreneurship is situated and enacted in a local context, and the first dimension, *leveraging a socioeconomic situation*, emphasises sensing a transient social situation and addressing its challenges. The second dimension, *building an evocative image of a venture*, complements the first, involving an imaginative organisation of symbols and utterances simulating the central aspects of the whole venture. This includes visual and operational representations supporting a distinct value proposition. The third dimension, *attracting engagement*, underlines how different actors get drawn into the (pretended) venture and actively co-create the entrepreneurial performance. An entrepreneur's proactiveness and responsiveness play an important role in this respect, and so does the ability to motivate collaboration and spur excitement. The fourth and final aggregate dimension is *pretending*, which highlights the role of pretence in creating space for (foolish) radical experimenting. The MOM case demonstrates a surprising tolerance for pretence and excitement about the experimentation it enables.

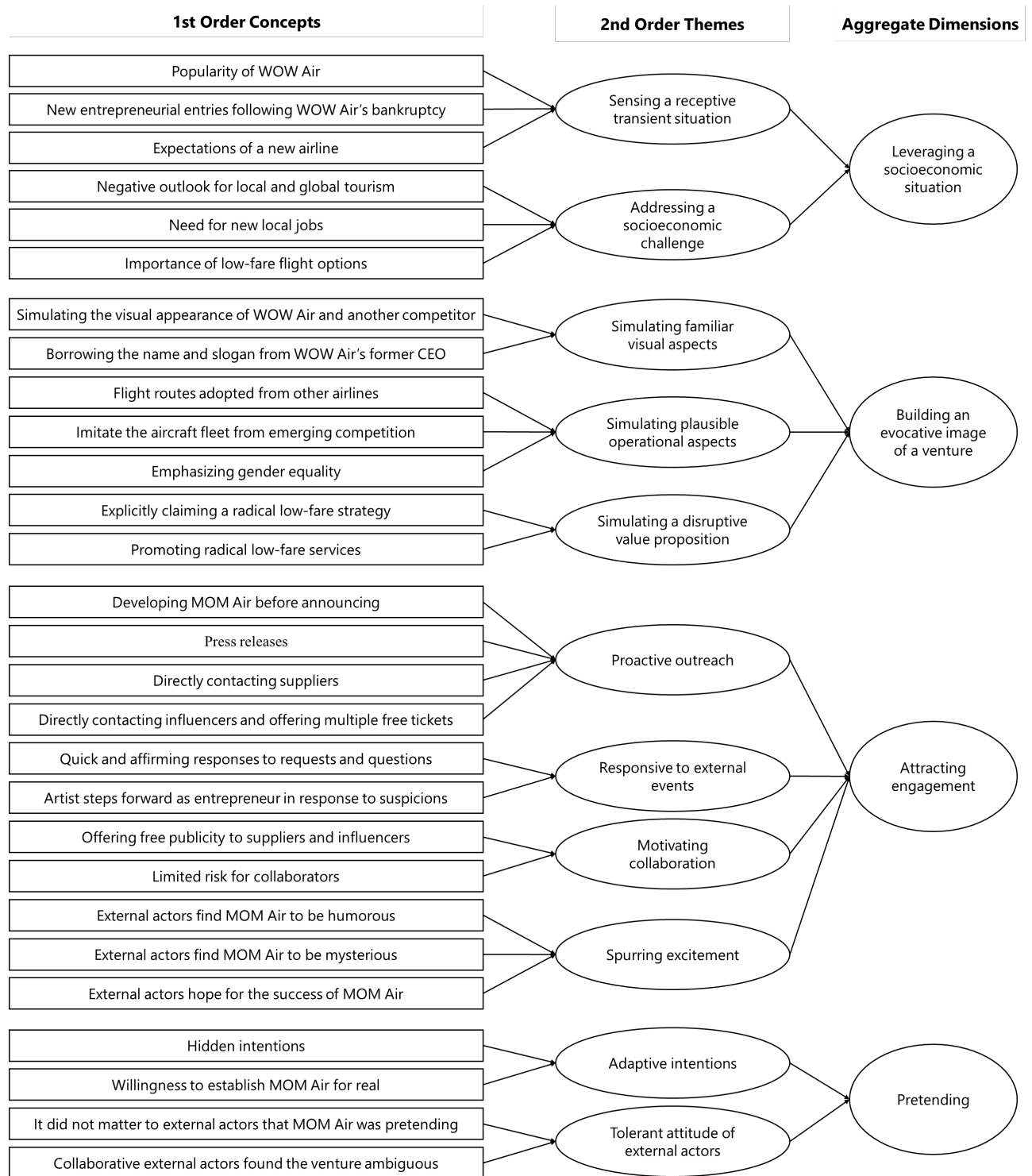


Figure 1: Data Structure

Leveraging a socioeconomic situation

MOM demonstrates entrepreneurial leveraging of a socioeconomic situation, showing sensitivity to circumstances receptive to MOM's approach and value proposal. The emergence

of MOM followed the bankruptcy of WOW Air, and *"[it was] the perfect timing"* for the new venture, as Gavin explains. WOW Air had received significant attention in national media since it was established. In less than seven years, WOW grew to transport over 3.4 million passengers, employed 1500 people during its peak (Arnarson, 2018), and its flamboyant CEO became a media darling. Towards the end, the media closely followed the company's struggle for survival until it finally went bankrupt. *"There was national grief when WOW Air fell,"* Paul recalls. Jobs were lost, and the availability of affordable flights shrunk significantly. The Icelandic government expressed concerns about the economic implications and the impact on the country's growing tourism industry.

Several initiatives were formed in response to WOW Air's collapse, and according to Charles: *"It was a kind of circus [following] WOW. ...Lots of people were going to establish an airline"*. Among those were the former WOW Air CEO, an eccentric hotel investor, a group of former WOW Air employees, and a mysterious U.S. investor who bought WOW Air's bankruptcy estate. However, more than a year and a half later, none of these actors had started flying. Then, amid the COVID-19 pandemic, in late 2020, MOM was announced. Charles stressed the severity of the situation: *"The industry [was] on its knees, and [there was] an oversupply of people [and] aircraft."* Beth explained that *"[a]t this point in time, it was welcome to get positive news"*. A third interviewee, Winston, spoke more personally, explaining why he actively promoted MOM: *"I was hoping this would become something."*

Iceland's geographical location makes aviation critical. Arthur explained: *"We are a nation that cannot live without a low-fare airline"*. Correspondingly, the industry professionals interviewed agreed that there is something about aviation that attracts both local and international attention beyond other industries: *"Access to media is ludicrous"* (Charles). The MOM event leveraged this situation to its advantage.

Building an evocative image of a venture

Entrepreneurship has been described as a practice of organising under conditions of scarcity, volatility, and uncertainty. Utilising the means at hand can help devise courses of action (Sarasvathy, 2001). MOM imaginatively used various means to build a holistic, evocative image of an entrepreneurial venture, including its visual appearance, operations, and value proposition. The whole was akin to an incomplete, but evocative, prototype that created and upheld a conversation about a desirable future (Beltagui *et al.*, 2023).

A strategic approach in MOM's overall design was to borrow and reorganise visual designs, service operations, strategies of other airlines, and even utterances of industry actors, both local and international. The artpreneur described how he began building an evocative image of MOM by investigating what other airlines and entrepreneurs had done and said:

I envisioned it would be fun to enter as this character and participate in this. [...] I started researching. I reviewed interviews with [a U.S. investor]. I also [reviewed] multiple interviews with [WOW Air's former CEO]. I looked at the previous websites of [another bankrupt airline] and WOW Air [...]. I got to know the competitors and created a rough mind map where I put key [attributes] I thought were important to figure out, for example, the new company's name, the colour and logo, and promotional materials. I had to prepare a press release and a website. I needed answers regarding finances and the aircraft fleet. So yes, I made this mind map to generate answers for everything.

The artpreneur began organising and building a new venture, drawing on what he had found through background research. He emphasised vigorous visual designs for MOM's website, social media accounts, and printed flight tickets resembling WOW Air (see online appendix). The brand's colour was created by mixing WOW Air's purple brand colour with the red shade

adopted by another emerging venture, Play Airlines. The slogan “*Everyone wants to be in their mother's arms*” was a playful appropriation of an utterance from WOW Air’s former CEO. The artpreneur explains: “*I was looking at old newspaper articles where [he] said that WOW Air was actually MOM upside down, and everyone wanted to be in their mom's arms.*” Additionally, MOM’s fleet and its planned flight routes were deliberately made almost identical to WOW Air’s and those proposed by the emerging Play Airlines. All the above arguably provided familiarity and legitimacy to MOM.

The strategic positioning of MOM was to become a *super* low-fare airline, highlighting this prevailing industry logic while appropriating its most radical ideas. Almost all services were presented as extras, every flight would include two free seats allocated in a pre-flight lottery, and all available seats would be sold at a discount just before a flight. Customers could book flights without paying immediately and change flight times without additional charges. Claims were made that, with the expected brand loyalty, MOM’s plans were financially sound.

Industry experts interviewed or cited in the media did not appear to find MOM’s offerings particularly farfetched or unattainable. One expert pointed out that offering free flight seats was an idea that local actors had been contemplating. Another interviewee noted that complementary seats reminded him of marketing campaigns some airlines run regularly, where a limited number of tickets are available for a few euros. Furthermore, CNN published a story, “*The spoof airline that could actually predict the future*”, contemplating the viability of MOM’s innovative offerings (Buckley, 2020).

Adopting and reorganising some of what was already there allowed MOM to swiftly and effectively simulate an emerging business and even to *become* one (Kauppinen and Daskalaki, 2015), as discussed later. The venture's playfulness and radical value proposition created a sense of novelty and excitement, which Bureau and Zander (2014) argue are critical attributes of entrepreneurial subversion.

Attracting engagement

Entrepreneurial subversion entails collective mobilisation (Kauppinen and Dasklaki, 2015). Indeed, MOM garnered significant attention and engagement, as indicated by a survey of 217 individuals eight months later, where only 5.1% were unaware of MOM (Mar *et al.*, 2021). Within two weeks of its launch, every major national news outlet and several international outlets, such as CNN, Lonely Planet, Simple Flying, and other aviation-focused media, had covered MOM.

As discussed earlier, MOM drew attention by resonating with the local socio-economic situation through familiarity, timely challenges, and a hopeful narrative while playfully organising various means to build a holistic and evocative image of a venture. Many interactions with external actors, like suppliers, social media influencers, and journalists—who engaged with MOM soon after its announcement—were co-creational, enhancing visibility and appeal. The external actors that became stakeholders and significantly advanced MOM's emergence were not privy to the artpreneur's true intentions.

The artpreneur's social/cultural capital (Bourdieu, 2018) —he was an art student without a prominent reputation—had a limited impact on attracting engagement. Meanwhile, in the small Icelandic community, social networks typically span diverse societal layers, and the artpreneur proactively reached out to key suppliers. Furthermore, some suppliers, initially considered out of reach, approached him, including international airports offering landing slots and companies providing aircraft and cabin crews:

People always think it is strange when I say we were offered planes, [but] it [became] tangible for me. It starts as a performance. Then, there is an explosion. Then, it becomes somewhere between viable and completely absurd.

The artpreneur's general approach was to be responsive to events, to play along and act "as if" (Gartner *et al.*, 1992) MOM was real:

I was constantly reacting to what came to me. When you're offered planes and crew and various things, you respond.

In response to interest from suppliers, the artpreneur actively promoted them and their products, such as food and beverages. Supplier promotion took place, for instance, on MOM's website, on social media, in interviews, and at a press conference. Hence, despite suspicions about real intentions, suppliers were motivated to collaborate by an opportunity for visibility with MOM. One supplier, Gavin, noted: "*I thought I couldn't lose on this. At worst, it would be a joke and part of something that would [generate] visibility, which is always a positive thing*". At the same time, all interviewed suppliers appreciated the humour and playfulness of MOM, including Ingmar: "*We thought it was just such a fun phenomenon.*"

Similarly, social media influencers interacting with MOM identified and appreciated its playfulness. The artpreneur motivated the influencers by offering them attractive printed flight tickets for personal use or as giveaways. Winston promoted MOM vigorously on social media, fielding numerous inquiries about its authenticity and details. Despite growing suspicions, he maintained: "*I don't think I ever lost faith until [it was] finally announced.*" As with the suppliers, MOM actively promoted its collaboration with influencers, making them more visible and making MOM more attractive and legitimate.

As implied, MOM spurred national and even international excitement. National and international media responded quickly with reporting and questions, even though there was early suspicion that it might be a spoof (Leff, 2020; Sverrisson, 2020). The interviewees generally expressed how they found the venture exciting and humorous and hoped for its success while also finding it mysterious, e.g., by its sudden appearance, radical offerings, and

peculiar representative, the artpreneur. Radio journalists who interviewed the artpreneur on national radio were attracted to the humour and playfulness. Ian explained: "*I thought it was very amusing. Just turn the name upside down, and you have an airline!*". Yet, they perceived openness and authenticity in the communication, as Paul, the co-host, implied: "*I felt that there was a person behind it who wasn't just at work taking care of talking to the media [...] It made it more personal*".

Pretending

Pretending is intertwined with entrepreneurship (Gartner *et al.*, 1992). Entrepreneurs are usually in a weak position in terms of their means compared to other actors in a market. Jensen *et al.* (2021) even argue that “[t]he norm of entrepreneurship encourages founders to be hustlers” and opportunistic. Entrepreneurs need to persuade others to collaborate and commit resources. To these ends, they might pretend and *fabulate* to convince others of an opportunity's viability (Hjorth, 2013). MOM's artpreneur claimed to have secured funding and aircraft, MOM's website promoted advanced online flight searches, and the initial social media followers were bots (pretend users). Many of the actions of the artpreneur were indistinguishable from those of a “real” entrepreneur.

However, MOM was also a process where the intentions to establish an airline were pretended, while also fluid. Kauppinen and Daskalaki (2015) emphasise the fluidity of intentions in subversive entrepreneurship, and the artpreneur experienced changes in his intentions and self-identity:

I was affected by the stimulus [...]; I was in some kind of mania; I was just immersed in this [...]. [E]veryone wanted to jump on this train. The phone was constantly beeping, and everyone wanted plane tickets and this and that [...]. I

thought: “If I get capital, I’ll start this. Why not?” Someone must [be willing to] bring in what’s missing.

The artpreneur had become an entrepreneur for all intents and purposes, and MOM fleetingly became an emerging enterprise. He discovered that he was good at what he was doing. He was excited and wanted to extend the process indefinitely: *“I thought: ‘I can stay like this. I’ll stay CEO and Founder.’”* The move of the artpreneur—becoming—entrepreneur did not influence action but shows how pretending and acting “as if” intensified awareness of the entrepreneurial opportunity and ignited a desire and confidence to actualise the venture.

There was a remarkably relaxed attitude among the interviewees towards MOM turning out to be an artistic happening, also demonstrated by their willingness to be interviewed. Most were even proud to have been involved but claimed to have been somewhat sceptical, suspecting that the illocutionary act of MOM was pretended. Nevertheless, they engaged with MOM as if the intentions were genuine. Arguably, the above discussions outlining how MOM leveraged a socio-economic situation, built an evocative image of a venture, and attracted engagement provide further valuable insights into this aspect.

What I think was the case with most people, [...] they wanted so much that this was true they were ready to believe it. (Winston)

Discussion

In a play about an entrepreneur, while the actor is not a real entrepreneur, what is done in the play is entrepreneurial, albeit pretended. A great play engulfs the audience, making them temporarily forget that they are in a theatre and experience the (pretended) world created. When the play is taken from a theatre to real-life settings, the pretence—to which one is previously alerted by being in a theatre before it diffuses into the background during the play—is hidden

before being revealed. Thus, one can enter a theatre before one's reality is subverted by the imaginary world of the play, or one can be subverted into an imaginary world before being made aware that one is in a theatre.

We propose a distinct, *artistic logic* of entrepreneurial action, which enables experiencing and reacting to entrepreneurship's consequences unreservedly without being privy to the underlying pretence. The vivid and powerful case of MOM provides a context to identify and articulate four dimensions of artistic logic of entrepreneurial action.

The first dimension of artistic logic involves *leveraging a socioeconomic situation* manifesting as transient and local demand for entrepreneurial action. It draws attention to sensitivity to social context and how it plays a role in opportunity creation (Hjorth and Holt, 2016; Steyaert and Hjorth, 2006; Welter and Gartner, 2016). This dimension implies acting on a temporal societal receptivity that can help legitimise entrepreneurial action to attract attention and engagement. Second, *building an evocative image of a venture* underscores an imaginative approach to simulating essential aspects of a venture, resonating with the notion of fabulation, where entrepreneurs create new opportunities through fictional but compelling narratives (Dey and Mason, 2017; Hjorth, 2007, 2013) This means-based approach (Sarasvathy, 2001) reflects the importance of playfulness and humour, as seen in culture jamming, where subversive performances disrupt conventional expectations and highlight entrepreneurial opportunities (DeLaure and Fink, 2017; Carducci, 2006). It complements Bureau and Zander's (2014) argument that art and entrepreneurship play on and can subvert established norms and offer new perspectives in existing situations. Third, *attracting engagement* emphasises artistic logic's co-creative and immersive nature, echoing Scherdin and Zander's (2011) emphasis on art and entrepreneurship's performative and socially interactive aspects. It also speaks to a central capacity of art to induce emotions, including joy and excitement, and attract people (Nummenmaa and Hari, 2023). Hjorth and Gartner (2012) further underline the importance of

collaboration in entrepreneurial leadership, while Holm and Beyes (2022) describe artistic entrepreneuring as a dynamic process where responsive performance continuously reshapes the venture, as seen in MOM's reliance on external actors to co-create its narrative. Finally, *pretending* is central to subverting reality through fictional performance and acting "as if" (Gartner *et al.*, 1992). It is an emancipatory shift that allows entrepreneurs to engage with an imagined reality that can create real responses and effects, as highlighted by Searle's (1975) theory of illocutionary acts and its application to venturing (Wood *et al.*, 2022).

Contributions

This study offers three contributions to entrepreneurship literature. First, the concept of artistic logic introduces a novel connection between art and entrepreneurship, enhancing our understanding of how artistic practices can enrich entrepreneurial experiences. It emphasises the social dimension of entrepreneurship and connects it with art, showing how entrepreneurship benefits from creative practices that involve social experimentation (Hjorth and Holt, 2016; Holm and Beyes, 2022). Artistic logic models how such experiments can be conducted by introducing a temporary disruptive subversion in industries/markets through the playful use of social and cultural resources. This extends previous work on subversion in entrepreneurship (Bureau, 2013; Bureau and Zander, 2014; Kauppinen and Daskalaki, 2015) by focusing on playfulness over resistance and process over conditions.

Second, the MOM case illustrates how leveraging artistic logic in entrepreneurial preparation can significantly enhance learning, especially for first-time entrepreneurs. By engaging in artistic logic, individuals gain the opportunity to simulate and internalise the dynamic, often unpredictable nature of entrepreneurial ventures. Such direct experience is essential for developing entrepreneurial intentions, skills and competencies (Motta and Galina, 2023; Neck *et al.*, 2014; Neck and Corbett, 2018). Despite the fictional framework, this form of artistic enactment allows participants to experience entrepreneurship's emotional intensity and

decision-making pressures. This immersive experience makes the abstract or imagined aspects of entrepreneurship feel more concrete and tangible, fostering deeper learning and confidence. As such, the “buzz” of entrepreneurship can be lived and learned before any real-world commitments are made, offering a powerful preparatory tool for aspiring entrepreneurs.

While prior work emphasises that entrepreneurs imagine futures but act in the present, the connection between the two does not sit comfortably within existing conceptions of entrepreneurial action. To the extent that futures are imaginary, there is no rational basis for treating them as reliable premises for action (e.g., Klein, 2008; McMullen, 2015). This study engages with the ideas of subversion and sensible foolishness (March, 1971) as a logic for exploring new possibilities to suggest that an artistic, entrepreneurial performance can stimulate real experience and impact despite its fictional nature.

The pretence that underpins artistic logic resonates with how entrepreneurs manage the tension between the imaginary and the real. For instance, Gartner *et al.* (1992) discuss acting “as if,” whereby entrepreneurs act based on future visions and possibilities rather than current reality. This creates the conditions for a self-fulfilling prophecy in that believing and acting as if a certain reality exists can help bring that reality into existence. Hjorth (2013) introduces the idea of fabulating, which implies telling a story that, while it is not necessarily true in the traditional sense, inspires, motivates, and mobilises resources and support. Similarly, Dey and Mason's (2017) use of disruptive truth-telling can reveal and intensify possible futures. Artistic logic adds insights to the tactical use of pretending as an imaginative and social exploration of a potential future venture. It can become a powerful tool in the entrepreneur’s arsenal, weaving compelling visions of a future that can captivate and convince.

Third, while the value of prototyping is well established in product development (Ries, 2011), where even very rough prototypes can be effective (Beltagui *et al.*, 2023), the idea of prototyping the creation of a new venture as a whole is novel. Our research demonstrates that

artistic logic can simulate entire entrepreneurial experiences and can produce real signals about venture ideas' (non-)feasibility, enabling testing the totality of their conditions. Conceptions of venture ideas as raw content dissociated from actors or settings—e.g., “*an envisioned venture in and of itself, disregarding any agent with whom it may be associated*” (Davidsson *et al.*, 2021, p.2) or a third-person opportunity (McMullen and Shepherd, 2006)—are difficult to evaluate for they have no purchase in the real world. Just as the text of a play, they are best appreciated when enacted. Thus, while there is a need to evaluate ideas to gain the confidence to act, evaluation requires enactment. Artistic logic offers a way to break out of this vicious cycle.

Entrepreneurs' pitches are often readily recognised as fiction. While people can share in the pretence and become excited about the depicted future (Liuberte and Dimov, 2021), there is a fine line between bold future framings and deceptions (Garud *et al.*, 2023; Wood *et al.*, 2022). In this regard, artistic logic provides a way to prototype ideas for radical futures, enabling the experiencing of new realities and articulation of new purposes (March 1971).

Practical implications

Artistic logic has practical implications for entrepreneurship. It can help create immersive experiences, offer expansive prototyping, and evaluate opportunities. Immersive experiences using artistic logic can give aspiring entrepreneurs a taste of entrepreneurship and help them improve their skills. Expansive prototyping, involving pretending and engaging with external actors, can quickly provide valuable feedback about the feasibility of an opportunity and attract resources.

In the context of entrepreneurship education, artistic logic complements the practice-based approach, which explicitly promotes play and experimentation (Neck *et al.*, 2014; Neck and Corbett, 2018). Bureau and Komporozos-Athanasiou (2016) suggest using *subversive*

dialogues and *heterotopic* spaces in entrepreneurship teaching. Artistic logic extends these approaches by proposing immersive experiences and prototyping to develop entrepreneurial mindset and skills (Larsen and Neergaard, 2024). It can also serve as a common platform for interdisciplinary collaboration between art and entrepreneurship in education and outside. Finally, there are societal benefits of tolerating pretence and "as if" behaviour in entrepreneurship (Wood *et al.*, 2022), as it can help challenge norms and promote societal progress.

Limitations and future research

There are limitations to the study that open avenues for future research. Firstly, the use of a single case study limits generalizability. Future research could explore a broader range of empirical cases across industries, cultural, and educational contexts to assess the applicability and variability of artistic logic in entrepreneurship. This would deepen our understanding of how different socioeconomic environments shape these strategies.

Secondly, the long-term effects of artistic logic in entrepreneurial actions remain unexamined. Future studies could investigate the sustainability of ventures that utilise artistic logic, providing insights into their impact on the entrepreneurs, the ventures' lifecycle, business models, and the potential for a lasting impact and disruption.

Finally, while the MOM case highlights the potential of artistic logic to foster entrepreneurial imagination, its broader implications raise ethical and systemic questions. The possibility of a 'dark side' of artistic logic must be acknowledged. If widely adopted, the invisible boundary between real and pretended performance could lead to unintended consequences for ecosystems reliant on trust and verifiable claims. As Garud *et al.* (2023) note, the fine line between visionary narratives and deception could erode stakeholder confidence, especially when intentions remain ambiguous. This is particularly relevant in sectors such as healthcare, where trust is paramount.

For instance, ventures based on speculative technologies could create unrealistic expectations, diverting resources from legitimate innovations and potentially harming beneficiaries.

On a systemic level, the proliferation of pretended ventures could strain stakeholder resources, diminish the credibility of new ventures, and discourage engagement with high-risk but transformative ideas. In educational contexts, while artistic logic offers experiential learning benefits (Motta and Galina, 2023), its unchecked adoption might blur the lines of what is ethical in prototyping, risking the normalization of opportunistic misrepresentation. Future research should explore how artistic logic can balance its subversive potential with accountability, particularly in contexts with high ethical and social stakes.

Conclusion

Artistic logic extends entrepreneurial action beyond traditional venture creation, blending reality with fiction and strategic pretence to reveal new possibilities and challenge norms. By using artistic logic to enact imagined scenarios, entire entrepreneurial experiences can be simulated, gathering real data on venture feasibility. This approach allows testing under various conditions and can inspire, motivate, and mobilise resources and support. It challenges conventional thinking and fosters innovation by exploring the boundary between reality and fiction. Just as artists can act as entrepreneurs, entrepreneurs can act as artists. Artistic logic can catalyse new ventures, guide entrepreneurial education through immersive simulations, and offer fresh perspectives on entrepreneurship. By weaving into existing theories and logic without being fully explained by them, artistic logic offers a unique perspective for understanding and practising entrepreneurship.

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Appendices





