

Integrating work-life balance and wellbeing in entrepreneurship: a systematic review and research agenda. Proposing the novel construct of ‘work-life wellbeing’ and an integrative conceptual model for entrepreneurial wellbeing.

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Extended abstract

Wellbeing can contribute to entrepreneurial growth and success (Games et al., 2023) and drive global progress (Kleine-Stegemann et al., 2024). At the individual level, previous studies have found that wellbeing impacts firm performance, perceptions of success, new venture goals, opportunity recognition and proactive venture behaviours (Marshall et al., 2020). Entrepreneurial wellbeing is a relatively new theme in the literature that has received more attention in the last decade (Bahsri et al., 2023; Banu & Baral, 2022; Kleine-Stegemann et al., 2024; Marshall et al., 2020; Pathak & Muralidharan, 2021). The growing body of entrepreneurial wellbeing research has examined topics such as the impact of failure on wellbeing (e.g., Quach et al., 2021), job satisfaction and wellbeing (e.g., Vörös, 2022), the influence of institutions on wellbeing (e.g., Xu et al., 2022), how wellbeing varies across locations (e.g., Abreu et al., 2019), differences in the wellbeing of entrepreneurs and employees (e.g., Bencsik & Chuluun, 2021), how entrepreneurial resources improve wellbeing (e.g., Najjinda et al., 2025), and the relationship between

financial wellbeing and wellbeing (e.g, Boesten et al., 2024). This variety of topics has been accompanied by diverse theoretical perspectives (e.g., conservation of resources theory, self-determination theory) to examine and explain entrepreneurial wellbeing, or has lacked a theoretical framework. Most of the research has been quantitative and has relied on secondary data and databases that are not focused on entrepreneurs.

While this growing research has advanced knowledge, it is focused on and scattered across specific areas of entrepreneurial wellbeing. It also lacks a holistic, rigorous, entrepreneur-focused approach. Thus, the current literature offers a fragmented understanding of entrepreneurial wellbeing and fails to provide a cohesive theoretical framework to integrate its several dimensions.

Entrepreneurs have a dual status in that they both determine and are determined by their work and nonwork spheres (Adisa et al., 2019). The thin and very weak borders that exist between their work and personal life domains are “extremely porous making work–life interference among entrepreneurs bi-directional and a norm rather than an exception” (Adisa et al., 2019: 1645). Entrepreneurs’ unusual, complex, and intimate relationship with their business enterprises (Tahir, 2022) posits that their work-life balance is not the same as the work-life balance of people who are employees (Adisa et al., 2019). This renders the study of their work–life interface particularly interesting (Ezzedeen & Zikic, 2017). Recent research on entrepreneurs’ work-life balance has focused on topics such as border management (e.g., Adisa et al., 2019), the influence of autonomy on work-life balance (e.g., De Clercq & Brieger, 2022), and factors influencing it (e.g., Sun et al., 2020). Other studies, although not focused on entrepreneurs’ work-life balance, have uncovered the impact of work-life balance on performance (e.g., Agarwal et al., 2021), and work-life balance as a driver of entrepreneurship (e.g., Irani et al., 2023). Several theoretical perspectives have been adopted to examine and explain entrepreneurial work-

life balance (e.g., border theory, resource-based theory, conservation of resources theory). Still, little is known about entrepreneurs' work-life balance challenges, especially regarding whether entrepreneurship enhances or constrains individuals' work-life balance (Tahir, 2022). Not only has this subject not been sufficiently explored empirically (Adisa et al., 2019), but previous research has produced mixed findings (Ezzedeen & Zikic, 2017). As such, there have been numerous calls for an enhanced comprehension of how entrepreneurs experience work-life balance (Ezzedeen & Zikic, 2017; Tahir, 2022).

Wiklund et al. (2019) propose that wellbeing is a relevant dependent variable in entrepreneurship, embedded in complex relationships like work-life balance, among others, and suggest that understanding wellbeing as a dependent variable and a key outcome of entrepreneurship will contribute to entrepreneurship research. Other authors have more recently suggested that entrepreneurial work-life balance and entrepreneurial wellbeing are related (e.g., Drnovšek et al., 2024; Kleine-Stegemann et al., 2024). Nevertheless, entrepreneurial work-life balance has still been limitedly explored in the literature (Adisa et al., 2019; Ezzedeen & Zikic, 2017; Tahir, 2022) and, overall, few studies purposely analyse the relationship between entrepreneurial wellbeing and work-life balance (exceptions include Drnovšek et al., 2024 and Leung et al., 2020).

Considering that wellbeing impacts entrepreneurial performance, opportunity recognition, venture growth, and broader societal progress, a lack of conceptual clarity on entrepreneurial wellbeing limits theoretical advancement and practical understanding. Moreover, the very permeable boundaries and therefore the uniquely complex work-life interface of entrepreneurs makes the integration of this experience into wellbeing research essential. This study solves this problem by conducting the first integrative bibliometric analysis and systematic literature review that explicitly combines entrepreneurial wellbeing and work-life balance.

We use methodological rigor, by following a PRISMA protocol to conduct the bibliometric analysis of 344 articles retrieved from Web of Science and Scopus databases and the theories-context-characteristics-methods framework – a comprehensive, versatile and effective tool to develop impactful systematic literature reviews and theory building (Paul et al., 2024) – to conduct the systematic literature review of 132 articles within the clusters of themes most pertinent to our research, which is consistent with quality standards for scientific research.

Our study makes several contributions to the entrepreneurship literature. We enhance knowledge about the work-life interface and wellbeing in the entrepreneurship literature, issues that are linked to two Sustainable Development Goals, namely Good Health and Wellbeing (SDG 3, target 3.4) and Decent Work and Economic Growth (SDG 8, target 8.3), and are therefore in line with global agendas.

We provide the first systematic integration of work-life balance into the conceptualisation of entrepreneurial wellbeing. We offer conceptual clarity, by mapping definitions, and analysing dimensions and categorising 1037 measurement indicators. We create a map of the theoretical landscape, by identifying and organising 45 theories into five categories, highlighting contradictions and gaps. We provide a map of the contexts and methods in the entrepreneurial wellbeing and work-life balance literature. We propose a structured research agenda with precise future research directions.

We introduce the novel construct of ‘work-life wellbeing’, capturing the dynamic, multidimensional and paradox experience of connecting work and life domains as part of entrepreneurial wellbeing. We propose that the life domain includes family, social relationships, leisure, and personal growth and we therefore consider that ‘work-life’ is more comprehensive and adequate than ‘work-family’. We conceptualise work-life wellbeing as the dynamic process that reflects how individuals experience their work and

life domains and how they navigate, integrate, and derive meaning from the interactions between them. It reflects the degree of satisfaction with the life domain, with the work domain, and with the interconnectedness between the two domains. Necessary elements include work satisfaction and life satisfaction, which leads us to argue that these elements may fit better into work-life wellbeing than in subjective wellbeing – this merits further investigation and may lead to new and enhanced discussions regarding the construct of wellbeing and its assessment. Sufficient elements include more specific factors such as marital satisfaction, family satisfaction, family support, leisure, time with family and friends, time for self, flexible work arrangements, adequate wage, professional validation, career growth, work-life balance, and work-life enrichment. It is influenced by individual and contextual factors and emerges from ongoing processes of constructing the sense of self and social roles, work and life motivations, boundary management, and resource allocation, among others. It is a multidimensional and dynamic construct that may reflect momentary or more permanent perceptions and be assessed on different time levels.

It is distinct from previous constructs found in the literature (e.g., work-life balance or harmony, work-life integration, work-life conflict, work-life enhancement or enrichment) and, rather, the integrative and holistic experience of navigating all of them, including when contradictory axes coexist. As such, it acknowledges paradox, coexistence, and complexity in cross-domain interactions.

It recognises that individuals value work-life balance, work-life harmony, work-life integration, work-life conflict, and work-life enrichment differently, which explains mixed results in the previous entrepreneurship literature, addressing the gap regarding the ambivalent work-life wellbeing in entrepreneurship (e.g., entrepreneurs with increased entrepreneurial demands, high work-life conflict, and low work-life balance experience both stress *and* enthusiasm *and* positive work-life wellbeing). For example, a single man

entrepreneur starting a new venture may desire high work-life integration and be willing to accept high work-life conflict and zero work-life balance, whereas the 'ideal' work-life wellbeing for a woman entrepreneur who is also a mother may be characterised by zero work-life conflict, zero work-life integration, and high work-life balance. Previous concepts do not explain this, which has given rise to the emergence of new concepts that nevertheless have been little used in the literature (Munkejord, 2017). Work-life wellbeing provides a theoretically coherent and empirically suitable way to capture this diversity.

We propose a six-pillar integrative conceptual model of entrepreneurial wellbeing, comprising physical, psychological, subjective, financial, social and work-life wellbeing, thus offering a more comprehensive and context-specific framework. We also argue that individual and contextual details are determinant variables to investigate entrepreneurial wellbeing and therefore we explicitly include them in our conceptual model.

Ultimately, our integrative approach to understanding entrepreneurial wellbeing provides conceptual clarity and brings order to extant research, suggesting pathways for future entrepreneurship research and preventing the continuous fragmentation of the literature.