

## POST-PRINT VERSION

Ranfagni, S., & Runfola, A. (2018). Connecting passion: Distinctive features from emerging entrepreneurial profiles. *Journal of Business Research*, 92, 403-411.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2018.04.018>

Link to publisher version: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2018.04.018>

## CONNECTING PASSION: DISTINCTIVE FEATURES FROM EMERGING ENTREPRENEURIAL PROFILES

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# **CONNECTING PASSION: DISTINCTIVE FEATURES FROM EMERGING ENTREPRENEURIAL PROFILES**

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

The recent literature explores new forms of entrepreneurship, which are born of passion in the sphere of consumption (Shah & Tripsas, 2007; Cova & Guercini, 2016). Consumption is indeed rich in gratifying experiences (Wallendorf & Arnoud, 1998; Belk, Ger & Askegaard, 2003) 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, Wincent, Singh & Drnovsek, 2009; Cardon & Kirk, 2015) as distinct research fields, and in part because research into entrepreneurship born of passionate consumption is relatively recent (Cova & Guercini, 2016; Shah & Tripsas, 2007; Haefliger, Jäger & Von Krogh, 2010). 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 analysed 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.

## **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, Ger and Askegaard (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, & Ger & Askegaard, 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, Wincent, Singh & Drnovsek, 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, Wincent, Singh and Drnovsek (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). Gelnick, 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, Wincent, Singh & Drnovsek, 2009, p. 520). Entrepreneurial passion is not a static force, but evolves over time (Cardon & Kirk, 2015; Murniesk, 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 Tripsas (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 satisfy on their own a felt need which finds no adequate response in the market. Like the innovator customers (Von Hippel, 1986), the so-called user-entrepreneurs propose solutions, but what is more they realize and turn them into the base of their entrepreneurial activity. Gifted with notable skills, they are moved by “a passionate desire to share their solution with others” (Shap & Tripsas, p.123). These “others” consist first and foremost of their community of users, and only secondarily, of the market. For user-entrepreneurs, the community is a space for sharing but also for experimentation. With other members of the community they share their passion carrying out “activities ranging from socialization with others to teaching an activity to new members” (p.130), but at the same time they “nurture and create more novel and effective innovations” (p.132) drawing on their heterogeneous skills and resources. The product-solution which emerges from this process serves to optimize the practice of a common passion. The members of the community become the first customers of the user-entrepreneur, who however also resorts to real commercial marketplaces. Their role in facilitating innovations has been recognized as fundamental (Von Hippel, 2009) just as their community passion is considered an engine of the new enterprise’s market entry as it develops new competences and tests out new ways of selling (Haefliger, Jäger & Von Krogh, 2010). The idea that also Borgers, Afuah and Bastian (2010) stress, according to which shared consumption activities may foster new approaches to entrepreneurship, is at the base of the study by Cova and Guercini (2016). The authors introduce the concept of “tribal entrepreneurship”. This notion identifies a form of entrepreneurship that stems from passion shared by a tribe of consumers. The experience of passion passes through the tribe. The tribe is distinct from the community of users. It is, in fact, understood as a network of heterogeneous persons (in terms of age, gender, income, etc.) who, while not bearers of specific competences,

are linked by a passion and emotions and are capable of collective actions. Thus, they are advocates more than simple consumers (Cova & Cova, 2002). The tribe is of crucial importance for the tribal entrepreneur: he experiments with and creates products with and for the tribe. In doing so, the tribal entrepreneur accumulates skills and knowledge. Like the user-entrepreneur, however, he targets not only the tribe but also the market. Moreover, given his continuous participation in the activities of the tribe, the tribal entrepreneur continues to be also a consumer. In this figure, two diverse identities seem to co-exist (Cova & Guercini, 2016). Ultimately, what is common to all the approaches that deal with the relation between consumption-passion and entrepreneurship is passion as a force that activates processes of entrepreneurship and that acts as a bridge between consumer and entrepreneur. However, what connotations are assumed by this force when it binds the entrepreneur to the consumer, in other words when the entrepreneur transforms the business into an arena where passion can continue to be played out, is a question which has yet to be answered. In this paper we aim to investigate how the entrepreneur perceives and experiences the passion that joins in time business (the role of entrepreneur) and consumption as an expression of the self (the role of consumer). In an attempt, then, to understand how it might be possible to overcome the potential trade-off between experiencing passion (as consumer) and entrepreneurship, we try to answer to the following research questions: What are the features of passion that connect consumption with entrepreneurship? and How can they be pursued by the entrepreneur?. We propose the concept of “connecting passion” as a possible answer to these questions, conceptualizing it as the passion that intertwines consumption and entrepreneurship.

### **3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The research methodology rests on the cross analysis of ten cases of entrepreneurs that originate from consumption, which are emblematic for the issues examined in this article. The identification and the selection of the entrepreneurs as well as the collection of data and their



interpretation required an analytical procedure that we now describe. Initially, the authors identified the businesses by consulting available secondary sources, such as interviews and news items, published in national dailies or specialized journals, in both their online and offline versions, as well as thematically focused and company websites. In choosing the entrepreneurs to interview, they took into account certain prerequisites, which follow from the literature selected (Yin, 1994) as specifically dealing with passion in consumption and entrepreneurship. The prerequisites are the following: (a) the business is the fruit of the entrepreneur's previous experience as a consumer; (b) the entrepreneur has cultivated over time a particular "consumer passion for" a given product, activity or hobby; (c) there are elements shared with other consumers joined by the "passion for"; (d) the "passion for" is the motor of the business creation, regardless of the individual's competence. Once the entrepreneurs were identified, the authors proceeded to contact them by email and telephone, in an effort to verify the effective presence of the points just described. After that, they determined the availability of the prospective interviewees. To ensure triangulation of data (Eisenhardt, 1989) all the available information from secondary sources was gathered prior to the interviews. The companies and the profiles of the entrepreneurs involved are described in table 1. The companies' names listed in table 1 are fantasy names for reasons of confidentiality and are all small- to medium-sized in terms of turnover.

Table (1) goes around here

Subsequently, the authors collected information by means of the qualitative face-to-face interview, one of the most widely employed methods for gathering data in social and business research (Guercini, 2004; Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). All the interviews were carried out through a protocol of analysis the authors elaborated to explore three main thematic areas: (a) experience as a consumer prior to creating the business, with a focus on: the personal story, the birth of the "passion for", the community frequented and the competences acquired as

consumer; (b) the foundation and development of the business, with an investigation into: why and how the business emerged from the experience of consumption, and the role the community of consumers has played in the creation and growth of the business; (c) the relation entrepreneurship-consumption, with an analysis of: behaviours brought to preserve the passion, changes in the relation with the community of consumers, and ways in which the entrepreneur strives to reconcile the company's economic and non-economic objectives with the pursuance of the passion. The duration of each interview was at least two hours. They were recorded and transcribed (Voss, Tsikriktsis & Frohlich, 2002). The transcriptions were subjected to an intense stage of analysis and interpretation of the content (Krippendorff, 2004) following approaches implemented in similar empirical investigations (Bingham & Eisenhardt, 2011; Guercini, La Rocca, Runfola & Snehota, 2015). To achieve the rigor of the analysis (Gibbert & Ruigrok, 2010), we specifically refer to the existing literature, which is described in the theoretical review, to identify the conceptual areas. In particular, the authors carefully read the transcriptions to determine *verbatim* that might express possible conceptual thematic areas relating to the relation consumption-passion-entrepreneurship. As Kassirjian noted (1977), this step is particularly useful when researchers intend to grasp the interviewee's wording and mode of expression. The authors first proceeded to analyze the *verbatim* of each company separately and then confront each other in order to increase the reliability of the research. Hence, the authors analyzed selected *verbatim*. They considered only the resulting common areas as an expression of agreement among them in order to assure the reliability to the analysis (Kassirjian, 1977; Kolbe & Burnett, 1991). The next paragraph will present and discuss significant *verbatim* as the main results of the empirical analysis; and we then propose some entrepreneurial profiles that stem from these considerations that are useful to point out the main features of connecting passion.

#### **4. MAIN EMPIRICAL RESULTS**

**4.1. The origin of the passion.** The business sprouts from entrepreneurial passion whose different origins impact on the depth of self-recognition in passion.

*Passion is in the DNA.* This fuels sentiments of the type “I’ve always wanted this to be an important part of my life, my working life as well”. The owner of Lamda describes them like this: “For me passion is something innate, since my father, a jet airplane pilot, always had a passion for motorcycles, so from the time I was little I went to watch the races and the bug got to me ...”. The proprietor of Epsilon has similar feelings: “At the age of two, I was riding my tricycle on two wheels. And my father was really into cars.....”.

*Passion is in the hobby you pursue.* There are situations of the type “in the course of my life I discovered that I had a passion for a certain hobby and I began to pursue it”. Such an opportunity can be taken individually. This is the case of Gamma: “I said to myself: Let’s see if I can bring together my passion for dogs with that for playing frisbee... that way I understood there might be a chance for an innovative product”. A similar experience is in Eta: “I started making the first pieces in my free time...”. There are also cases in which the creation of an enterprise is triggered by the measuring of oneself against others. In the Iota transcript we find: “...I met my future partner; we collaborated on a website, a magazine on [*..a famous high tech brand..*], which from few visits came to count over 50,000. We thought to earn from this traffic...”. A shared interest also gave birth to Delta. One of the partners explains: “Fashion is my passion. With my [current] partner we asked ourselves, why not set up this platform, which was still lacking on the European scene?”. The desire to do business can also stem from hobbies pursued collectively. “It all started when we were ten years old and had a great passion for music. We opened a little lab in the garage... then after a while we decided to found this business ...” (Theta).

*Passion as personal redemption.* There are situations of the type “other people want me to do something else or I encountered difficulties in my previous work experience”. In situations like

this it is possible to appeal to one's passion and find there a means of redemption. The business becomes a sort of anchor to take off again, grow and find self-realization. The redemption may be personal: "This was my destiny because I was the one who had the greatest passion for wine. Despite what my parents wanted, I had no intention of remaining in the [family] silver shop ..." (Zeta). The redemption may also be professional: "I found myself having to reinvent a job for myself. ... I had seen that the products I created were better than those available commercially" (Beta). But it can also have a dual origin. "The halt in my married life and the loss of my job as an architect left me shocked; so I said: let's devote ourselves to this passion and see what happens" (Alpha).

**4.2. How passion relates with business.** Passion born of consumption may intertwine with business and it may remain distinct. Indeed, entrepreneurs may dedicate themselves more to their passion than to their business or vice versa.

*"Following one's own passion is a necessity"*. This is an attitude typical of entrepreneurs who live within the passion and make it the motor of the business. In the Lamda interview we read: "Passion is fundamental... going to work is not the burden I find it is for practically every other profession ... for me and for the guys who work with me it's a game, it's not a chore like other jobs". It is not, however, a game with an end in itself. In fact, the proprietor specifies: "Our profession is an activity of passion; we don't work in order to earn money, although we have turned this passion into a way to make a living ...". The same emerges from the Epsilon interview: "living your passion turns your job into a bike competition... it's as if I were carrying on with my racing career, every day I feel like I'm racing". The founder makes his enthusiasm for racing the glue that holds together the components of the business model he pursues. The entrepreneurs experience their business as a game, thus they play doing business. Sometimes this experience is combined with the game really played by consumers. Indeed, the founder of Gamma remarks: "I'm an enthusiast who wants to live from the activity I've created over these

years ... to do this, however, I want to live inside it, I don't want to look out of the window at others playing, I want to play together with them ... So I go to the competitions, too, where I can keep up and take along our product and brand". The idea, then, is "I pursue economic aims and at the same time have fun indulging my passion".

*"Feeling you're at a crossroads; which way to go: pursue the passion or the business?"* The entrepreneur may feel that he is at a crossroads when the passion fails to intertwine with the business. The business is not experienced as a game where one can continue to pursue the passion as consumer. This leads to reflect on whether the path to follow is that of the passion or that of the business. Some adopt the attitude: "the passion is and continues to be the priority even though I am aware to give up some of it to further the business". In the words of the proprietor of Eta: "The creative activity has had to give a bit, because there are many bureaucratic chores.... but I'm thinking of sticking to slow growth". Also the founder of Alpha admits: "I'm always closely tied to the passion, and everything goes pretty much its own way. I should organize better, but in the end the choice not to organize is itself a choice". Others experience a different approach: "The passion is continually losing ground, because you have to keep up the business, taking time away from the passion". A passage in Delta reads as follows: "In the beginning, the activity was almost a game, then it became a real job... we have to take care of everything, from the selection of clothing to purchase, to customer service, to shipping ...". Certain personal limits make some tasks perceived as more engaging: "I've learned that I'm not very good at delegating, so I end up doing a lot by myself. I issue the invoices, I write memos for the accountant, and I take care of communications ..." (Beta). In the long run, the entrepreneur may find himself clinging to the passion as if to a thread, while the business tends to take over: "In the beginning I went from door to door carrying a little sack with a bottle of wine in it to present. Then the little sack became a suitcase, and I started to participate in fairs and wine tasting events" (Zeta).

*“Passion is a dead end: I have to give it up”*. This attitude is typical of the entrepreneur who intends to abandon a condition of indecision (passion versus business) and gives up the passion for the business. The effect is that the time devoted to the passion is completely eliminated. Ultimately he dedicates himself exclusively to the business, thus assuming the role of the more traditional entrepreneur. Expressions of this attitude are the following statements by the owners of Theta and Iota. The first: “It was passion that provided the kick start for us, but as soon as we received the first order, we realized that we could convert our engineering laboratory into a company.....”. The owner of Iota is even more explicit: “Of course, compared with a few years ago, our perspective is clearly business-oriented. I understood immediately that it would be promising to launch into business”. As a result, the passion that remains is little more than a residue, which surfaces every once in a while in the business life: “The passion remains a simple safety valve; only when you feel the need, you put yourself there” (Theta). Alternatively, it may remain as a preference towards certain products: “At home with my girlfriend we don’t have any hi-tech products that are not of the brand [*There follows a name of a very well-known brand.*]” (Iota).

**4.3. The outcome of passion.** Passion generates different conceptualizations of product from an entrepreneurial point of view.

*The product is growth through passion:* Passion acts as a motor that leads to the realization of unique and rare products. In the words of the owner of Gamma: “I invested with the aim of creating an exception...it took me two years of work to get from the idea to the finished product”. It follows that uniqueness does not emerge spontaneously; rather it is the fruit of personal experimentations. It may not originate alone, as the Lamda interview points out: “The customer comes to me to build a unique object, and I work in close contact with him for a year or a year and a half on a motorcycle....”. Moreover, it may act as the main objective to pursue: “Having an idea, asking people, designing the product, creating the prototype, selling it; all this

gives 100% satisfaction....” (Epsilon). In addition to tangible effects, the search for uniqueness may impact on the personal sphere: the process of experimenting on oneself that it produces may contribute to personal growth. The following remarks are representative of this: “I have lived unbelievable excursions...on the trail of unique objects. They come from my drawings, my drafts. By experimenting, I found that they give me and transmit to me a lot...” (Eta). Thus, growth is both material and spiritual: the product, in fact, reflects the feelings, which it embodies. Its creation harbours individual changes. The owner of Lamda adds: “It was by growing that I understood the hard work invested by entrepreneurs who have been successful” (Lamda). Ultimately, the entrepreneur who is being carried away by passion ends up discovering himself and his potentialities. “I realized that I could do more, but there’s a problem with the faith I have in myself, which I discovered after my first successes” (Alpha).

*The product is aspiration with the aid of passion:* Passion may lead to the creation of products that are not in themselves unique, as they draw inspiration from something that already exists. The owner of Zeta states: “I wanted to make a wine that appealed above all to myself. My points of reference were [*There follows a list of brands in the Chianti geographical area..*]”. A similar reflection is made by the owners of Delta who, driven by their passion, were inspired by excellence in developing their online business: “We wanted to create this platform, like a similar one identified in America...”. Passion, then, acts as a motor, which leads to the realization of “inspired goods” or “aligned goods”. Rather than models of reference, the owner of Beta follows a collective business tendency. “I have drawn inspiration from many people who today produce their cosmetics independently...”. “Aspiring” entails “trying to do, experimenting”. Experimenting to “align oneself with” is not experienced directly, it is not self-experimentation. But it is learning in the field, carried out to understand how to obtain what one aspires to. It becomes a sort of guided experimentation in which a fundamental role may be assigned to experts. The owner of Zeta admits: “I owe really a lot to Daniele... He

taught me about spontaneous fermentations, he tasted the wines with me, he told me what to do”. Similarly, the proprietor of Beta notes: “I found a laboratory that produced my formulas... I took my sample to the director. He subjected them to tests, suggested to me integrations and adjustments”. By experimenting the entrepreneur can proceed by trial and error also in search of managerial standards to adopt. A passage from the Delta interview reads as follows: “In selecting the clothing to offer... we try to understand how to reduce to the minimum certain issues. One of these is the size..”.

*The product is solving problems with the aid of passion.* Passion can contribute to coming up with solutions to problems raised by customers. In other words, the passion for something leads entrepreneurs to gain expertise and to be in a position to propose solutions to specific consumers’ requests. The owner of Iota recounts: “The customers were interested to sell used articles... so we told them we would send around a courier to pick up [*There follow product brands*]...we would pay by wire transfer..”. Theta also presents itself as a problem-solver: “We offer solutions to those who work in the world of music and beyond... we recently created a system for a bus hailing service”.

**4.4. Passion and consumer community.** The entrepreneur participates in the life of the business as well as in the life of the communities of consumers. These communities may include friends, consumers, family members and more in general persons who share the same passion.

*Community as life context.* The communities the entrepreneur participated in as consumer are places where he spends moments of his leisure time, indulging his passion to the hilt. The owner of Gamma remarks: “In my communities there are participants in competitions ... [as a consumer], I attended them to practice and do the disc contests... now [as entrepreneur] they are like a party, we feel like we are all friends and we share the same passion”. These communities are places where the entrepreneurs enjoy themselves but also spaces where they



capture ideas and more in general opportunities for their business. Gamma adds: “It may happen that I try out the products with my community. I have given them to many in the hope of receiving feedback”. The owner of Lamda notes: “We understood [as entrepreneurs] that we were able to develop a Lamda precisely because as consumer, we hung out with a group of friends with whom we took Sunday hikes at the mountain pass. The owner of Epsilon points out: “I started devoting myself to my communities again, and I saw the effects in terms of understanding the market dynamics, because as you move around you talk with people”. A mutual understanding is established with the members of the community; in fact, the product can be lived and ways to improve it can be captured.

*The community as a launching pad.* These are communities the entrepreneur frequented as consumer from which he gradually distances himself, communities in which “there was a friend’s mother or a friend who asked you for the product ...” (Beta). In another case “there was my father who let me take part in his community of friends in the fashion sector and the schoolmates I studied with who shared my passion” (Delta). In the course of time the entrepreneur takes his distance from these communities, as though he were aware that their function is by now exhausted. He begins to seek and then to manage relations with new target customers. “We left the garage ... where we used to meet with our community... we started making phone calls, going door to door with a travel bag asking if anyone was interested” (Theta). In any case, the communities played a crucial role: they contributed to the budding and the flourishing of the business activity. The owner of Iota states: “The communities help us understand that the business we had in mind could have a market sense...”. Beta adds: “I emerged from the shell which helped me to define myself and to create a word-of-mouth circuit...”. The communities, then, acted as endorsers: “I tried to get my bottles into restaurants and wine shops belonging to my community... a trattoria, renowned for its wine list, supported me” (Zeta).

*Communities as background.* These are communities which appear as backdrops: the entrepreneur is interrelated very little with them and at times almost unintentionally, but his business would be meaningless without them. He draws nourishment from them just as a plant thrives on the surrounding understory. These are communities that although they function as backgrounds to the business, constitute its integral part. In Alpha, for example, we find families with children who are passionate about cake design, or cake designers. All these serve as a point of reference: “They complain that we don’t have our own personal style... we need to create our own style”. In Eta, the owner says: “For me the principle point of reference is the Fuori Salone of Milan ...”.

## **5. THE EMERGING ENTREPRENEURIAL PROFILES**

Taking into consideration the previous analysis, several entrepreneurial profiles can be identified.

The *first profile* that emerges from the analysis is the “Tightrope Walker”. Examples of the group of Tightrope Walkers are the owners of Lamda, Epsilon and Gamma. Their passion is innate or sprouts from a hobby; they identify themselves in it as consumers but also as entrepreneurs. They are able to blend passion (experienced as consumer) with business. The former resides in the latter and vice versa. This is because Tightrope Walkers experience passion (as entrepreneur) as a game: they share the conviction that “dedicating yourself to business, you have fun”. In other words, they play while doing business. In this way, they consider the activities they perform as entrepreneurs the same as the fun they had when they indulged in their passion (as consumers). And this fun is not merely a recollection of the past, since they continue to experience it. In the course of playing the Tightrope Walker strives to create distinctive features in terms of products or services. This leads him to experiment, to identify with the product he creates, thus giving rise to a circular relation with it; the product

grows and with it the entrepreneur. By experimenting on oneself, one finds that one is different and one's knowledge is also enhanced. Moreover, by experimenting on himself the entrepreneur continues to be a member of the community he attended as consumer. More precisely, he lives in it in the sense that it is both his "professional home" and his "personal home". He spends his leisure time with its members and in this way, is able to get ideas and receive feedback that are useful for his activity. He also involves the other members in his product experimentations. The community is not, however, his market but rather simply his living environment.

A *second profile* that emerges is "The Artist". The Artist is an entrepreneur who is not able to merge passion and business. In other words, he is unable to practice his passion while doing business, preferring the former to the latter. If forced to choose between dedicating time to passion (as consumer) or business, passion wins out. Ultimately, then, he remains a consumer. He sees time dedicated to business as taken away that available for passion (as consumer), which continues to be central to his interests, while the development of the business is pursued only gradually. The owners of Eta and Alpha seem to fall into the category of the Artist. Here the passion is born of a hobby or of the desire for redemption and continues to contribute markedly to the definition of the entrepreneurial identity. Moreover, the experimentations it enacts, though rare, are individually experienced. More specifically, if on the one hand the Artist, like the Tightrope Walker, strives for the *unicum* and grows through self-experimentations, on the other he remains closed in his own comfort zone. The bond with the community is in fact weak. The community acts as a background that serves the existence of the company. Thus, the Artist does not consider the community a partner for experimentation, nor is it perceived as an irreplaceable target to listen to.

A *third profile* is "The Dualist". Like the Artist, the Dualist identifies with a passion that emerges as redemption or from a hobby. He, too, does not see the business as a space where he

can continue to practice his passion as consumer, and, when forced to choose, begins to put business before passion. He reveals a gradual passage from passion as priority to business as necessity. Ultimately, he turns out to be more entrepreneur than consumer. This profile is represented by the owners of Zeta, Beta and Delta. Also for them the original community becomes secondary. Once used as springboard for their entrepreneurial idea, it is replaced by nuclei of consumers belonging to a mass market. They address it in an effort to reach segments interested in products they offer. In so doing, rather than create by carrying out self-experimentation, the Dualist creates being inspired by existing business models and tendencies. These are what he aspires to under the influence of passion; as a rule he does not go about this alone but together with experts, who help him try out appropriate entrepreneurial paths.

The *last profile* is the “The Businessman”. In this case, the entrepreneur does not feel undecided between passion as consumer and business. This is because he has decided a priori to pursue business. The passion, which arose as a hobby, is seen as antithetical to business so it must be abandoned. The Businessman is an entrepreneur who listens to the market and strives to serve it through a problem-solving approach. In this case, with respect to the other profiles, passion as consumer is no longer interpreted as self-identification. Passion and the correlated community played for the Businessman a crucial role, as it contributed to making the business what it is today, but now they are more a vestige of the past, since the entrepreneur defines himself in relation to business aims that for him are primary. This implies, then, that the passion now incorporates logics that are proper to business. According to our analysis, examples of this profile are Iota and Theta.

## **6. THEORETICAL DISCUSSIONS**

We will now examine the features of “connecting passion”, an entrepreneurial passion that connects consumption with entrepreneurship. It shows four main features.

*Connecting passion is passion as a game.* The entrepreneur who succeeds in combining business with passion (as a consumer) experiences his passion as a game. Like the entrepreneur that Cardon, Wincent, Singh and Drnovsek (2009) describe, the Tightrope Walker is a passionate entrepreneur who recognizes himself in the activity he does. But he also experiences it as a game. Experiencing one's own business as a game means living it as a personal and free space where one enjoys oneself, grows and achieves self-awareness. So doing, the entrepreneur experiences his passion as if he were a consumer and immersed in his passion. The consumer, in fact, finds in passion his own space (Belk, Ger & Askegaard, 2003) where he expresses himself (Wallendorf & Arnould, 1988), and fosters personal growth and renewal of self (Arnould & Price, 1993). In living this space, he may also enjoy himself, as happens in the Mountain Man Myth (Belk & Costa, 1998), where participants play sharing a common passion. Apart from this, by playing the entrepreneur dedicates himself to the business as if he were dedicating himself to his passion (as consumer). It is in doing business that the practice of his passion as a consumer lies. Thus, the game becomes a bridge between being entrepreneur and consumer joining in a certain sense the two identities. What is more, since the entrepreneur continues living his passion with the community he participated in as consumer, he finds in it a training ground to make the practice of passion a game. If compared to the existing literature, our contribution encompasses passion as self-recognition (studies on entrepreneurial passion) with passion as a space for individual freedom (studies on passion in consumption) through the metaphor of business as a game.

*Connecting passion implies self-continuity.* The entrepreneur who lives passion as a game continues to recognize himself in the passion experienced as consumer. This implies that the connecting passion resides in a self that does not alter over time and tends to preserve a halo of authenticity. Authenticity is thus to be interpreted as a stable belief in the values that characterize the individual and his identity as consumer (Ranfagni & Guercini, 2014). This

authenticity is in turn fostered by passion: being experienced as a game, connecting passion is a space in which the self, by expressing itself, strengthens its true identity. The relation it has with authenticity is thus inclusive: they complete one another. If we examine the literature on passion in consumption, we realize that the authentic self is not so much a prerequisite of passion as its possible effect. Passion, in fact, is conceived (Celsi, Rose & Leighm, 1993; Ahuvia, 2005) as a field where the individual is enriched, increases self-awareness and can reduce the gap between the actual self and the desired true self. On the other hand, if we consider the literature on entrepreneurial passion, it emerges that among the effects that passion can produce is the persistence of action rather than the persistence of self (Foo, Uy & Baron, 2009; Cardon, Zietsma, Saporito, Matherne & Davis, 2005; Cardon, Wincent, Singh & Drnovsek, 2009). Thus, the continuity of self seems unconnected with entrepreneurial passion. But it is not exactly like that in the case of “connecting passion”. In fact, as Cardon et al. (2009) point out, entrepreneurial passion that generates outcomes presupposes the recognition of the entrepreneur in activities which are expression of the role that he intends to perform in the company. This role reflects his nature, that is, it is related to something he has always been. If so considered, entrepreneurial passion implies a certain continuity of self over time. In the case of the Tightrope Walker, this continuity is evident: he continues to recognize himself in something that has continued to define him from the time he was a consumer. More generally, we observe that self-continuity enhances self-recognition and more specifically the centrality of self that, together with positive experienced feelings that entrepreneurial passion generates, is seen as a determining factor for entrepreneurial outcomes (Cardon, Gregoire, Stevens & Patel, 2013). If, however, the outcomes are to be achieved by combining passion with business, the continuity of self is not enough. It must be combined with the personal ability to interpret passion as a game.

*Connecting passion is self-experimentation.* By living his business as a game, the entrepreneur moves into a space of individual freedom where he experiments with himself developing ideas, prototypes and products for customers. In doing so, he also leverages the competences and skills that, like the user-entrepreneur (Shah & Tripsas, 2007), he has acquired during his experiences of consumption. The experimentation he conducts is circular; the products he creates in fact, embed a more evolved self as synthesis of a path of individual growth. In virtue of this, the entrepreneur experiments with himself with the business just as the consumer experiments with himself with his passion. In fact, passion is for consumers a field of challenge (Arnould & Price, 1993; Bamme & Burrus-Bammel, 1982); here he proves himself to the point of integrating himself with the object of passion; more specifically, by relating with it, he can evolve by incorporating its symbolic properties and values (Belk, 1988; Holt, 1995). Thus, the self-experimentation includes a self-evolution. In this way, the entrepreneur succeeds in giving continuity in the business to his passion (as consumer). It follows that connecting passion passes also through self-experimentation. Among entrepreneurs this translates into the search for rarity. Moreover, we note that, although experimenting with themselves while innovating, the entrepreneurs are able to overcome obstacles that under normal conditions could be perceived as insurmountable. Therefore, their experimentations produce effects that can be likened to the “creative problem solving” skills described in the literature on entrepreneurial passion (Fredrickson, 1998; Gelnick, Spitzmuller, Schmitt, Klemann & Frese, 2015). It follows that these effects delimit an intersection between connecting and entrepreneurial passion. However, one point has to be clarified. While in entrepreneurial passion the creative problem solving skills are activated above all as a response to obstacles hindering the attainment business goals in which the entrepreneur recognizes himself (Cardon, Wincent, Singh & Drnovsek, 2009), in the connecting passion they are a reaction to obstacles that obstruct paths in which business goals and goals of personnel development are combined.

*Connecting passion is “inhabiting” the community.* The entrepreneur experiments with himself by “inhabiting” the community he frequented as consumer; that is, by experiencing it as part of his private but also of his professional life. He frequents it and in it he enjoys himself and trains for the "game". Thus, he lives it as consumer. But in doing so, he is also in the position to pick up signals of individual perceptions and opinions that may affect his business activities. As a consequence, the entrepreneur plays in the community but also listens to the voices of its members and, thus, of consumers that may materialize in his productions. By “inhabiting” the community, he reveals his being consumer together with his being entrepreneur; he strengthens the bond between passion (as consumer) and business. The trait of "inhabiting" in connecting passion is distinctive. This trait distinguishes it from passion in consumption. Here, instead of “inhabiting”, consumers dive into the community to live consumer experiences (Belk & Costa, 1998). Likewise, as Jahanmir & Lages, (2016), and Cardon, Wincent, Singh and Drnovsek (2009) point out, the entrepreneur, as an effect of the passion, experiences the activities he carries out, plunges into them but he does not “inhabit” them. Thus, entrepreneurial passion is also different from connecting passion. Intended as an engagement in tasks and activities that hold identity meaning, the immersion is part of the inhabiting. But the inhabiting is more. It is not something that is temporally and spatially defined, but rather a way of being. Just as the entrepreneur inhabits the community, so does he other environments. He experiences them to the fullest, with curiosity, with mental opening, creating almost naturally links between different worlds (professional and personal life). In other words, whoever inhabits, cultivates himself by developing. This is the logic that pervades the Tightrope Walkers. Moreover, it should be noted that the community they inhabit is not a simple interactive social context (Cardon, Wincent, Singh & Drnovsek, 2005), but it is also not the community of the user-entrepreneur (Shah & Tripsas, 2007) or of the tribal entrepreneur (Cova & Guercini, 2016). It is not made up, that is, of users having specific competences and practicing the same hobby;



and it is not a small social group held together by a particular passion. It is a community of people who are socially different and who share a widespread passion. Just as the Tightrope Walker inhabits his community, so most probably also the user-entrepreneur and the tribal entrepreneur inhabit their social spaces; but unlike the Tightrope Walker, they inhabit them as a ground for experimentation and as their primary market. The Tightrope Walker is more open: he thinks beyond the community; he does not create with and for the community. For him, the community is a territory of integration between entrepreneurship and his own self-expression.

## **7. MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS**

This paper points up a number of managerial implications. Indeed, our study shows that an entrepreneur can in fact reconcile two aspects of his own person that may appear to be antithetical. In other words, being a passionate consumer is not merely a factor that can contribute to giving life to a new business. It can also constitute the final objective of the entrepreneur who links to the aim of attaining business results. It emerges in fact, that maintaining an identity as consumer in business can be read not only as an ambition of the entrepreneur but also as a necessity that makes it possible to guarantee at least the survival of the company. By these means, the individual succeeds in reconciling through consumption the search for individual growth with the business activity. From a managerial standpoint, it implies that entrepreneurs who are passionate consumers can continue to grow just as they did when they were consumers and experienced their passion. But this requires the activation of four factors. These factors suggest policies or lines of action that an entrepreneur can undertake, that is, to perceive business as a game, to recognize the need to continually search for the values of consumption, to experiment with the product as he, when consumer, experimented with his passion, and to engage in spontaneous and continuous modes of interaction with his community of consumers. It is clear, in any case, that these approaches are also strongly influenced by the

personal and subjective characteristics of the individual entrepreneur and must, therefore, be experienced as well as incorporated and understood individually.

Moreover, our research shows that the “connecting passion” that reconciles consumption and entrepreneurship may lead to the need to give things up. The results of the cross-analysis of our cases, in fact, show that the pursuance of the identity of the consumer in that of the entrepreneur may work to the detriment of the company’s growth or of the attainment of certain levels of performance. The entrepreneur must be aware of and willing to accept these sacrifices. Among the profiles we have identified, in fact, it is far from clear that the Tightrope Walker is the best performer or the one that manages to develop better in the market. Thus, “connecting passion” is not an indicator of company success and performance but rather a concept that unites individual growth through consumption with business through entrepreneurial activities. This is the ultimate aim that an entrepreneur could intend to achieve. It follows that if an entrepreneur pursues economic growth or market performances as his primary objective, it is quite likely that connecting passion could be not the best path to follow. Consequently, in terms of implications, it emerges the need for a continuous rethinking of the entrepreneurial objectives and of the means of achieving them in the arduous search to balance personal and business gratifications. In this sense, it is possible to observe a passage from a “connecting passion” that draws on the values of consumption toward other forms of passion.

Finally, we can point to some limits of our study, which can at the same time be considered as avenues for future research. This paper, even though it identifies the main factors that characterize “connecting passion”, does not specifically analyze the relationships between this passion and entrepreneurial outcomes. Hence, future research should consider how the founding elements of connecting passion relate with economic performance. A second limit of the study involves the relation between the evolution of “connecting passion” over time. Future research should analyse in greater depth the possible developmental paths that each

entrepreneurial profile we proposed may follow and the diverse factors involved. The authors show how entrepreneurs can follow a distinct desire and ability to live one's own business spiritually, making it a way of expressing one's true self in something as uncontaminated as passion. Thus, spiritualism in materialistic entrepreneurship seems to be a paradox that finds its solution in the "connecting passion". By delineating it, this paper has the merit of contributing to the academic debate on new forms of entrepreneurship and providing relevant implications for entrepreneurs. In this sense, the concept of "connecting passion" strengthens the bridge that exists between the consumption and entrepreneurship literatures.

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Table 1. The companies analyzed in the empirical study

Company	Sector	Brief profile of the entrepreneur and the company	Year of foundation
Alpha	Pastry making (Offline business)	The entrepreneur has a passion for the kitchen and is now an architect-pastry chef. Drawing on her competence as an architect she realizes pastry creations that reproduce international artistic monuments in scale. The material she uses is also innovative, in that in contrast to what is used in cake design her products are created with shortcrust pastry.	2012
Beta	Cosmetics (Offline business)	The entrepreneur has a passion for do-it-yourself and self-made products in general. She decided to fuel this passion by developing organic cosmetic products (using natural ingredients) for a public that seeks an alternative to industrial cosmetics.	2014

Gamma	Dog accessories (Online business)	The entrepreneur has a passion both for dogs and for the frisbee. He decided to join these two passions by creating a business that offers a new concept of frisbee for dogs for use in disc dog events (frisbee throwing for dogs), both competitive and leisure time. He created an online platform where customers can buy in addition to frisbees articles of clothing for the person who trains the dog with the frisbee.	2016
Delta	Fashion (Online business)	The entrepreneur has a passion for fashion and shopping. She has created a business activity that consists in renting selected articles of luxury apparel and targets a public that experiences fashion as a life style. The service is available on an online platform.	2015
Epsilon	Bicycles (Online business)	The entrepreneur used to have a passion for two-wheeled vehicles, bicycles and motorbikes. He decided to found a business specialized in the production of bicycles and components for extreme sports with particular reference to bikes and components for the trials. These are goods, which are not easily found on the market and are addressed to a niche of passionate experts. Sales take place on an online platform.	2011
Zeta	Wine (Offline business)	The entrepreneur has a passion for life in the open air and living in the country. Building on this passion he decided to reclaim unused land to produce wine. In just a few years he created one of the most prized wines of the Tuscan Chianti region, one of the most important brands of Made in Italy.	2003
Eta	Furniture (Offline business)	The entrepreneur has a passion for design and do-it-yourself. He drew on his skills as a metalworker to create an innovative concept of furniture, uniting recovered wood (for example, wood used in wine casks or roof beams) with iron, producing unique articles with high design content.	2013
Theta	Audio systems (Offline business)	The entrepreneur has a passion for music and played in an amateur group. He founded a business to create a new way of amplifying sound employing new technologies, which have become widespread and by now a technological standard.	1994
Iota	Electronics (Online business)	The entrepreneur has a passion for high tech brands and software programming. Fueling his passion for technology, he decided to found a business that buys, regenerates and sells used brand products. Sales take place on an online platform.	2003
Lamda	Motorbikes (Offline business)	The entrepreneur has a passion for motorcycles. He founded a business to create personalized, tailor-made motorbikes, unique pieces, built to last. These products are aimed at a community of motorcycle aficionados.	2002