

Perceived Success and Entrepreneurial Identity in West Africa

Nouha Hajji

Università di Corsica Pasquale Paoli, France

nouhahjj@gmail.com

Abstract: This research aims to understand the Fake It Until You Make It (FIUYMI) culture and its impact on entrepreneurial identity in the West African startup ecosystem. Self-presentation is important for entrepreneurs and often they tend to exaggerate their success. In West Africa, this is usually the case for entrepreneurs that want to gain social acceptance among their peers and to secure funding. It is represented by a desire of belonging and is amplified with digital social platforms and peer pressure. This study aims to evaluate the impact of perceived success using mixed methods research with both qualitative and quantitative data. The qualitative phase consists of semi-structured interviews with 20 startup founders from West Africa. The initial objective is to understand the motivations behind employing FIUYMI behaviour and its effect on the entrepreneurial identity and sense of success. A structured survey is then conveyed to 50 startup founders across the same region. The second objective is to quantitatively assess the prevalence of this behaviour and its impact on self-perception, and psychological well-being. Results suggest that FIUYMI is at first a good strategy for entrepreneurs to enhance perceived credibility and attract support and can be a positive tool for entrepreneurs to some extent as it boosts their confidence and network. It may later lead to psychological stress and has a perverse effect on entrepreneurs of not belonging to their community: Even when they achieve their desired outcome, they may consider their achievements to be fraudulent which is linked to a sense of imposter phenomenon. The research goal is to understand the complexities of perceived success and the 'Fake it Until You Make it' attitude in the West African context informing effective interventions in entrepreneurial behaviour. By showing its negative impact on an entrepreneur's journey, the research also aims to enhance accurate self-presentation and contribute to a more trustworthy entrepreneurial ecosystem in West Africa for entrepreneurs and investors.

Keywords: Entrepreneurial Identity, Perceived Success, Entrepreneurial Behaviour, West Africa

1. Introduction

Entrepreneurship constitutes a pillar of Africa's growth; In 2023, African tech startups attracted a record-breaking \$1.4 billion in venture capital funding (Disrupt Africa, 2023). Entrepreneurship in Africa quickly became front and center of global news. As the market is in the spotlight with many opportunities for entrepreneurs, it is essential for entrepreneurs to project an image of success to attract support and secure funding (Davila, Foster, and Gupta, 2003). According to the African Development Bank Group (2024), West Africa, growth is projected to rise from an estimated 3.2% in 2023 to 4% in 2024 and 4.4% in 2025. In West Africa, it is relevant to make a good impression as social capital is as valuable as financial capital; social acceptance is a key pillar of entrepreneurial success (Light and Dana, 2013). Self-presentation is crucial for entrepreneurs. It has been explored by Goffman (1959) that defined it as the way individuals present themselves and their success to the world.

For entrepreneurs, self-presentation influences the perception of others and facilitates resource acquisition and social validation. Digital platforms like LinkedIn play an important role in this social validation process as they provide new means to reach wider audiences (Henderson and Bowley, 2010). Social platforms come also with their challenge as they intensify peer pressure and the necessity to conform to success norms while managing public image carefully (Afolayan and Folorunso, 2015).

In this dynamic ecosystem, it is easy for entrepreneurs to exaggerate their success and fall into the practice of acting as if they have already attained their objectives (Chen et al, 2009). Guided by a competitive, resource-constrained environment, and the pressure to always maintain a positive image, they tend to falsify the reality of their success to enhance their credibility (Pollack, Barr, and Hanson 2012). This has complex implications for entrepreneurial identity as the pressure to maintain this inflated image of success may impact mental health and authenticity (Parkman, 2016). This also affects building trust within the ecosystem. This research consists of understanding the motives behind this "Fake It Until You Make It" (FIUYMI) culture and measuring its impact on entrepreneurial identity in West Africa. The objective is to inform effective interventions in entrepreneurial behaviour in West Africa and to leverage the insights gained to enhance entrepreneurial practices across the continent.

2. Literature Review

Entrepreneurs' identity is defined by how entrepreneurs perceive themselves and how others see them within the entrepreneurial ecosystem (Jones et al., 2012). Entrepreneurial identity is dynamic and is constantly

challenged by social interactions and entrepreneur's experience (Navis & Glynn, 2011). In Africa, entrepreneurial identity is related to cultural and social beliefs that are specific to the region (Murugesan and Jayavelu, 2017). Social norms and community support are pillars of business success and shape how entrepreneurs present themselves and their startup (Kamoche et al., 2015). In Africa, social status and family ties are central and can either support or hinder entrepreneurial success (Ondiba and Matsui, 2019). Literature shows that family involvement is crucial, and entrepreneurs rely on their network for advice and financial support (Ondiba and Matsui, 2019). Entrepreneurial identity is made in these daily interactions and through peer influence as entrepreneurs look up to each other for validation and support (Sriram and Mersha, 2010).

These Entrepreneurs' behaviours impact their perceived success and constitute a central aspect in entrepreneurs' journey in evaluating their achievements. Perceived success is defined by both tangible results like financial gains and intangible concepts like social recognition (Fisher, Martin, and Lobo, 2016). For these reasons, the way entrepreneurs view their achievements is a critical aspect that affects their motivation and overall well-being (Obeng and Blunder, 2015).

Entrepreneurial identity and perceived success have a mutually reinforcing relationship. A confident entrepreneurial identity can enhance perceived success, entrepreneurs are likely to behave in a way that results in positive outcomes (Cardon et al, 2009). Conversely, perceived success can boost confidence of entrepreneurs in the way they perceive their work (Hoang and Gimeno, 2010).

Societal expectations in West Africa as in the continent, place a high value on visible signs of success and on entrepreneurs' validation by influential community members (George et al., 2016). Attaining entrepreneurs' business objectives is as important as showing one's success (George et al., 2016). Digital platforms like LinkedIn amplifies this need of positive self-presentation (Iwu and Allen-Ile, 2015). Speaking out loud about their achievement helps entrepreneurs gain social acceptance and more importantly, attract potential clients and investors (Shneor and Jenssen, 2014). This digital stage makes entrepreneurs project an image that often inflates their work as they want to appear more successful than they are (Murugesan and Jayavelu, 2017). This attitude is often the one of entrepreneurs who face challenges in attracting resources. It is the case for most entrepreneurs operating in the tech industry (Pollack et al, 2012).

Entrepreneurs who bluff their way to success may experience at first a boost in confidence and credibility (Maxwell, Jeffrey, and Lévasque, 2011). However, in the long run, this can lead to a misalignment between their self-perception and people's opinion which result in a sense of impostor phenomenon (Clance and Imes, 1978). In addition to that, it can cause anxiety for entrepreneurs and psychological stress because of the pressure to conform to their projected vision of success (Murugesan and Jayavelu, 2017). This fear of being unmasked can even cover their genuine achievements, creating a perpetual cycle of self-doubt and stress (Pollack et al, 2012).

For instance, research by Al Halbusi (2024) demonstrates how fear of failure and peer pressure can lead to anxiety among entrepreneurs in emerging countries and in Africa. Additional studies specific to the Nigerian market have shown how this pressure in portraying success creates a challenging environment for durable entrepreneurial growth in the region (George et al, 2016). A recent study by the World Economic Forum (2023), highlighted the importance of having the right growth mindset and how this significantly influences entrepreneurs' success. This requires fostering a culture of transparency and authenticity where entrepreneurs present their real work and achievements without fearing judgment and rejection (Pollack et al, 2012).

Understanding the dynamics between perceived success and entrepreneurial identity is essential to contribute to the broader discourse on entrepreneurship by providing context-specific insights and implications for theory and practice. Ultimately, the objective of this research is to enhance a more accurate self-presentation for entrepreneurs and encourage sustainable business practice to build a trustworthy entrepreneurial culture in Africa.

3. Methodology

The research conducted is non-experimental and consists of a data population of 20 West African Startup founders selected through purposive sampling for qualitative analysis and involves 50 founders selected through stratified random sampling for quantitative analysis. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews for the qualitative scientific procedures and explained with thematic analysis. For the quantitative study, data were collected through a survey covering demographics, self-perception and psychological well-being. The last analysis used descriptive and inferential statistics in order to test and validate the research hypothesis. By combining qualitative and quantitative scientific procedures, the objective of this study is to offer a nuanced understanding of the complex dynamics at play in the FIUYMI culture among West African entrepreneurs.

For the qualitative phase, semi-structured interviews allowed to gather data from 20 startup founders. A diverse representation across various industries, ages, genders and business stages was possible thanks to purposive sampling and allowed for a rich exploration of participants motivation and experience with FIUYMI behaviour. The data population consists of tech startups from West Africa, representing startups at different stages of maturity and countries. The purpose of this first study is to get insight from West African entrepreneurs to better understand the perception they have about their entrepreneurial identity and their practices (if any) of amplifying their success. Participants anonymity is assured, encouraging them to share honestly about their journey. The interviews are guided by a structural framework based on existing literature and theoretical models related to entrepreneurial behaviour and psychological well-being (Kvale, 1996; Smith et al., 2010; Jones, 2015). Each interview lasts about an hour and is conducted either in person or virtually. Thematic analysis is then employed to identify patterns within the data to gather common entrepreneur's behaviour.

For the quantitative study, a structured survey was administered to 50 startup founders, selected using stratified random sampling. For this phase of the study, the objective was to ensure that the sample accurately reflects the broader population of West African startup founders to get relevant insights about entrepreneur's journey. The data population as for the interviewees, are assured of their anonymity and are tech startup founders from West Africa representing various industries and stages of business. The survey included measures on self-perception using the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965) and on psychological well-being with the GAD-7 scale (Spitzer et al, 2006) and the Perceived Stress Scale (Cohen et al, 1983). The digital format allows for direct integration with statistical software. Descriptive statistics was used to provide an overview of the data, while inferential statistics allowed to test the study hypothesis and explore the relations between the variables.

4. Research Objectives

The objective of this research is to understand entrepreneur's behaviour when it comes to amplifying their success. The objective is also to measure the impact of exaggerating achievement on an entrepreneur's self-perception and well-being. Fake It Until You Make It (FIUYMI) behaviour will be discussed as FIUYMI throughout the study. They are defined and are not limited to exaggerating achievement, past experiences, enhancing qualification or overstating stage of development/partnerships.

To evaluate their impact, three hypotheses were formulated and allowed to guide the research:

H1: There is a negative relationship between frequent FIUYMI behaviour and entrepreneur's self-esteem.

H2: There is a positive relationship between frequent FIUYMI behaviour and entrepreneur's anxiety levels.

H3: There is a positive relationship between frequent FIUYMI behaviour and entrepreneur's stress levels.

5. Findings

5.1 Qualitative Study

The qualitative study is preliminary research that aims to understand the reasoning of entrepreneurs and why they may amplify their success. It is an essential step before measuring the prevalence and impact of this behaviour. Findings from the qualitative analysis provided in-depth insights into the experiences of entrepreneurs with FIUYMI behaviours and the motivation behind their actions.

The interviews revealed that entrepreneurs frequently exaggerate their success to navigate the competitive and resource-constrained environment they are part of. A significant theme that emerged in this regard was the role of social pressure and expectations, which pushed entrepreneurs to project an image of success. For many, amplifying their success was a necessity to be part of the ecosystem, gain social acceptance and attract first clients and investors. Regarding their behaviour, participants indicated for the most part that these practices initially boost their confidence and credibility and were indeed facilitating resource acquisition and peer validation. They also can't help but feel a sense of imposter syndrome that leads to stress and anxiety to maintain that always positive image of success. This behaviour was particularly evident among early-stage founders. The following table provides insights using original statements by the interviewees.

Table 1: Key findings from the qualitative study

Theme	Sub-Themes	Key Findings
Understanding what FIUYMI Behaviour are	Perceptions and Perceived Success	Some entrepreneurs exaggerate achievements, past experiences, number of clients, stages of development and or partnerships and collaboration.
Motivations Behind FIUYMI Behaviour	Social Pressure and Expectations, Resource Acquisition and Investment Attraction	Entrepreneurs feel compelled to exaggerate their success due to societal expectations and the need to secure funding.
Influence of Digital Platforms	Amplification of Success, Peer Pressure and Competition	Digital platforms like LinkedIn amplify the need for positive self-presentation which increases peer pressure and competition among entrepreneurs. Constant visibility intensifies the pressure to maintain an image of success.
Impact on Self-Perception	Short-Term Confidence Boost, Long-Term Psychological Strain	It initially enhances self-esteem but often leads to long-term psychological stress and anxiety. Entrepreneurs experience a conflict between their projected image and their genuine self-perception, contributing to imposter syndrome.
Cultural and Social Factors	Community Support and Validation, Family Involvement and Expectations	Cultural norms and family expectations significantly influence entrepreneurs' behaviour. Entrepreneurs rely heavily on their social network for support and validation.
Long-Term Effects	Sustainability of Success, Authenticity and Trust Building	Over time, maintaining an exaggerated image of success becomes unsustainable. The disconnect between perceived and actual success impacts trust in the ecosystem.

5.2 Quantitative Study

The quantitative study allowed us first to get insight on the frequency of FIUYMI behaviour and classify them based on their frequency and business stage.

The study showed that these behaviours are highly prevalent among West African startup founders. From our 50-population data, 44 entrepreneurs reported engaging in amplifying their work and exaggerating their success. This high prevalence underscores the significant role of perceived success and social acceptance in the entrepreneur's journey. Every industry is concerned, with a clear focus on tech industries which probably reflects a common response to competitive and resource-constrained environments. The highest percentage of respondents, 40%, occasionally engage in these practices. In that case, occasional use can be considered as a strategic tool rather than a habitual practice. The most concerning is the frequent and very frequent category that concerns about half of the population data. Very frequent engagement might correlate with higher levels of psychological stress and imposter syndrome, as maintaining such a facade can be mentally challenging.

Table 2: Frequency of FIUYMI behaviour

Frequency of FIUYMI behaviour	Percentage
Never	12 %
Occasionally (Every month)	40 %
Frequently (Every week)	26 %
Very frequently (Many times a week)	22 %

Looking at the data distribution by business stages showed that early and growth startups are the most concerned with frequent and very frequent FIUYMI behaviour. The high percentage for early stages can be attributed to the intense pressure on new businesses to validate their business concepts and to attract initial funding. Founders in the growth stage still rely on projecting an enhanced image of success but there is a slight decrease in frequent and very frequent engagement compared to the early stage. As businesses mature, the reliance on FIUYMI behaviours diminishes with 30% entrepreneurs that don't feel the necessity to project an

inflated image. These practices remain quite common occasionally even for mature businesses suggesting that even if the business has established its reputation and stability, there remains a need to occasionally project a slightly enhanced image to maintain their market position and appeal to potential investors or partners. It can also be linked to specific events that are part of the startup life like new product launches and funding rounds. This shows the necessity at every stage to address these dynamics fostering a culture of authenticity to contribute to a healthier and more sustainable entrepreneurial ecosystem.

Table 3: Prevalence of FIUYMI Behaviour according to the business stage

Business Stage	Never	Occasionally	Frequently	Very Frequently
Early Stage	8%	36%	32%	24%
Growth Stage	7%	39%	27%	27%
Maturity Stage	30%	50%	10%	10%

To better test the hypotheses, the second part of the quantitative analysis was about measuring the impact of these behaviours on self-perception and well-being among West African startup founders. The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale was then used to measure Self-Perception for entrepreneurs, it consists of 10 items rated on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from "Strongly Agree" to "Strongly Disagree." According to that scale, higher scores indicate higher self-esteem (Rosenberg 1965). For the surveyed entrepreneurs that never or occasionally used these practices, the mean self-esteem is 21 indicating a moderate level of self-esteem. Entrepreneurs who frequently and very frequently engaged in FIUYMI behaviour had lower self-esteem scores, with a mean score of 17. Data shows This can suggest that for entrepreneurs who tend to exaggerate their success, self-perception tends to decrease.

To measure psychological well-being the GAD-7 scale was used, it measured anxiety with 7 items rated on a 4-point scale ranging from "Not at all" to "Nearly every day" (Spitzer et al. 2006). Stress was also measured using the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS), that evaluates perceived stress with 10 items rated on a 5-point scale from "Never" to "Very often" (Cohen et al. 1983)

For both scales, higher scores were significantly correlated with frequent FIUYMI behaviour. The mean GAD-7 scores among participants who never or occasionally use this practice was 7 while it was 9 for the frequent and very frequent population. The pressure to maintain a facade of success can contribute to increased anxiety among entrepreneurs.

Regarding the PSS scale, the average PSS score for participants who never overstate their work was 15. It was 21,2 for the participants that frequently and very frequently amplify their achievements. Participants who engaged more frequently in FIUYMI behaviours reported higher stress levels.

The findings highlight the potential negative psychological impacts of such practices, reinforcing the need for interventions that promote authentic self-presentation and mental well-being within the entrepreneurial ecosystem.

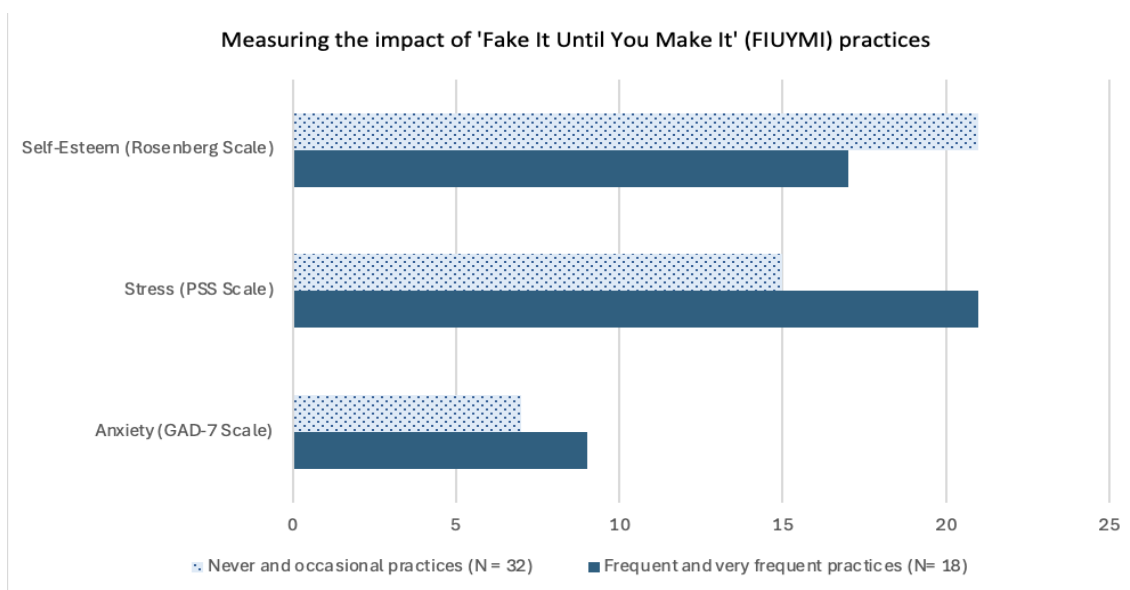


Figure 1: Measuring the impact of FIUYMI practices.

Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated for each of the three measures to further validate the impact of these behaviours on the self-perception and psychological well-being of the data population. The analysis focused on participants engaging frequently and very frequently in FIUYMI behaviours. By performing a correlation analysis, we can properly identify the strength and direction of these relationships. Measuring correlation clearly indicates that the hypotheses are validated, and entrepreneur’s practices affect entrepreneur’s identity.

Table 4: Measuring the correlation of FIUYMI behaviour against entrepreneur’s well-being.

Measure	Correlation coefficient (r)
Self-Esteem (Rosenberg Scale)	-0,7
Stress (PSS Scale)	+0,6
Anxiety (GAD-7 Scale)	+0,65

6. Discussion and Conclusion

Table 5: Hypothesis validation from the study results

Hypothesis	Results
H1: There is a negative relationship between frequent FIUYMI behaviour and self-esteem among entrepreneurs.	Supported
H2: There is a positive relationship between frequent FIUYMI behaviour and anxiety levels among entrepreneurs.	Supported
H3: There is a positive relationship between frequent FIUYMI behaviour and stress levels among entrepreneurs.	Supported

These findings convey the need for practical interventions on both individuals and ecosystem level. For the individuals, it is about providing entrepreneurs with access to a support system and the right mental health resources. The objective is to mitigate the negative psychological impact of the FIUYMI culture. For the ecosystem, investors, incubators and accelerators should always prioritize transparency and authenticity as core values to promote open communication about the challenges of entrepreneurship. It is also about showing that failure is a possible option and should not be stigmatized. This study has shown that authenticity is essential to

foster an environment where entrepreneurs feel comfortable sharing their genuine progress and setbacks (Cohen, 1983). It is also important to address these issues as this can significantly reduce anxiety and stress among entrepreneurs (Spitzer, 2006).

This study also highlights the specific cultural and contextual factors influencing West African entrepreneurs and contributes to the broader literature on entrepreneurial identity and self-presentation. It provided qualitative and quantitative data to show a nuanced understanding of entrepreneurial behaviour and identity. The need for social validation often drives entrepreneurs to engage in FIUMI practices. Future research can build on these highlights by exploring how interventions aimed at promoting authenticity and mental health can be evaluated and implemented across different entrepreneurial ecosystems.

References

- African Development Bank Group (2024). Africa's Macroeconomic Performance and Outlook January 2024.
- Brooks, I. and Weatherston, J. (1997). *The Business Environment: Challenges and Changes*. Prentice Hall, London.
- Brzozowski, M. J., Sandholm, T., & Hogg, T. (2009). "Effects of Feedback and Peer Pressure on Contributions to Enterprise Social Media". *Proceedings of the ACM 2009 International Conference on Supporting Group Work*, pp. 61-70.
- Cardon, M. S., Wincent, J., Singh, J., & Drnovsek, M. (2009). "The nature and experience of entrepreneurial passion". *Academy of Management Review*, 34(3), pp. 511-532.
- Chen, X.-P., Yao, X., & Kotha, S. (2009). "Entrepreneur Passion and Preparedness in Business Plan Presentations: A Persuasion Analysis of Venture Capitalists' Funding Decisions". *Academy of Management Journal*, 52(1), pp. 199-214.
- Cohen, S., Kamarck, T., and Mermelstein, R. (1983). "A Global Measure of Perceived Stress". *Journal of Health and Social Behaviour*, 24(4), pp. 385-396.
- Davila, A., Foster, G., & Gupta, M. (2003). "Venture Capital Financing and the Growth of Startup Firms". *Journal of Business Venturing*, 18(6), pp. 689-708.
- Disrupt Africa (2023). *The African Tech Startups Funding Report 2023*.
- Doherty, Noel and Delener, Nejd. (2001). "Chaos Theory: Marketing and Management Implications". *Journal of Marketing Theory and Practice*, Fall, Vol. 9, No. 4, pp. 66-75.
- Fisher, R., Maritz, A., & Lobo, A. (2016). "Does individual resilience influence entrepreneurial success?". *Academy of Entrepreneurship Journal*, 22(2), pp. 39-53.
- George, G., Corbishley, C., Khayesi, J. N. O., Haas, M. R., & Tihanyi, L. (2016). "Bringing Africa In: Promising Directions for Management Research". *Academy of Management Journal*, 59(2), pp. 377-393.
- Goffman, E. (1959). *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Anchor Books, New York.
- Henderson, A., & Bowley, R. (2010). "'Authentic Dialogue? The Role of 'Friendship' in a Social Media Recruitment Campaign". *Journal of Communication Management*, 14(3), pp. 237-257.
- Hoang, H., & Gimeno, J. (2010). "Becoming a founder: How founder role identity affects entrepreneurial transitions and persistence in founding". *Journal of Business Venturing*, 25(1), pp. 41-53.
- Jones, P., Ratten, V., Klapper, R., & Fayolle, A. (2019). "Entrepreneurial identity and context: Current trends and an agenda for future research". *The International Journal of Entrepreneurship and Innovation*, 20(1), pp. 3-7.
- Kamoche, K., Siebers, L. Q., Mamman, A., & Newenham-Kahindi, A. (2015). "The dynamics of managing people in the diverse cultural and institutional context of Africa". *Personnel Review*, 44(3), pp. 330-345.
- Kariv, D. (2011). *Entrepreneurship: An International Introduction*. Routledge, pp. 45-67.
- Light, I., & Dana, L. P. (2013). "Boundaries of Social Capital in Entrepreneurship". *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice*, 37(3), pp. 603-624.
- Maxwell, A., Jeffrey, S., & Lévasque, M. (2011). "Business Angel Early-Stage Decision Making". *Academy of Management Perspectives*, 25(3), pp. 183-184.
- Murugesan, R., & Jayavelu, R. (2017). "The influence of big five personality traits and self-efficacy on entrepreneurial intention: The role of gender". *Journal of Entrepreneurship and Innovation in Emerging Economies*, 3(1), pp. 41-61.
- Navis, C., & Glynn, M. A. (2011). "Legitimate distinctiveness and the entrepreneurial identity: Influence on investor judgments of new venture plausibility". *Academy of Management Review*, 36(3), pp. 479-499.
- Ondiba, H. A., & Matsui, K. (2019). "Social attributes and factors influencing entrepreneurial behaviours among rural women in Kakamega County, Kenya". *Journal of Global Entrepreneurship Research*, 9(1), pp. 1-20.
- Parkman, A. (2016). "The Imposter Phenomenon in Higher Education: Incidence and Impact". *Journal of Higher Education Theory and Practice*, 16(1), pp. 51-60.
- Pollack, J. M., Barr, S. H., & Hanson, S. E. (2012). "Preparedness and Cognitive Legitimacy as Antecedents of New Venture Funding in the Emerging Stage". *Academy of Management Journal*, 55(4), pp. 963-989.
- Rosenberg, M. (1965). *Society and the Adolescent Self-Image*. Princeton University Press.
- Spitzer, R. L., Kroenke, K., Williams, J. B. W., & Löwe, B. (2006). "A brief measure for assessing generalized anxiety disorder: the GAD-7". *Archives of Internal Medicine*, 166(10), pp. 1092-1097.
- Sriram, V., & Mersha, T. (2010). "Stimulating entrepreneurship in Africa". *World Journal of Entrepreneurship, Management and Sustainable Development*, 6(1/2), pp. 9-19.
- Wang, Y., & Guo, D. (2020). "Digital Innovation and Entrepreneurial Success: A Systematic Literature Review". *Journal of Business Research*, 118, pp. 277-288.