De la résignation à la manipulation : L'action stratégique face aux contraintes entrepreneuriales

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RÉSUMÉ

La croissance entrepreneuriale est un facteur clé du développement économique. Cependant, de nombreuses entreprises se heurtent à des contraintes qui limitent cette croissance. Cette revue systématique de la littérature examine la nature de ces contraintes ainsi que les réponses stratégiques mises en œuvre par les entrepreneurs pour y faire face. À partir de 87 études empiriques, nous classons les contraintes selon trois niveaux : micro (limites intellectuelles ou croyances culturelles), méso (manque de capital humain et financier, déficits en capital social) et macro (normes culturelles, institutions formelles, distorsions de marché). Nous étendons le cadre des réponses stratégiques d'Oliver (1991) en introduisant une typologie des réponses reflétant différents degrés d'agence entrepreneuriale, allant de la résignation à la manipulation proactive des contraintes. Nos résultats montrent que les dynamiques de pouvoir, le capital social et la maturité des écosystèmes jouent un rôle déterminant dans ces stratégies. Par ailleurs, nous identifions un manque d'études longitudinales autour de la nature cyclique des contraintes et de l'évolution des réponses dans le temps. Cette revue offre aussi un guide analytique concret pour les entrepreneurs et les décideurs publics.

Mots-clés : Contraintes et goulots d'étranglement, stratégies entrepreneuriales, orchestration des ressources, capital social, contexte institutionnel.

From Endurance to Manipulation: Strategic Agency in Entrepreneurial Constraint Management

ABSTRACT

Entrepreneurial growth has a massive impact on economic development, yet many ventures face constraints that restrict their expansion. This systematic literature review examines the nature of these growth constraints, and the strategic responses entrepreneurs employ to manage them. Drawing from 87 empirical studies, we categorize constraints at the micro (intellectual or cultural beliefs), meso (human and financial capital shortages, social capital deficiencies), and macro levels (cultural norms, formal institutions, market distortions). We extend Oliver's (1991) framework of strategic responses by introducing a typology of responses that reflects varying degrees of entrepreneurial agency, ranging from passive endurance to proactive manipulation of constraints. Our findings reveal that power dynamics, social capital, or ecosystem maturity play important roles in determining the strategies available to entrepreneurs. Moreover, we highlight gaps in the literature, such as the need for longitudinal studies to understand the cyclical nature of constraints and responses over time. This review provides a structured framework for future research and offers practical insights for entrepreneurs and policymakers.

Keywords: Resource constraints and bottlenecks, entrepreneurial strategies, resource orchestration, social capital, institutional context.

INTRODUCTION

Growth oriented entrepreneurship, at its core, is about speed; how quickly a venture scales to seize opportunities. High-growth firms embody rapid scaling, with disproportionate increases in size within short timeframes. At the firm level, the speed of growth is driven by how quickly a firm addresses key challenges in strategy, market expansion, resource acquisition, and learning (Phelps et al., 2007). Friction in a venture's ability to swiftly identify and seize opportunities will, by definition, constrain growth.

Entrepreneurial growth is often hindered by deficiencies in key ecosystem elements, such as institutions, talent, finance, infrastructure, and networks. Outside advanced ecosystems, entrepreneurs face significant barriers, including limited capital, weak human resources, institutional voids, inadequate infrastructure, and shallow networks (Amankwah-Amoah & Hinson, 2019; Mair & Marti, 2009; Stam & Van de Ven, 2021; Thakur, 1999; Verver & Koning, 2024; Xie & Wu, 2003). Despite government efforts, there is little scientific consensus on effective policies to promote high growth (Spigel, 2017; Stam, 2015).

We thus ask the following research questions: what do we know about constraints to entrepreneurial growth? And what do we know about how entrepreneurs respond to those constraints? We specifically define growth constraints as those factors that negatively affect the health and expansion of entrepreneurial ventures after their initial establishment. Constraints limit the range of possible actions or decisions and significantly shape the strategic decisions and management processes of entrepreneurs (Zahra, 2021).

To address our research questions, we conducted a systematic review of 87 empirical studies from top ranking journals all dealing at least partially with entrepreneurial constraints to growth. We analyzed entrepreneurial constraints and responses by identifying core constructs, causal relationships, and contextual variables. Our first section further details the methodology for this review. Our analysis identified three categories of constraints: micro, made of individual-level cognitive limitations and cultural beliefs; meso, affecting resource mobilization, talent recruitment, and networks at the organizational or community level; and macro, covering systemic issues like cultural norms, institutions, and market distortions. Our second section describes in detail this constraints typology. Our analysis also revealed entrepreneurs manage growth constraints through strategies ranging from passive adaptation to high-agency actions like defiance and manipulation. Our third section details this typology of responses. We highlight gaps in the literature, such as those related to the dynamic and contextual nature of constraints and responses. We discuss our contributions and recommendations for future research in our last section.

1. METHODOLOGY

Our primary unit of analysis is entrepreneurs and their ventures. To build our sample, we search in Scopus for various combinations of terms related to entrepreneurs and constraints in titles, abstracts, and keywords[1]. We explicitly include papers on unfavorable entrepreneurial ecosystems: constraints tend to be more pronounced when surrounding conditions for entrepreneurship are particularly antagonistic, making them a particularly rich source of data.

Most studies use entrepreneurial terminology and that of small businesses interchangeably. The difficulty of providing a crisp definition of entrepreneurship is recognized (Gartner, 1985). Even though some authors did advocate discriminating on the basis of opportunity identification, the innovative character or the growth intent of the organization (Carland et al., 1984; Shane & Venkataraman, 2000), we did not apply a distinction when we searched for articles for two reasons. First, a large number of studies categorizing ventures or organizations as entrepreneurial do not match the criteria of opportunity or growth intent. Such

[1] The retained search queries were: "entrepreneur constrained environment", "entrepreneur constrained context", "entrepreneur imperfect environment", "entrepreneur constrained ecosystem", "entrepreneur developing ecosystem", "entrepreneur developing context", "entrepreneur developing environment", "entrepreneur imperfect context", "entrepreneur* constraint*".

is the case for example of necessity driven entrepreneurship (O'donnell et al., 2024). Second, our interest in constraints is relative to *ability* to grow, not *intent*. Most studies do not include growth intent as an explicit variable, even though growth of a new venture is a strategic decision made by the entrepreneur (Wiklund et al., 2003). The lack of an entrepreneur's growth intent may in fact result from macro constraints (Decker et al., 2020; Estrin et al., 2013).

We adhere to the methodological approach of Guerrero and colleagues (2021): "*Only journal articles have been included, since these are considered validated knowledge* (Podsakoff et al., 2005). *In contrast, materials such as books, chapters, and conference papers have been excluded due to the variability in the peer-review process and their more restricted availability* (Jones et al., 2011)". We thus include only journal articles in English with a Scimago Journal Rank (SJR) score of 2 or higher to ensure the credibility and rigor of the analyzed papers, aligning with methodologies from prior systematic reviews that have employed similar standards.

Based on the above, our initial search led to a total of 222 articles. We then applied the following inclusion and exclusion criteria. Articles which do not focus on independent entrepreneurs and their ventures as a primary unit of analysis are excluded. We omit papers dealing exclusively with constraints on business creation, as opposed to business growth. Only studies covering created ventures and their growth are within the scope of our review. We also exclude articles such as (Leckel et al., 2020) which deal exclusively with constraints on innovation rather than growth. Innovation, although a growth factor, has its own subtleties and differences. Generally, dependent variables or outcomes in included articles must be, implicitly or explicitly, an operationalization of the concept of growth. We include only empirical studies. These studies are based on primary or database data collected by their authors through quantitative or qualitative methods, which we treat as secondary sources of data for our analysis. We rely on the analyses and findings of previous researchers to draw insights into how entrepreneurs deal with growth constraints. Out of the 222 articles in the initial search, 77 matched our inclusion and exclusion criteria.

To minimize the risk of missing significant contributions to the field as a result of limitations in our keyword search, we implemented a thoroughness check using targeted searches: whenever a gap or specific research question emerges, we conduct specific searches to identify relevant studies which may not have been captured. Importantly, the inclusion and exclusion criteria outlined above must be applied, so that the selected articles consistently meet the same methodological and relevance standards. Thus, another ten articles were added to the sample, bringing the total to 87. After completing the review of these articles, we further tested the robustness of our search by looking up additional articles with broader keyword combinations and variations. None of these searches revealed new conceptual categories that would enhance the identified topologies. While the core set of empirical articles above forms the basis of the topological framework, additional articles are mobilized to build and ensure the theoretical coherence of this review.

2. A TYPOLOGY OF ENTREPRENEURIAL CONSTRAINTS

What emerges from our review is a picture of various types of constraints acting at different levels, as synthesized in Table 1. This picture is consistent with, and expands on, institutional theory (Dacin, 1997), which provides the ground to explain how norms and practices embedded within institutions shape entrepreneurial behavior, influencing among other the persistence of constraints.

Table 1: Typology of Constraints to Entrepreneurial Growth

Constraint Level	Nature of Constraint	Examples of Materialization
Micro	Intellectual	Motivation and Goals (Lerner et al., 1997; Lynch et al., 2021; Thakur, 1999) Experience, education or intelligence (Berge et al., 2015; Honig, 1998; Thakur, 1999) Suboptimal decision making (McKnight & Zietsma, 2018)

	Cultural	Internalized cultural tightness (Pidduck et al., 2024) Family obligations (Berge et al., 2015; Lenz et al., 2021)
Meso	Human and Financial Capital	Systemic resource scarcity (Bruton et al., 2013; Chliova et al., 2015; Thakur, 1999) Lack of access to formal financial services (Cowling & Clay, 1995; Wu et al., 2016)
	Social Capital	Network marginalization (Holt & Littlewood, 2017) Network structure and content (Lerner et al., 1997)
Macro	Norms	Constraints on individual agency (Devarakonda & Liu, 2024; Tyson et al., 1994) Constraints on to social inclusion (Adbi & Natarajan, 2023)
	Formal institutions	Corruption (Estrin et al., 2013; J. S. Yang, 2017) Weak property rights (Bruton et al., 2013; Estrin et al., 2013) Taxation (Venâncio et al., 2022) Regulation driven resource rigidity and red tape (Hietaniemi et al., 2024)
	Market distortions	Conflict and crime zones (Hiatt & Sine, 2014; Honig, 2001; Lenz et al., 2021)

2.1. Micro Constraints

Micro constraints act at an individual level and arise from the entrepreneur's cognitive limitations. We identify two layers of these constraints. At a basic level, entrepreneurs can be subject to fundamental intellectual constraints related to education or cognitive capacity. The second layer is internal cultural constraints, i.e. the entrepreneur's own beliefs and values. According to institutional theory, shared beliefs shape the interpretation of constraints. Entrepreneurs internalize what is legitimate or feasible in their decision-making processes at an individual level. This is distinct from externally enforced social norms.

2.1.1. Intellectual Constraints

Intelligence, educational background, and skills make the *entrepreneur's own intellectual capital*. Deficits mean suboptimal management practices and resource mobilization capabilities (Berge et al., 2015; Boden Jr. & Nucci, 2000; Thakur, 1999). Developing countries in particular are typically characterized by *deficient education systems*, underfunded, inadequate, outdated, or inaccessible to the broader population, resulting in various skillset shortages (Borah et al., 2019).

Environmental duress also adds *emotional stress*, which impairs entrepreneurs' risk-taking, opportunity identification and cognitive complexity. Subsistence markets mostly fail to offer basic services such as nutrition, healthcare, or unemployment insurance, compelling individuals to focus on avoiding destitution (Ault & Spicer, 2022).

2.1.2. Cultural Constraints

Entrepreneurs are also shaped by their *own cultural beliefs*, inherited from long-term history and geographic context (Decker et al., 2020). Such beliefs can become constraints in two ways.

First, *limiting beliefs* arise when entrepreneurs internalize societal or familial norms that conflict with entrepreneurial aspirations. Self-efficacy for instance, a psychological determinant of entrepreneurial performance (Baum & Locke, 2004), is shaped by culture (F. Yang & Yang, 2022). Women studies deserve a particular mention. Research extensively examines how they are subject to cultural tightness. Female entrepreneurs may internalize significant psychological restrictions (Pidduck et al., 2024) and doubt their own legitimacy (Aparicio et al., 2022). Family obligations are a particular form of such gendered expectation and limit availability for entrepreneurial activities (Berge et al., 2015; Lenz et al., 2021). Limiting beliefs create *internal friction*. That is, they impact entrepreneurial agility by slowing down and biasing decision-making processes due to internal conflicts about risk and responsibilities.

Second, *cultural dissonance* occurs when the entrepreneur is situated outside a culture that reflects their internal value system. For instance, returnees having experienced more stable and predictable institutional environments abroad must overcome less developed, more uncertain regulatory and business environments in their home countries (Bai et al., 2021). Immigrants moving to more developed markets suffer the reverse (Aluko et al., 2022). This misalignment creates *external friction* in entrepreneurial agility. Business and social interactions are more cognitively demanding and involve more uncertainty.

2.2. Meso Constraints

Meso constraints occur at the organizational or community level. They affect the interaction between entrepreneurs or ventures and their immediate environment.

2.2.1. Human and Financial Capital

Financial capital is often identified as one of the strongest growth constraints and is the most frequently studied (see e.g. (Berge et al., 2015; Bischoff et al., 2020; Chliova et al., 2015; McKenzie, 2017); 46 out of 87 articles include it at least as one of the constraints). We suggest this emphasis in the literature may stem from its importance as the ultimate fungible resource.

A root cause of financial constraints is *limited access to formal financial services*. Entrepreneurs are subject to high transaction costs and are excluded from traditional banking and financial systems due to lack of collateral, insufficient credit history, or the high risks associated with their ventures, unfit for traditional banking instruments (Abid et al., 2023; Adbi & Natarajan, 2023; Cowling & Clay, 1995). The inability to allocate financial resources to acquire other resources affect business operations (Battisti et al., 2022) and the process of entrepreneurial risk taking (Bruton et al., 2013).

Another major capital constraint is *organizational human capital*. That is, the collective talent the entrepreneur leverages such as employees. Entrepreneurs frequently initiate ventures with limited personnel, sometimes depending solely on family members for support. This paucity of human resources can persist, even within growing ventures, thereby complicating efforts to recruit new talent or retain current employees (Baker & Nelson, 2005).

2.2.2. Social Capital

Social capital both enables and constrain access to other resources (Batjargal, 2003; Ellis, 2011; Ozgen & Baron, 2007), acting as a *conduit for information and knowledge*

(Coleman, 1988; Granovetter, 1985). It determines the pathways through which *mobilization and mutualization of resources* happen through *trust and legitimacy* (Boudreaux et al., 2022; Devarakonda & Liu, 2024). Accordingly, it forms the *social fabric* that supports action in contexts of institutional voids (Chung & Luo, 2013; Fiedler et al., 2017; Ge et al., 2019).

Two dimensions of network content, *resource variety* and *resource spanning*, moderate social capital's quality. Resource variety ensures access to a broad range of resources, while resource spanning decentralizes these assets across multiple contacts, reducing the risk of over-reliance on specific relationships (Zou & Storz, 2023).

2.3. MACRO CONSTRAINTS

Macro constraints perform at the broader societal, economic, or political level. We identify three interrelated types of macro constraints through the literature: cultural norms, formal institutions, and market distortions.

2.3.1. Cultural Norms

Cultural norms are *informal institutions* that exert external pressures on entrepreneurs by socially sanctioning deviations. We distinguish two types of cultural constraints. First, *constraints on individual agency* pressure entrepreneurs to comply with social norms. They discourage risk-taking or challenges to authority, seen as destabilizing in environments with negative views on entrepreneurship or high levels of conformity (Devarakonda & Liu, 2024; Tyson et al., 1994). Second, *constraints on social inclusion* marginalize women (Aparicio et al., 2022; Bruton et al., 2013), lower socio-economic classes (Kumar et al., 2022), immigrants, or ethnic and sexual minorities. Even where women may not adhere to gendered expectations of family and work responsibilities, noncompliance could be sanctioned (Adbi & Natarajan, 2023; Pidduck et al., 2024).

Theories from sociology, social psychology or even evolutionary anthropology and biology describe the dynamics behind social compliance. We will mention social identity theory (Turner et al., 1979), which explain in-group out-group dynamics; stigma theory about the effects of visible or perceived differences on social interactions (Goffman, 1956); or kin selection theory which models Darwinian roots of in-group cooperation (Hamilton, 1964a, 1964b).

2.3.2. Formal Institutions

Formal institutions dysfunction when they display characteristics of either *institutional voids*, or their opposite, *regulatory and fiscal constraints*.

Institutional voids refer to conditions where formal systems that facilitate market functions are absent, weak, or poorly enforced. These voids can be *structural*, through gaps in market-supporting institutions such as financial markets, regulatory frameworks, and infrastructure that allow resource mobilization or lower transaction costs. Alternatively, they can be *normative*, materialized by unstable taxes and regulations, corruption, weak property rights or uneven law and contract enforcement (Audretsch et al., 2022; Guerrero et al., 2021; Tonoyan et al., 2010). Normative voids increase reserve resources requirements and jeopardize entrepreneurs' ability to capture the value they create. Normative voids disincentivize investments beyond those that yield immediate returns.

Regulatory and fiscal constraints in the form of excessive regulatory burdens, compliance costs or taxation create *friction* that diverts resources and attention from growth (Audretsch et al., 2022; Klapper et al., 2006; Venâncio et al., 2022). They can be deliberately maintained to prevent the emergence of new enterprises that would challenge the status quo (Faccio, 2006), particularly in developing countries where bureaucratic processes are often more cumbersome and less transparent (Sobel, 2008). Regulatory constraints also create *resource rigidity*. Entrepreneurs in rigid labor markets for example withhold workforce expansion until they receive clear signals of market demand due to higher costs of correcting misallocated human resources, which reduces agility in seizing market opportunities (Hietaniemi et al., 2024).

2.3.3. Distorted Markets

Distorted markets are an outcome of dysfunctional institutions. They affect entrepreneurial performance differently based on *structure* and *volatility*. Structural constraints to competition are caused by institutional failures to regulate or enforce fair market access. Entrepreneurs face entrenched incumbents who, through *institutional capture* or monopolistic and oligopolistic practices, block new entrants and dominate major industries (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2006, 2008). Volatility is caused by failures to enforce low levels of crime or conflict. As with normative voids, entrepreneurs face operational disruptions which force them to adopt short-term, reactive strategies to survive (Audretsch et al., 2024; Emami et al., 2023).

3. STRATEGIC RESPONSES TO CONSTRAINTS

We build on (Oliver, 1991)'s framework of responses to institutional processes, specializing it to entrepreneurial responses on one side, and generalizing it to our broader focus on various constraints on the other. Like (Oliver, 1991), we structure responses to constraints into a framework consisting of strategies and tactics, but we add a mechanism layer for practical relevance. The new typology is enumerated in Table 2.

Thus, at the highest level, *strategies* represent broad orientations that entrepreneurs take when facing constraints. Within each strategy, *tactics* represent the category of responses entrepreneurs use to manage constraints. Each tactic is enacted through *mechanisms*, which are systems through which entrepreneurs execute their tactics. We preserved (Oliver, 1991)'s naming conventions where relevant. Beyond this theoretical foundation, the typology below emerges from the empirical studies we reviewed. We order the responses we have identified through the literature by the degree of agency and power exercised over the corresponding constraints.

Table 2: Typology of Strategic Responses to Growth Constraints

Strategy	Tactic	Mechanism	Examples
Acquiesce	Endure	Routine Maintenance	Resilience (Ault & Spicer, 2022) Operational restraint (Bruton et al., 2013)
	Adapt	Operational realignment	Operational shift (Tae et al., 2020). Search for alternative resources (Belitski et al., 2019)
Alleviate	Mitigate	Strategic flexibility	Dynamic tradeoffs between resources, investments, collaborations (Brinckmann et al., 2019; Hiatt & Sine, 2014; McKnight & Zietsma, 2018; Xie & Wu, 2003)
		Resource flexibility	Human resource redeployment and repurposing (Hietaniemi et al., 2024; Thakur, 1999) Bricolage (Abid et al., 2023; Baker & Nelson, 2005; Kodithuwakku & Rosa, 2002)
	Share	Leveraging networks and collective resources	Participation in resource pools (Battisti et al., 2022; Simba et al., 2023; Verver & Koning, 2024; Wu et al., 2016)
	Reduce	Investment in human capital	Education to overcome bounded rationality (Assenova, 2021; Berge et al., 2015; Bischoff et al., 2020; Boden Jr. & Nucci, 2000; Nakara et al., 2021) Education to acquire specialized knowledge (Xie & Wu, 2003) Mobilization of complementary human capital (Thakur, 1999).
		Legitimacy signaling	Certification (Devarakonda & Liu, 2024; Wang et al., 2017) Ethical signaling (Neubert et al., 2017; Ruebottom & Toubiana, 2021)
		Knowledge bridging	Through social capital (Riddle & Gillespie, 2003). Through incubators and accelerators (Amezcua et al., 2020; Battisti et al., 2022; Busch & Barkema, 2021)
		Resource bridging	Repositioning to gain access to resources (Assenova, 2021; Xie & Wu, 2003)
Avoid	Buffer	Institutional bridging	Repositioning to insulate from competition (Amezcua et al., 2020)
	Escape	Geographic relocation	Internationalizing or physically relocating (Hursti & Maula, 2007; Pidduck et al., 2024)
Defy	Dismiss	Participation in the informal economy	Working around institutions (Ault & Spicer, 2022; De Castro et al., 2014; Webb et al., 2014)
		Exploiting black and gray market opportunities	Breaking rules (Elert & Henrekson, 2016; Lucas et al., 2022)
	Attack	Market disruption	Disruptive Innovation (Agarwal & Assenova, 2024; Ernkvist, 2015)

Manipulate	Influence	Institutional bridging	Aligning incentives, e.g. by means of corruption (Hartarska & Gonzalez-Vega, 2006) Leveraging networks as buffer (Bai et al., 2021; Estrin et al., 2013; Sydow et al., 2022)
	Control	Institutional capture	Regulatory influence (Ernkvist, 2015)

3.1. Acquiesce

The first strategy is to *acquiesce*. Entrepreneurs exercise a low degree of agency and operate within the confines of existing constraints. Acquiescing is expressed through two distinct tactics: entrepreneurs *endure* and *adapt*. Enduring represents a passive approach, where entrepreneurs work under constraints without attempting to change or overcome them. Adapting is a more active response, where entrepreneurs modify their strategies, operations, or behaviors to work within the constraints they face.

3.1.1. Endure

Under severe conditions of bounded rationality (Simon, 1955) and lacking in the most rudimentary capabilities (Ault & Spicer, 2022), many necessity entrepreneurs are likely to default to enduring as a strategy. They rely on *routine maintenance* as a mechanism, that is habitual practices to maintain operations (Boden Jr. & Nucci, 2000). They rely heavily on unpaid family labor or local social capital as a cost-saving tactic to sustain businesses (Khavul et al., 2009), without even contemplating the possibility of expanding their reach or resources (Bruton et al., 2013). At most, these entrepreneurs would employ *resilience*, such as reducing operational costs or extending working hours, and *restraint* from fundamentally altering their undifferentiated business models to avoid risk. The priority is survival, in a reactive response to immediate financial pressures, rather than proactive change. If any growth happens with this strategy, it is serendipitous.

3.1.2. Adapt

In contrast, adapting entrepreneurs exhibit more flexibility and resourcefulness in their strategy. It is still low-agency, as they adjust internal conditions to better fit within constraints they face, without challenging them.

The main mechanism for the adapt tactic is *operational realignment*. Entrepreneurs may remodel their operations on both the input and output sides. This mechanism optimizes what is under control to function within limitations. For instance, when facing productive capacity constraints, entrepreneurs may reduce the range of their offerings and concentrate on improving product quality to maximize the impact of their limited resources (Tae et al., 2020). Entrepreneurs may search for alternative funding or resource avenues that are more responsive than traditional options (Belitski et al., 2019).

3.2. ALLEVIATE

The alleviate strategy reflects a moderate level of agency and refers to responses where entrepreneurs reduce the severity of constraints on their growth to make them less debilitating. Three tactics emerge in this approach: *mitigate*, *share* and *reduce*.

3.2.1. Mitigate

When they mitigate, entrepreneurs implement measures that *lessen the effects* of constraints without altering the constraints themselves. The first mitigation mechanism is *strategic flexibility*. Entrepreneurs prioritize short-term reactivity and tactical adjustments over potentially irrelevant long-term planning (Hiatt & Sine, 2014). They balance collaborative tactics with other players (McKnight & Zietsma, 2018) throughout the venture's lifecycle. For instance, entrepreneurs may initially adopt low-cost strategies to enter new markets, then gradually moved up the value chain as they learn and accumulate resources (Xie & Wu, 2003). Bootstrapping entrepreneurs carefully minimize financial obligations through cash flow optimization, use of temporary labor and avoidance of fixed costs (Brinckmann et al., 2019).

The second mitigation mechanism is *resource flexibility*. Entrepreneurs who engage in bricolage show a remarkable ability to repurpose resources to generate new opportunities (Baker & Nelson, 2005). Bricolage is somewhat related to frugal innovation, where entrepreneurs develop low-cost, minimalistic functional products or services in small increments and may generate significant growth over time (Adomako et al., 2024; Ernst et al., 2015). This process of resource repurposing or redeployment acts as a substitute for external inputs which may be difficult to secure and extends to human (Hietaniemi et al., 2024; Thakur, 1999) and social capital (Kodithuwakku & Rosa, 2002).

3.2.2. Share

This strategy does not reduce the constraint in aggregate terms. However, it is reduced at the individual level. Here, entrepreneurs *leverage social capital and collective resources* as a mechanism to overcome constraints that would be significantly more pronounced if faced alone. For instance, financial capital can be provided through collaboration around resource pools and community-led alternatives to formal funding (Battisti et al., 2022; Kodithuwakku & Rosa, 2002; Simba et al., 2023). Female and immigrant entrepreneurs are groups set to particularly benefit from those community schemes (Simba et al., 2023; Verver & Koning, 2024). Meta-organizations or industrial associations enable members to share the high costs and diffuse complex knowledge associated with adopting advanced technologies (Battisti et al., 2022; Belitski et al., 2019). Friends, family, or suppliers fill the gaps left by formal financial institutions (Wu et al., 2016) to provide funding.

3.2.3. Reduce

With this strategy, entrepreneurs actively work to *decrease the constraint itself*, rather than merely mitigating its effects or diffusing it. One of the core mechanisms of the reduce strategy is *investment in human capital*. Entrepreneurship training improves managerial and problem-solving skills, making entrepreneurs better equipped to act on resource-constrained environments; in essence, it helps overcoming bounded rationality (Assenova, 2021; Berge et al., 2015; Bischoff et al., 2020; Boden Jr. & Nucci, 2000; Nakara et al., 2021). To acquire skills, entrepreneurs engage in informal learning through community workshops, mentorship, peer networks (Bischoff et al., 2020), or through more formal education or partnerships with academic institutions that give access to cutting-edge technical and managerial knowledge (Xie & Wu, 2003). This mechanism reduces both micro and meso-level constraints. Building teams with complementary skills has similar effects at firm level (Thakur, 1999).

The second mechanism is *signaling legitimacy*, which mainly reduces social capital constraints. Entrepreneurs with elite educational backgrounds or prior experience with reputable firms are perceived as more competent and credible, giving them an edge in securing funding and forming partnerships (Hsu, 2004). Funding and partnerships from credible organizations or government programs act as certification of the venture or entrepreneur's quality (Battisti et al., 2022; Devarakonda & Liu, 2024). Entrepreneurs with a history of successful community involvement are also better positioned to build trust with local stakeholders (Kistruck et al., 2013). Other entrepreneurs subject to stigma or to the liability of newness may implement recognizable normative standards (Ruebottom & Toubiana, 2021; Wang et al., 2017).

Existing social capital is leveraged in two other mechanisms of reduction: *knowledge bridging* and *resource bridging*. Entrepreneurs use their contacts to obtain knowledge about opportunities and the market (Bai et al., 2021) and mobilize resources (Assenova, 2021; Xie & Wu, 2003). This is also achieved through such knowledge-rich platforms as incubators or accelerators, which curate knowledge and provide greater access to financial resources, such as commercial lenders, angel investors, and venture capitalists, which would otherwise be difficult to secure (Amezcua et al., 2020; Assenova, 2021; Battisti et al., 2022; Busch & Barkema, 2021).

3.3. Avoid

Through the *avoid* strategy, entrepreneurs transcend constraints by recontextualizing the business environment. Two strategies emerge from our review: *buffer* and *escape*.

3.3.1. Buffer

The buffer strategy is implemented through *ecosystem recentering* and provides *institutional bridging*. Entrepreneurs embed their ventures within supportive organizational ecosystems like accelerators and incubators, or aligned organizations, that offer a protective layer against local constraints while preserving ties to the local market. This allows entrepreneurs to avoid direct competitive pressures (Amezcua et al., 2020) or receive technical assistance in adverse conditions (Lenz et al., 2021). Other entrepreneurs seek political connections that serve as a quasi-institutional layer which shields them from institutional unpredictability and offers conflict prevention mechanisms (Bai et al., 2021).

3.3.2. Escape

The *escape* tactic represents a proactive exit from environments perceived to be too rigid or costly. Agency here is not exercised against the constraint, which remains unchanged. Rather, this strategy results in a partial or complete release from the constraint.

The first escape mechanism is *geographic relocation*. Entrepreneurs move to new environments that provide greater flexibility, resources, or market opportunities. This mechanism allows them to escape the liability of local constraints, such as restrictive cultural norms, inadequate resources, or unfavorable regulations. Although geographic relocation may initially result in a liability of outsidership, returning entrepreneurs will benefit from cognitive flexibility that significantly influence their entrepreneurial success upon returning to their home markets. Experience gained in less restrictive environments emancipates them from cultural tightness (Pidduck et al., 2024). Exposure to international business practices and diverse markets expands entrepreneurs' cognitive frameworks, enabling them to recognize opportunities more effectively, take calculated risks, and engage in creative problem-solving. These acquired skills also enhance their capacity to adapt global innovations to fit local contexts (Bai et al., 2021).

3.4. Defy

Defiance is a strategy by which entrepreneurs overcome macro-level constraints. Two distinct tactics emerge in this category: those who dismiss these constraints and work around them, and those who actively challenge them.

3.4.1. Dismiss

Entrepreneurs who dismiss typically carry a mindset of noncompliance, circumventing macro-level constraints without directly confronting the underlying structures. The constraints are perceived as obstacles to be bypassed rather than as parts of a system that can be influenced or reformed. Here, entrepreneurial responses are characterized by a pragmatic disregard for existing rules, norms, or market conditions, driven by the pursuit of business objectives.

Participation in the informal economy essentializes the most important mechanism of the dismiss strategy. Informal entrepreneurship thrives in environments with deficient institutions, where formal systems fail to provide adequate support or incentives for compliance. Entrepreneurs avoid predation (Kistruck et al., 2015) and use local knowledge and social networks to bypass bureaucratic red tape and compliance costs or formal regulations perceived as burdensome, corrupt, or unnecessary (Godfrey, 2011; Williams & Shahid, 2016). The flexibility afforded by their unregulated status enables those entrepreneurs to meet market demand faster and potentially compete with regulator sponsored incumbents or monopolies (Sutter et al., 2019; Webb et al., 2014). This flexibility is a tradeoff however, since it also lowers informal entrepreneurs' access to formal funding (Oppedal Berge & Garcia Pires, 2020).

A related mechanism in the dismiss strategy is *exploiting black and gray market opportunities*. Formal entrepreneurs leverage their understanding of enforcement processes and governance to identify where they can safely break rules (black market) or exploit regulatory ambiguities (gray market) (Lucas et al., 2022). Social capital, through connections with enforcement actors, helps them gauge sanction risks and facilitates collaboration or corruption (Tonoyan et al., 2010).

3.4.2. Attack

Motivated by a combination of perceived illegitimacy of rules and a desire to reshape the environment in their favor, entrepreneurs who adopt the *attack* tactic actively engage in a more confrontational form of defiance with regulatory authorities, market incumbents, cultural gatekeepers, and other entities that uphold the established order.

Market disruption refers to the mechanism that fundamentally restructures industry dynamics through innovation, rendering current regulations or market practices obsolete. A prime example of market disruption is M-Pesa in Kenya. Financial services were offered through mobile to the unbanked population, unhindered by traditional banking regulations. The platform's rapid adoption among millions of Kenyans forced regulators to adapt to the new realities of mobile money (Agarwal & Assenova, 2024).

We conjecture that the attack tactic is possible in environments with relatively higher levels of political freedoms, institutional robustness, and legal security. Depending on governance, entrepreneurs may be more likely to face harsh retaliation from politically powerful incumbents or corrupt authorities (Baumol, 1996).

3.5. MANIPULATE

The *manipulate* strategy represents the highest level of agency in entrepreneurial responses to constraints. Those who pursue this approach alter market conditions by exerting influence or control over the institutional frameworks that create constraints.

3.5.1. Influence

The *influence* tactic consists of leveraging social capital, political connections, and institutional intermediaries to reshape constraints. The insight here is that entrepreneurs, by positioning themselves at the intersection of business and politics, mobilize power to shift constraints.

Its main mechanism is *institutional bridging*: Entrepreneurs leverage institutional intermediaries, political networks, or kinship systems who can advocate on their behalf to soften the impact of institutional voids (Sydow et al., 2022). Their networks allow them to remain insulated from systemic risks related to formal institutions or distorted markets (Bai et al., 2021; Estrin et al., 2013). Strong ties with government actors allow entrepreneurs to gain preferential access to resources and regulatory leniency.

3.5.2. Control

The *control* tactic represents the highest form of agency. Here, entrepreneurs actively reshape the institutional factors that generate constraints, acting at the intersection of entrepreneurship and governance. Such entrepreneurs gain control through direct political engagement, regulatory capture, or economic dominance over the institutional environment.

The main mechanism here is *institutional capture*, more likely at mature stages of a venture's lifecycle. Entrepreneurs who have achieved significant market traction pivot to influencing the regulatory process to maintain their competitive edge, secure long-term dominance (Ernkvist, 2015), and favor incumbents over new entrants (Estrin et al., 2013). A shift from innovation-driven to rent-seeking behavior characterizes this process. The very definition of "entrepreneur" may not apply anymore.

4. DISCUSSION

The strategic responses identified in this study align with (Oliver, 1991)'s typology but reflect the distinct ways entrepreneurs engage with their environment. Acquiescence in entrepreneurship often involves necessity-driven compliance under limited alternatives, making this strategy more pronounced than in corporate settings. Oliver's "compromise" strategy is replaced for entrepreneurs by alleviation, which implies more causation and agency. Avoidance strategies are consistent with Oliver's framework, but materialize more dramatically in entrepreneurship, where entering informal markets or relocating operations are common responses to macro level constraints. Defiance aligns closely with disruptive entrepreneurship, when constraints are attacked by introducing innovations that reshape norms. Manipulation also parallels Oliver's framework but occurs on a macro scale, with entrepreneurs leveraging social capital or informal influence to reshape their environments.

Entrepreneurial responses are thus heavily influenced by the power dynamics within their environment, with agency depending on social capital and institutional influence. Power dynamics create an uneven distribution of opportunities. Entrepreneurs with strong networks or political connections can better manage constraints (Bai et al., 2021), while those without are limited to low-agency strategies like enduring or adapting. Strategic flexibility and high-agency responses like defiance or manipulation are mainly accessible to entrepreneurs with significant social or political capital. Those with more power reshape their environment, while those without such power remain trapped in lower-agency strategies.

Just as power dynamics shape entrepreneurial responses, entrepreneurial constraints cluster around at least three dimensions: the entrepreneurial ecosystem in which the venture is evolving, the nature of entrepreneurship, and the lifecycle stage of the venture. Contextualizing the use of our framework through these dimensions is therefore fundamental for future research to accurately capture how constraints and responses interact (Zahra & Wright, 2011).

Entrepreneurial ecosystems are composed of interconnected actors, institutions, and processes that collectively enable sustained entrepreneurial performance (Ács et al., 2014; Leendertse et al., 2022; Spigel, 2017; Urbano et al., 2019). These systems evolve over time, transition through a continuum of development, from nascent to mature, influenced by endogenous forces such as resource availability, knowledge spillovers, social networks, or institutional support as well as exogenous shocks (Cantner et al., 2021; Cao & Shi, 2021). The geographic distribution in our core set of articles is balanced, with 29 articles out of 87 focused on Western countries or regions, nine on China, the rest on countries from all world regions. Entrepreneurial constraints to growth exist across this spectrum, but they occur with greater frequency and severity as ecosystems deviate further from optimal configurations.

Resources stress also creates stronger distinction between different types of entrepreneurships, each displaying different motivations, objectives, and impacts. Recurring in the literature is notably the opportunity-driven vs necessity-driven entrepreneurship dichotomy (O'donnell et al., 2024). Necessity-driven entrepreneurs act out of their immediate needs rather than proactive opportunity recognition (Reynolds et al., 2005; Williams, 2009). Prevalent in developing economies, they operate under strong institutional voids (Sinkovics et al., 2014), use scarce resources to seize business opportunities (Schoar, 2010) and usually display limited scalability and growth potential, consuming capital primarily to support household welfare rather than business expansion (Sutter et al., 2019). Many necessity entrepreneurs have limited access to education, resulting in low literacy, irrationality, fatalism and reduced self-esteem. They may implement inadequate business models and excessively rely on bonding rather than bridging social capital (Kumar et al., 2022).

Entrepreneurial constraints vary across different stages of a venture's lifecycle too. While there is no universally accepted entrepreneurial lifecycle model (Phelps et al., 2007), elements such as opportunity identification, venture formation, scaling, and maturity are widely recognized (Kazanjian & Drazin, 1990; Robinson, 1987; Ruhnka & Young, 1987, 1991). Initially, opportunity-driven entrepreneurs use their cognitive capabilities and their social capital to identify a market need (Baron, 2006; Sarasvathy, 2001; Shane & Venkataraman, 2000). They identify, attract, combine, and transform resources into a unique, valuable, rare and difficult to imitate bundle (Brush et al., 2001; Lichtenstein & Brush, 2001).

As ventures scale, they require significant human and financial resources, but constraints like immature capital markets, limited venture funding, poor infrastructure, or talent shortages may still constitute substantial resource bottlenecks (Bergantino et al., 2023; DeTienne, 2010; Khavul et al., 2009; Wennberg et al., 2010).

5. A ROADMAP FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Some of the studies included in our review focused on specific industries, which may be another dimension affecting the behavior of both constraints and responses. However, we could not identify patterns as the industries were isolated and diverse in our set.

While our review points to the need for finer segmentation and comparative studies of entrepreneurs' profiles and conditions in relation to the intensity of their constraints and response choices, it also reveals broader systemic dynamics. First, constraints are interconnected in vicious cycles. For example, Table 3 shows how restrictive norms and institutions are born out of historical journeys (Decker et al., 2020) and entrenched interests (Ernkvist, 2015). Table 4 shows how, subsequently, those constraints impact both the availability of capital (Cowling & Clay, 1995; Wu et al., 2016) and the cognitive abilities of entrepreneurs (Lynch et al., 2021; Onwuegbuzie & Mafimisebi, 2021; Thakur, 1999), and more generally a negative impact on overall economic growth (Chliova et al., 2015), worsening institutional voids. However, the full picture of the cycle's relationships and transitions over time remains significantly underexplored in the current literature.

Table 3: Root Cause of Constraints

Constraint Level	Nature of Constraint	Root Cause
Micro	Intellectual	Inadequate individual training or capabilities (Fuster et al., 2019) Gender discrimination (Boden Jr. & Nucci, 2000)

		Environmental stress (Ault & Spicer, 2022; Thakur, 1999)
	Cultural	Historical and geographical context (Decker et al., 2020)
Meso	Human and Financial Capital	Cognitive biaises against external funding (Du & Nguyen, 2022) Lack of legitimacy (Wu et al., 2016) Gender discrimination (Boden Jr. & Nucci, 2000) Institutional voids (Bischoff et al., 2020) Market imperfections, e.g. information asymmetry, moral hazard (Cowling & Clay, 1995)
	Social Capital	Cognitive constraints (Holt & Littlewood, 2017) Lack of embeddedness (Bai et al., 2021)
Macro	Norms	Historical and geographical context (Decker et al., 2020)
	Formal institutions	Inertia and entrenched elites (Ernkvist, 2015)
	Market distortions	

Table 4: Impact of Constraints

Constraint Level	Nature of Constraint	Impact
Micro	Intellectual	Horizon or rigidity in decision making and opportunity identification (Lynch et al., 2021; Onwuegbuzie & Mafimisebi, 2021; Thakur, 1999)
	Cultural	
Meso	Human and Financial Capital	Inability to acquire necessary productive resources or innovate (Cowling & Clay, 1995; Wu et al., 2016) Human and economic development (Chliova et al., 2015)
	Social Capital	Lower productivity (Boudreaux et al., 2022)
Macro	Norms	Lower innovativeness (Devarakonda & Liu, 2024)
	Formal institutions	Lower female entrepreneurship (Aparicio et al., 2022) Lower growth aspirations (Estrin et al., 2013; Hiatt & Sine, 2014) Lower sales and profits (J. S. Yang, 2017)
	Market distortions	Extreme volatility of business conditions and enforced disequilibria (Hiatt & Sine, 2014; Honig, 2001)

Second, constraints reveal the system-like nature of entrepreneurial activity, with intellectual, social, financial, or material capital acting as either constraints or growth enablers, depending on their availability. In contrast to macro constraints, these categories of capital each form a continuum ranging from being passive constraints when they're lacking, to growth enablers when they're abundant. Whether they limit or enable growth is circumstantial, as alleviating one constraint (e.g., financial capital) won't drive growth if other bottlenecks persist.

Both these systemic views of *constraints as cycles*, and *constraints as bottlenecks*, would benefit substantially from longitudinal studies. Such studies would add temporal and strategic depth to our understanding of how constraints accrue, or to the contrary, how entrepreneurs relax them by deploying and sequencing adequate responses.

5.1. Conclusion

We advance the current understanding of entrepreneurial growth by presenting a systematic framework that organizes constraints and strategic responses along degrees of agency. In most previous studies, constraints and responses are incidental to the main research question, even when they are explicitly part of it. We hope this clear typology will pave the way for more precise and systematic research around this topic.

We also contribute to the literature by extending (Oliver, 1991)'s strategic response model from the institutional theory arena into the field of entrepreneurship. We analyze the role of power dynamics in entrepreneurs' ability to overcome constraints, as their position within existing power structures defines their options and choices. Entrepreneurs with greater power may leverage their networks to manipulate their environment, while those without such power are confined to lower agency strategies. This unequal distribution of power contributes to disparities in opportunity and success.

Finally, we highlight two key gaps in the literature. First, we outline the dimensions along which constraints cluster, such as ecosystems, the nature of entrepreneurship, and the venture lifecycle stage, with potential for additional dimensions like industry. Second, we examine the dynamic, causal links between constraints and responses, calling for research towards a more holistic perspective on how these factors accumulate and evolve over time.

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