

TRIGGERS OF STRATEGIC TRANSITION THROUGH SENSEMAKING IN NASCENT ENTREPRENEURSHIP

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Purpose Decision-making under conditions of uncertainty has long been a central concern in various disciplines focusing on behavioral research (Bjurström and Bakken, 2022; Johnson and Busemeyer, 2010), particularly within the field of entrepreneurship (Shepherd *et al.*, 2015; Zayadin *et al.*, 2023). Entrepreneurial intention among emerging adults is not shaped by personality alone but is also strongly influenced by contextual enablers such as perceived support and opportunity structures (Apasieva *et al.*, 2024). In this context, sensemaking emerges as a multidimensional concept explaining how entrepreneurs interpret ambiguous signals, reassess assumptions, and construct meaning to guide pivotal decisions (Niemi *et al.*, 2022). Despite growing interest among researchers in entrepreneurial sensemaking *processes* and their antecedents, particularly within nascent entrepreneurial ventures, remains underexplored. This is particularly important since the nascent entrepreneurs are lacking established routines guiding their decision-making processes. In that vein, the sensemaking process is a meaningful mechanism for identifying opportunities, assessing them, and adapting to unexpected challenges (Maitlis and Christianson, 2014; Snowden, 2011; Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2015). It is a communicative process through which individuals construct meaning by using language, talk, and interaction to interpret ambiguous situations (Weick *et al.*, 2005). The paper focuses on the entrepreneurial sensemaking process during pivoting from a nascent venture to a sustainable business model. The aim is to explore the interaction mechanisms between the triggers - a disruption that challenges existing understanding and initiates sensemaking (Kocielnik and Hsieh, 2017; Obear, 2007) and enablers - routines, practices, and structures that facilitate the sensemaking process (Maitlis and Lawrence, 2007).

Design/methodology/approach This paper is grounded on a single case study from North Macedonia. Data were collected between January and March 2025 through a written interview and an in-depth, in-person interview with both founders. The analysis was based on the Gioia qualitative inductive research approach (Gioia *et al.*, 2013). In the first stage, 1st-order coding was applied to capture informant-centric terms and experiences of the founders with third-party actors, generating a wide array of descriptive codes related to emotional reactions, pivot decisions, and stakeholder interactions. In the second stage, 2nd-order coding grouped these categories into abstract themes reflecting deeper patterns in the entrepreneurial sensemaking process. Finally, these themes were organized into aggregate dimensions to identify underlying

mechanisms, particularly the role of specific triggers and enablers shaping how sense was made during the venture’s strategic transition.

Findings The analysis revealed distinct types of triggers, such as institutional, individual peer signals, market silence, as well as enabling conditions like urgency, credibility, and relational trust, shaping how and when entrepreneurial sensemaking was initiated and sustained. Additionally in the analysis were identified three distinct mechanisms through which triggers and enablers interact to shape sensemaking were identified: enabler-driven, trigger-driven, and interpretative breakdown. In enabler-driven mechanisms, sensemaking only occurred when the trigger was reinforced by internal or contextual enablers like technical knowledge or urgency. Trigger-driven mechanisms emerged when the trigger was strong or clear enough that sensemaking would likely occur in the same way with or without the presence of an enabler. In contrast, interpretative breakdown mechanisms reflected moments where the absence of clear signals or supportive enablers led to the new concept of the *sensemaking gap*. Finally, we reveal two previously underexplored dimensions of entrepreneurial sensemaking: *self-driven sensemaking* - emerging from pure internally motivated reflections, and *reactive sensemaking* - emerging from authoritative time-bound external pressures. Nevertheless, the findings have some limitations because they are based on a single case, which can limit their broader use and leave out other relevant aspects, such as cross-cultural factors.

Originality/value This paper offers original insight into how distinct types of triggers, such as institutional, individual peer signals, or market silence, interact with enabling conditions like urgency, credibility, and relational trust to shape entrepreneurial sensemaking in nascent entrepreneurial ventures. It moves beyond linear models of decision-making by emphasizing social dimensions through which meaning is constructed and actions are justified. The value lies in providing an understanding of how founders navigate the uncertainty, offering guidance on how support mechanisms can be better tailored to trigger productive sensemaking and timely strategic adaptation. In practical terms, the findings suggest that policy-makers should strengthen this process by supporting the development of entrepreneurship support organizations that offer mentorship programs, peer-learning platforms, and help build trust-based initiatives that can ultimately foster productive sensemaking in new ventures.

Table 1: Triggers, Enablers, and Outcomes of the Sensemaking Process in Nascent Entrepreneurship

Stage	Trigger	Enabler	Mechanism	Outcome
Early incubation phase	Environmental jolt	Technical knowledge/founder activism	Enabler Driven Mechanism	Immediate self-driven sensemaking
Market exploration phase				
Early transition phase	Accelerator invitation: B2B transition requirement	Stagnation and urgency (internal crisis)/Conditional invitation	Enabler Driven Mechanism	Reframed retrospective sensemaking
	Institutional	Authoritative, time-intensive	Trigger-Driven Mechanism	Immediate reactive sensemaking
	Individual peer trigger	Relational connection	Enabler Driven Mechanism	Relational sensemaking

	Absence of a signal (inaction or silence)	/	Interpretative Breakdown Mechanism	Sensemaking gap
	Industry disinterest	Knowledge about validation	Enabler-driven Mechanism	Reflective sensemaking
Late transition phase	Recognition of strategic misalignment	Temporal distance	Trigger-Driven Mechanism	Deliberative collective sensemaking
	Post accelerator investor excitement	Founders' self-confidence	Trigger-Driven Mechanism	Prospective sensemaking
	Market signal of willingness to pay	Legitimacy	Trigger-Driven Mechanism	Ongoing sensemaking

(Source: Author's work)

Keywords: Nascent entrepreneurship, Sensemaking, Pivot, Qualitative process research

JEL classification: L26, D83, M13

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APPENDIX

Table 2: Entrepreneurial transition process

	MyAir	AirXXX (active developed)		AirXXX (support only), EarthXXX.ai	
phase	early incubation phase, 2014 - 2018	market exploration phase, 2018 - 2019	early transition phase, 2020 - 2023	late transition phase, 2023-2024	pre-seed phase, 2025 - (...)
status	pre-startup venture creation			post-startup venture creation	
motivation	development focus		business model focus, customer orientation		
main objective	development of service application	internationalisation of service	business model incubation and experimentation, prototyping, customer research	business model product development (platform)	business model development

(Source: Author’s work)