



Passion for what? Expanding the domains of entrepreneurial passion[☆]



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ABSTRACT

Entrepreneurial passion helps coordinate cognition and behavior of entrepreneurs, providing the fire that fuels innovation, persistence, and ultimate success. However, our knowledge of the sources of passion is limited and focuses primarily on activities predetermined by scholars, rather than those generated by entrepreneurs themselves. Using a phenomenological approach, we conduct an inductive qualitative study of 80 entrepreneurs and analyze their oral histories to explore the sources of entrepreneurial passion as described by entrepreneurs. Our discovery process suggests six major sources of entrepreneurial passion: passion for growth, passion for people, passion for the product or service, passion for inventing, passion for competition, and passion for a social cause. This extends prior research that focuses on passion toward a more limited range of activities.

1. Introduction

The popular and academic press have argued convincingly that passion is an important aspect of entrepreneurship (Bierly et al., 2000; Bird, 1989; Chen et al., 2009). Passion increases entrepreneurs' dedication and commitment to their ventures, their persistence in pursuing venture-related goals and activities, and their ability to get and stay fully engaged in their actions (Cardon et al., 2009; Cardon and Kirk, 2015; Drnovsek et al., 2016; Vallerand et al., 2003). Entrepreneurial passion is also contagious to other key stakeholders of the firm, such as employees (Breugst et al., 2012; Cardon, 2008), and investors (Cardon et al., 2018; Chen et al., 2009; Mitteness et al., 2012; Murnieks et al., 2016).

Despite all of the recent attention towards entrepreneurial passion, one particularly important question that has not been fully addressed is what makes entrepreneurs passionate. The literature surrounding entrepreneurial passion has almost universally focused on passion towards "activities" (e.g., Cardon et al., 2009; Murnieks et al., 2012). A variety of activities relevant to the entrepreneurial context have been investigated (i.e., activities related to inventing, founding, developing, etc.), and authors have uncovered numerous interesting relationships between these activities and both antecedents to and consequents of entrepreneurial passion. However, this concentration on activities ignores the possibility that the source of an entrepreneur's passion may be something else entirely. In discussing how the construct of "passion" is used more generally in psychology, Vallerand (2015) notes that, "...the object of one's passion can be an activity, an object, another person, or even an abstract concept, idea, cause, or goal." (p. 28, emphasis added).

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Thus, many other options exist besides activities as targets for passion.

Another prevalent problem with extant work is that the two predominant scales used in empirical work on passion (Cardon et al., 2013; Vallerand et al., 2003) first choose a particular object, such as activities associated with an entrepreneurial role, and then ask respondents the extent to which they are passionate for that object. These scales typically gauge both the strength of one's positive feelings and the extent to which that particular activity is central to one's identity (Cardon et al., 2013), or the extent to which that activity is internalized harmoniously and obsessively into one's self-concept (Vallerand et al., 2003; Hsu et al., 2014). While this body of work has shed tremendous light on the role of passion in entrepreneurship, we must recognize that this empirical approach involves scholars assuming that specific entrepreneurial activities are the key factor to gauge entrepreneurial passion. By doing so, scholars restrict the range of options available to entrepreneurs, and pre-determine the potential objects of their passion, rather than allowing respondents to freely indicate what particular aspects of entrepreneurship serve as the focus of their passion. As such, existing scales are ill-suited to assess passion for other viable targets such as products, ideas, or people, and because of this, we do not have a good understanding of the full range of objects that may ignite an entrepreneur's passion. Given the prevalent evidence of diverse motivations among entrepreneurs, it is time to question our focus on activities and instead explore the variety of targets that may be the source of passion for entrepreneurs.

The question of what entrepreneurs are passionate about is an important one because the object of one's passion can have important implications for the types of behaviors entrepreneurs engage in, such as persistence and creativity (Cardon et al., 2009; Cardon and Kirk, 2015), and the outcomes of such behaviors, such as firm performance (Drnovsek et al., 2016). Therefore, understanding a broader potential set of potential targets of passion might help inform our understanding of entrepreneurs' behaviors and performance outcomes for themselves, their firms, and their stakeholders.

To delve further into the sources of entrepreneurial passion, we conducted an inductive qualitative study of 80 entrepreneurs as part of a larger oral history project. The inductive approach was used because an "individual's interpretation of an experience is an essential part of the experience itself (Patton, 1990)" (Cope, 2005: 168). The researchers' job is to explore and reveal the essential types and structures of such experiences with the individuals (Burrell and Morgan, 1979) so that better understanding of the phenomenon – here entrepreneurial passion – can occur. Our goal was to discover how entrepreneurs themselves experience and make sense of their passion and its sources. We note that our goal is not to develop a new typology of objects of entrepreneurial passion, but rather to suggest that a broader set of domains of passion should be considered in our research, and to encourage greater flexibility in research designs to allow for entrepreneurs to indicate the object, as well as the strength and nature, of their passions.

2. Sources of passion in entrepreneurship

Entrepreneurial passion has been defined as involving positive and intense feelings experienced from engagement in activities associated with roles that are meaningful to the self-identity of entrepreneurs (Cardon et al., 2009). Recent theoretical and empirical work has suggested that the object of passion is important and that, "studies that ask what passion is or what it does must begin by addressing *passion for what*" (Cardon et al., 2009: 525, emphasis in original). Indeed, recent empirical work finds differing relationships between passion for specific domains of entrepreneurship and outcomes such as persistence (Cardon and Kirk, 2015), bricolage behaviors and firm survival (Stenholm and Renko, 2016), venture growth (Drnovsek et al., 2016), and employee commitment (Breugst et al., 2012).

Despite acknowledgement that the focus of passion matters, the dominant approach undertaken in extant research still focuses on passion for activities, which we suggest is a limitation to our collective knowledge concerning entrepreneurial passion. A review of prominent journals for papers focusing on entrepreneurial passion (see Table 1) indicates the overwhelming emphasis (86% of the articles) on "activities" as the target for entrepreneurial passion. We note that a few papers have suggested the focus of entrepreneurial passion could extend beyond "activities". For example, scholars hint that entrepreneurs may be passionate about the venture they have created (Bird, 1989; Cardon et al., 2005; Chen et al., 2009), or particular opportunities they are pursuing (Branzei and Zietsma, 2003; Ruskin et al., 2016), regardless of the venture involved. This variety in targets alludes to the possibility that the sources of entrepreneurial passion may range beyond activities related to entrepreneurial roles, yet the dominant empirical and theoretical approaches, and even the definitions themselves, still focus on passion for activities.

3. Methodology

3.1. Sample

In this study, we analyze interview data from 80 entrepreneurs across the US to explore the sources of entrepreneurial passion. These interviews were conducted between 1995 and 2009 as part of a ongoing project to collect oral histories of entrepreneurs (Glauser, 2009). Purposeful sampling (Patton, 1990: 169) was used to select entrepreneurs. This process involves contacting knowledgeable individuals and reviewing data sources that can lead to interesting, information-rich cases. The companies involved are typically at least three years old, have reached viability, and are growing. The final sample represents entrepreneurs with a variety of gender (60% male), age and ethnic backgrounds (84% Caucasian, 6% Hispanic, 4% African American, 3% Native American, 3% Asian), who operate firms of varying size and maturity in a broad range of industries (see Table 3 for details, reported with results below).

Interviews were conducted by phone or in-person, and were recorded. They were typically 30–120 min long (with an average of 60 min). The interviews were semi-structured, with the entrepreneurs being asked to tell their story "*from the time you conceived your*

Table 1

Targets of passion in the entrepreneurship literature.

Authors	Type of Research	Target of Passion	Findings
Baum and Locke (2004)	Empirical	Activities (work)	Passion has an indirect effect on venture growth, mediated through goals, self-efficacy and communicated vision.
Baum et al. (2001)	Empirical	Activities (work)	Passion has an indirect effect on venture growth, mediated through competencies (general and specific), motivation and competitive strategies.
Biraglia and Kadile (2017)	Empirical	Activities (entrepreneurship)	Entrepreneurial passion is positively related to entrepreneurial intentions.
Breugst et al. (2012)	Empirical	Activities (inventing, founding, developing)	Perceptions of entrepreneurs' passion for inventing and developing lead to greater positive affect and goal clarity among employees of an organization. Passion for founding led to lower positive affect and goal clarity.
Cardon and Kirk (2015)	Empirical	Activities (inventing, founding, developing)	Passion for inventing and passion for founding mediate the relationship between entrepreneurial self-efficacy and persistence.
Cardon et al. (2013)	Empirical	Activities (inventing, founding, developing)	Passion for inventing is related to creativity. Passion for founding and for developing are both related to persistence. The interaction between passion for founding and identity centrality/founding is positive towards persistence and creativity. Passion for developing is related to absorption. The interaction between passion for developing and centrality/developing is positive towards absorption.
Cardon et al.(2009)	Conceptual	Activities (inventing, founding, developing)	Entrepreneurial passion coordinates goal-directed cognitions and behaviors. Entrepreneurial passion drives creative problem-solving, persistence, and absorption in tasks. In turn, this fuels opportunity recognition, innovativeness, venture creation and growth.
Cardon et al. (2018)	Empirical	Object (venture)	Investors prefer entrepreneurs who are both prepared and who have demonstrated commitment to their ventures. Demonstrated enthusiasm can have a positive effect when entrepreneurs invest little of their own money or time in the venture, but a negative effect when entrepreneurs invest a lot of personal money or time.
Cardon et al.(2017)	Conceptual	Activities (inventing, founding, developing)	Diversity of passion among new venture teams will impact the emergence of team entrepreneurial passion (shared team identity and collective emotion), which will then influence individual and team outcomes, including individual passion.
Cardon et al. (2005)	Conceptual	Object (venture)	Entrepreneurial passion for a venture can lead to both functional and dysfunctional consequences. Passion can lead to persistence and perceived confidence which inspires investors, but it can also lead to problems with interpersonal relationships and escalation of commitment.
Chen et al. (2009)	Empirical	Activities (work)	Preparedness of a business plan, not presenter passion, positively impacts decisions to fund ventures.
Collewaert et al. (2016)	Empirical	Activities (founding)	Entrepreneurs' passion for founding decreases over time, while their identity centrality does not. Venture idea changes mitigate the decrease in passion. Feedback seeking reduces the influence of increased role ambiguity on decreases in passion.
Dalborg and Wincent (2014)	Empirical	Activities (entrepreneurship)	Self-efficacy mediates the relationship between 'pull entrepreneurship' and entrepreneurial passion.
Davis et al. (2017)	Empirical	Activities (entrepreneurship)	Perceived product creativity is positively related to crowdfunding responses, directly and indirectly through positive affective reactions of funders. Perceived entrepreneurial passion positively moderates the indirect effect.
De Clerq et al. (2011)	Empirical	Activities (work)	Passion for work predicts entrepreneurial intentions. Passion positively moderates effects of perceived ability and perceived attractiveness of becoming an entrepreneur on entrepreneurial intentions.
Drnovsek et al. (2016)	Empirical	Activities (developing)	Passion for developing directly influences venture growth, and has an indirect effect mediated by goal commitment.
Gielnik et al. (2015)	Empirical	Activities (inventing, founding)	Effort leads to passion. Effort leads to progress, which leads to positive feelings. New venture progress mediates the effort-to-passion link, but only in free-choice environments.
Ho and Pollack (2014)	Empirical	Activities (entrepreneurship)	Harmonious entrepreneurial passion leads to higher out-degree centrality (seeking out others to discuss work issues) and increased referral and overall business income. Obsessive entrepreneurial passion leads to lower in-degree centrality (less likely to be approached by peers) which results in less income from referrals and lower business income.
Hsu et al. (2014)	Empirical	Object (venture), Concept (opportunity)	As an investment criterion, passion matters more to angel investors than to venture capitalists.
Huyghe et al. (2016)	Empirical	Activities (inventing, scientific research)	Entrepreneurial passion (passion for inventing) leads to higher spin-off and start-up intentions. Obsessive scientific passion leads to higher spin-

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Table 1 (continued)

Authors	Type of Research	Target of Passion	Findings
Kang et al. (2016)	Empirical	Activities (inventing)	off intentions, and lower start-up intentions. Entrepreneurial self-efficacy mediates the effects of entrepreneurial passion, and affective organizational commitment mediates the effects of obsessive passion. Obsessive scientific passion positively moderates (strengthens) the effects of entrepreneurial passion on spin-off intentions. Innovative climate is positively related to innovative behavior indirectly through passion for inventing. The relationship between climate and passion is positively moderated by proactive climate, and the relationship between passion and innovative behavior is positively moderated by risk-taking climate.
Ma and Tan (2006)	Conceptual	Activities (entrepreneurship)	Entrepreneurs possess intense passion for what they do, which is one trait that separates them from other individuals.
Mittennes et al. (2012)	Empirical	Object (venture)	Perceived passion increases evaluation of funding potential by venture capitalists. This relationship is strengthened by age, intuition, openness to experience and motivation to mentor, and weakened by extraversion and promotion-regulatory focus.
Murnieks et al. (2016)	Empirical	Activities (entrepreneurship)	Passion and tenacity increase the evaluation of funding potential by angel investors. Entrepreneurial experience among angel investors positively moderates the value provided by passion and tenacity.
Murnieks et al. (2016)	Empirical	Activities (entrepreneurship)	Identity centrality drives entrepreneurial passion, and passion drives entrepreneurial behavior. Passion also relates to entrepreneurial self-efficacy.
Ruskin et al. (2016)	Empirical	Activities (entrepreneurship), Concept (opportunity), People	Entrepreneurial passion leads to self-oriented motives among social entrepreneurs
Stenholm and Renko (2016)	Empirical	Activities (inventing, founding, developing)	Entrepreneurial passion for inventing and developing increase engagement in bricolage. Passion and bricolage combine to increase venture survival.
Thorgren and Wincent (2013)	Empirical	Activities (entrepreneurship)	Obsessive passion for entrepreneurship is related to both serial and portfolio entrepreneurship, whereas harmonious passion for entrepreneurship is related to portfolio entrepreneurship.
Yitshaki and Kropp (2016)	Empirical	Activities (entrepreneurship)	High-tech entrepreneurs' passion tends to be focused on leading meaningful activities and the challenge therein whereas social entrepreneurs' passion involves a desire to leave a meaningful mark.

Table 2
Summary of Results.

Source of Passion	% of Mention ^a	Sample Statements
Growth	51%	"I like to build things; that's what I like to do." "We kept growing and going to other states.... We had offers to purchase us, but we weren't quite ready; we wanted to open more stores." "My goal is to scale this immensely... I love to do this and I am really passionate about it."
People	46%	"I am very passionate about fulfilling a need for these people." "I like to sit down with my clients and really get a feel for what kind of event they are going to be having." "We treated our vendors with great respect.... We had great partnerships."
Product/Service	43%	"I am in a business where I really love the products." "I love travel and wanted to share that..." "I love the sport we represent."
Competition	31%	"I have always been competitive; it didn't take too long until we were number one." "I can beat the large, publicly traded companies in this market and do garbage better." "I enjoy competing, but I also really enjoy winning. I hate to lose. I like when I can get in and do more homework and out-think the competition."
Inventing	31%	"Our love is design, not running a company or answering the phone." "I am passionate about creating things."
Social Mission	23%	"Our bottom line is the utilization of profits to alleviate human suffering; so until we move beyond the profit level we haven't accomplished our corporate objective." "We wanted to make the world a little better place." "We embrace both commerce and the environment." "I wanted to do something that was good for people, and to think about how I was being a vital contributor in life."

^a Most entrepreneurs (84%) mentioned several sources of passion.

Table 3

Analysis of passion sources by firm age, entrepreneur gender, and industry.

Firm Age	Firm # (% of Sample)	Avg Srcs	1: growth		2: people		3: product/serv		4: competition		5: inventing		6: social mission	
			#	% ^a	#	% ^a	#	% ^a	#	% ^a	#	% ^a	#	% ^a
under 5 yrs	11 (14%)	2.2	5	45%	5	45%	5	45%	2	18%	4	36%	3	27%
5 to 10 yrs	33 (40%)	2.3	15	45%	15	45%	20	61%	10	30%	10	30%	7	21%
10+ yrs	36 (46%)	2.2	21	58%	17	47%	9	25%	13	36%	11	31%	8	22%
All Firms	80	2.2	41	51%	37	46%	34	43%	25	31%	25	31%	18	23%
Ent Gender	Firm # (% of Sample)	Avg Srcs	1: growth		2: people		3: product/serv		4: competition		5: inventing		6: social mission	
			#	% ^a	#	% ^a	#	% ^a	#	% ^a	#	% ^a	#	% ^a
Male	48 (60%)	2.2	24	50%	20	42%	20	42%	15	31%	16	33%	11	23%
Female	32 (40%)	2.3	17	53%	17	53%	14	44%	10	31%	9	28%	7	22%
All Firms	80	2.2	41	51%	37	46%	34	43%	25	31%	25	31%	18	23%
Industry	Firm # (% of Sample)	Avg Srcs	1: growth		2: people		3: product/serv		4: competition		5: inventing		6: social mission	
			#	% ^a	#	% ^a	#	% ^a	#	% ^a	#	% ^a	#	% ^a
Bus/professional	11 (14%)	2.1	6	55%	6	55%	4	36%	2	18%	3	27%	2	18%
Food Services	10 (13%)	2.5	5	50%	6	60%	4	40%	2	20%	6	60%	2	20%
Travel	10 (13%)	2.2	3	30%	4	40%	6	60%	5	50%	3	30%	1	10%
Consumer Products	9 (11%)	2.3	7	78%	5	56%	1	11%	2	22%	4	44%	2	22%
Sports	7 (9%)	2.1	2	29%	3	43%	5	71%	2	29%	3	43%	0	0%
Arts/Entertainment	7 (9%)	2.2	4	57%	1	14%	7	100%	2	29%	0	0%	2	29%
Health	6 (8%)	2.0	3	50%	1	17%	2	33%	3	50%	1	17%	2	33%
Technology	4 (5%)	1.5	1	25%	0	0%	1	25%	1	25%	2	50%	1	25%
Clothing	4 (5%)	2.3	2	50%	3	75%	0	0%	2	50%	1	25%	1	25%
Home/Garden	4 (5%)	2.8	4	100%	3	75%	1	25%	1	25%	1	25%	1	25%
Real Estate	3 (4%)	2.4	2	67%	2	67%	1	33%	3	100%	0	0%	0	0%
Education	3 (4%)	2.3	1	33%	3	100%	2	67%	0	0%	0	0%	2	67%
Energy	2 (3%)	2.0	1	50%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	1	50%	2	100%
All Firms	80	2.2	41	51%	37	46%	34	43%	25	31%	25	31%	18	23%

^a Represents percentage of firms in that category (age, gender, industry) reporting that source of passion. Totals do not equal 100% due to rounding.

idea up to today.” Interviewers probed to obtain a greater understanding of the opportunity, sources of inspiration and passion, venture creation process, growth stages, and keys to success in the “real world” of the entrepreneur (Hammond et al., 1991). The job of the entrepreneur in such interviews is “to provide a careful and authentic description of ordinary conscious experience” (Cope, 2005: 167) in whatever level of detail they wish, which provides the researcher with the concrete contexts of experiences, as they were interpreted by the entrepreneurs themselves (Thompson et al., 1989).

3.2. Analytical method

In this phenomenological approach, the goal of analysis is to identify common themes within the interviews (Mitchell, 1997), specifically as they relate to what entrepreneurs are most passionate about concerning their entrepreneurial experience. Rather than fitting the data to any existing frameworks for passion, we let the categories emerge from the oral histories and stories. Once the interviews were completed and transcribed or recorded, the authors read the transcripts and listened to the interviews multiple times to identify core themes related to passion, and to compare themes across stories. We utilized the conceptual definition of passion from Cardon et al. (2009) to guide our analysis. As such, specific words we focused on included “passion”, “love”, “excitement”, and “who or what I am” (identity), as well as the context and subtext related to them. We looked for “coherent and important examples, themes, and patterns in the data...that are examples of the same underlying idea, issue, or concept” (Patton, 1987: 149). With this approach, the researchers are not counting words, but are doing a holistic assessment of what entrepreneurs were describing concerning the intense positive feelings and identity-relevance of the object of those feelings they experienced. We note that many entrepreneurs used the word “passion” unprompted in their oral histories, and explained what they were most passionate about concerning their entrepreneurial endeavors. We then wrote summaries of each emergent category, drawing directly from the data. Finally, we compared existing theory concerning entrepreneurial passion to the categories evident in our data (Eisenhardt, 1989) to help develop and extend theory “with stronger credibility and deeper conceptual insight” (Cope, 2005: 179) stemming from the lived-in experiences of entrepreneurs.

4. Results and comparisons

Analysis of the interview data revealed six major objects of passion among the entrepreneurs in our sample, as summarized in Table 2, and analyzed based on gender, age of firm, and industry in Table 3. Most (84%) of the entrepreneurs mentioned multiple targets of passion during their interviews, with an average of 2.2 targets (range from 1 to 5).

4.1. Passion for growth

The most frequently mentioned object of passion was for growing a company (51% of interviewees). Passion for growth was more prominent among entrepreneurs in older firms (10+ years; 58%) than younger ones (< 5 years & 5–10 years; 45% each). This category is consistent with existing conceptual (Cardon et al., 2009) and empirical (Drnovsek et al., 2016) studies of passion for developing firms. Examples of entrepreneurs with passion for growth include Brooks Merrill, who was so passionate about growing his company, Golden Canyon, that they needed new warehouses every six months to accommodate their rapid increase in size, and Brent Bishop from Greenbacks who rejected offers to sell his firm until he had grown it to over 100 stores.

Interestingly, individuals in our sample who talked about passion for growth focused on growth through expansion of stores, distribution centers, or employees, but not through offering more or newer products or services. This is consistent with Cardon et al.'s (2013) “passion for developing” scale which also focuses on growth in terms of customers and employees rather than through offering an expanded set of products or services.

4.2. Passion for people

The second major object of passion was people (46% of interviewees). Passion for people was more prominent for female entrepreneurs (53%) than for male entrepreneurs (42%) in our sample. In this category, entrepreneurs indicated they were passionate about working with family, satisfying customers, and building meaningful relationships with employees, vendors, or affiliates. The most frequent group of people mentioned in this category was customers or clients. Examples of this included Colomba Aguilar of Colomba Café Carambola, who talked about her love for making customers happy with her unique menus, and Jason Araghi of Green Beans Coffee who said that his passion for providing a gourmet coffee house experience to soldiers overseas was the catalyst for his drive as an entrepreneur. Several of the entrepreneurs in this category also mentioned their passion for working with their family members, and for treating their employees or vendors well.

This focus on passion for people, whether it is customers, employees, or other key stakeholders, is noticeably absent in existing conceptual and empirical treatments of entrepreneurial passion. While entrepreneurship scholars acknowledge the importance of employees and customers, and even how the passion of the entrepreneur might impact employees (e.g., Breugst et al., 2012), passion derived from interacting with people has not been examined.

4.3. Passion for products/services

The third focus of passion in our data was the particular product or service provided by the entrepreneurial firm (43% of interviewees). This emphasis was more prominent among entrepreneurs in firms that were 5–10 years old (61%) than in those that were 10+ years old (25%) or less than five years old (45%). Every entrepreneur in this category had an overwhelming love for some product or service in their lives and wanted to create a way to share that with others. For example, Brian Morgan, the founder of an adventure travel company, epitomizes this passion focus, noting “I loved travel and wanted to share that with people.” The range of products and services provided by the entrepreneurs in this category was large, encompassing the travel and hotel industries, outdoors products, holistic healing, dancing, horses, mountain biking, and snow-boarding, among others.

Interestingly, passion for the product or service is another source of passion that is noticeably absent from existing work. Some scholars have alluded to the existence of this focus of passion, such as Winnen (2006) who discovered that entrepreneurs can be more passionate about the products they sell (chocolate) than their businesses, or Clarysse et al. (2015) who argue that passion for activities involved in providing a service like nursing care is distinct from passion for developing a business. Similarly, in their typology of founder identities, Fachart and Gruber (2011: 947) describe communitarian entrepreneurs who are motivated by creation of “a product for their own use because their own customer needs are not satisfied by current market offerings.” While these investigations hint at the existence of passion for something other than entrepreneurial activities, the extant literature still stops short of delineating a product or service as a separate, specific target of an entrepreneur's passion. The lack of focus on passion for a product in our collective body of research is surprising, given the advice often given to aspiring entrepreneurs to figure out what they are passionate about in their lives, and then find a way to turn that into a business opportunity (Abrams and LaPlante, 2009; Glauser, 2016).

We also note subtle, but important distinctions between passion for inventing (Cardon et al., 2009) and passion for a product/service that we uncovered here. Passion for inventing springs from the activities associated with identifying or creating opportunities (e.g. “Searching for new ideas for products/services to offer is enjoyable to me”; Cardon et al., 2013). As such, it focuses on activities related to the *process* of discovery or creation. In contrast, passion for products/services is aimed directly at the specific product or service itself.

4.4. Passion for competition

The fourth major focus of passion was on the element of competition (31% of interviewees). This was more prominent among entrepreneurs in firms that were 10+ years old (36%) and 5–10 years old (30%) than in firms less than five years old (18%). Entrepreneurs with a passion for competition said they loved proving that they were more successful or had better products than other businesses. In describing his love of competing, Josh Coates of Mozy summarized it best by saying, “winning is fun.” Interestingly, while a few entrepreneurs mentioned they enjoyed the money that often comes with success, money was not the major focus for entrepreneurs who talked about being passionate about competing and winning. This category revolved around the pride of winning, rather than the related economic benefits.

We note that passion for competition should be viewed distinctly from passion for growth. Passion for growth focuses on expanding and growing the organization and customer base, while passion for competition arises from the intangible but visceral aspect of proving oneself to others and to the self. Ongoing growth was not important for entrepreneurs expressing this type of passion, whereas being better than others was. These entrepreneurs were also not focused on the financial gains they realized, or the size of their firms, but rather the feeling of having succeeded and in particular the feeling that they were beating other firms. As with many other categories we uncovered, this target of passion has yet to be discussed in extant literature.

4.5. Passion for inventing

The fifth focus in our data was passion for inventing, including creating new products or services and looking for new opportunities in the marketplace (31% of interviewees). Brad Keywell of Media Bank summarized this category nicely by stating, “I’m passionate about creating things.” This focus of passion is highly consistent with Cardon et al.’s (2009: 516) conceptualization of passion for inventing as a passion “for activities involved with identifying, inventing, and exploring new opportunities” and with existing measures of passion for inventing (Cardon et al., 2013). Many of our interviewees mentioned their passion for the inventing and innovation related to being an entrepreneur, and how those activities inspired them more so than activities necessary for the daily operation of their company. Our data reiterate that this focus of passion, which is well-represented in extant passion literature, is prevalent among entrepreneurs.

4.6. Passion for social mission

The final source that emerged from our data was passion for a social mission (23% of interviewees). While the social missions mentioned in the data varied widely, the one commonality uniting this group was the passion for championing a cause and addressing a need for a specialized group of people. For example, Amelia Antonetti of Soapworks felt anguish over the allergic reactions many people, including her son, had to common household cleaners which impacted their ability to live normal lives. She indicated their suffering ignited her passion to help by saying, “I have to do something.” Similarly, Janet Yorgason of At Your Door Haircare voiced her excitement for addressing the adversity and problems faced regularly by her customers, who physically could not leave their homes.

While passion for a social mission often involves helping people, similar to the passion for people focus mentioned above, there are key distinctions between these two sources. Passion for people involves strong enjoyment derived from serving or working with groups of people such as a founder’s family, employees or customers. In contrast, passion for a social mission involves solving a particular problem experienced by a specific social group that is underserved by the current market, such as cancer patients, homeless people, or children. The products and services provided by entrepreneurs with passion for a social mission were targeted toward addressing an explicit need in that particular social group, rather than in serving all customers or all stakeholders of the firm.

This focus on passion for a social mission is also noticeably absent from current work on entrepreneurial passion, which is odd given the clear recognition that social entrepreneurship is a large and important area of scholarship (Dees et al., 2004) and pedagogy (Tracey and Phillips, 2007). Social entrepreneurs are focused not on financial performance or growth of the firm, but instead measure their success by the extent to which they achieve “social transformation” (Pearce, 2003; Tracey and Phillips, 2007). Our findings indicate this desire can serve as a powerful source of entrepreneurial passion, and therefore that our studies of passion should consider this, as well as other novel objects of passion.

5. Discussion and conclusions

The purpose of this paper was to study the sources of passion for entrepreneurs in an open-minded manner. This is a contribution to the literature because scholars have almost uniformly presumed the source or focus of passion, such as for work (Baum and Locke, 2004; Houlfort et al., 2014; Perrewé et al., 2014), being an entrepreneur (Fisher and Langan-Fox, 2009; Murnieks et al., 2012), or for specific activities within that role, and measured the extent to which individuals feel passion for those activities. We have also presumed that passion is experienced for activities associated with entrepreneurship, rather than for other non-activity targets. In this study, instead of presuming, we asked entrepreneurs very openly to tell us what they were passionate about, and let their experiences guide our findings.

Our results underscore the importance of this approach because the sources of passion revealed varied widely from activities and were fairly specific rather than just for entrepreneurship, the firm, or work in general. This builds on the conceptual work of Cardon and colleagues (2009), and related empirical work (Breugst et al., 2012; Cardon et al., 2013; Cardon and Kirk, 2015; Collewaert et al.,

2016; Drnovsek et al., 2016), which suggests that entrepreneurs will likely experience passion for something specific, not the overall entrepreneurial experience. Our findings also underscore a point made by others (e.g., Cardon et al., 2009; Clarysse et al., 2015; Huyghe et al., 2016) that entrepreneurs may feel passion for multiple objects, rather than just one. 84% of the entrepreneurs in our sample reported multiple sources of passion, which suggests that extant work that limits respondents to reporting on only one source of passion (i.e. think about a specific hobby or work, and report on the strength or type of that passion) are potentially neglecting other sources of passion for those entrepreneurs. Further, our results underscore a point recently made by Vallerand (2015) that passion can be experienced for objects beyond just activities, and might also include places, products, or people.

Our results were in some ways consistent with prior work, since passion for inventing and growth were prominent among entrepreneurs in our sample. However, our study uncovered several sources of passion that have not been included in extant work, specifically passion for people involved in the business, passion for the product or service the business is built to provide, passion for competition, and passion for a social mission. While we know that people, products, competition, and social missions are important aspects of entrepreneurship, the experience of passion for these things is noticeably absent from the current literature (see Table 1). In addition, surprisingly, our data did not reveal passion for the process of founding the firm, which Cardon et al. (2009) argue is important, nor passion for the firm itself (Cardon et al., 2005).

This study provides an important link between current research on entrepreneurial passion and the real life experiences of entrepreneurs feeling that passion. By using the inductive interpretations of entrepreneurs themselves, supported and integrated with the use of extant theoretical frameworks concerning passion, we can enhance the engagement of our theories with the sense-making processes of entrepreneurs (Lopez and Willis, 2004). As such, this provides a richer and perhaps more complete understanding of how entrepreneurs experience passion and where that passion originates. Going forward, we encourage scholars to utilize more flexible measurement of entrepreneurial passion that allows entrepreneurs to not only indicate the strength of their passion, and/or the way in which it is internalized, but also the source(s) of that passion. We also encourage continued research that recognizes that entrepreneurs likely have multiple, rather than singular, sources of passion, and allows for that in their empirical designs.

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