

Interpersonal Relationships in Entrepreneurial Team Research: a Meta-Analysis Using Advanced Computational Methods

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Abstract: This study examines how interpersonal relationships are positioned within entrepreneurial team (ET) research, focusing on how relational themes such as trust, conflict, cohesion, diversity, and collaboration are distributed across dominant research streams. Moving beyond conventional literature reviews and performance-centred perspectives, the study provides a systematic, data-driven mapping of relational orientations in ET scholarship. Using three complementary text analysis techniques, namely topic modelling, term network analysis, and large language model (LLM)-assisted text extraction, the study examines 916 abstracts of peer-reviewed articles, book chapters, and conference papers published between 1995 and 2025. This integrated approach enables multi-level analysis of a large corpus and the identification of latent research streams derived from the substantive focus of each study, followed by an examination of their term networks. Findings show that although nearly half of the publications address internal team functioning, relational constructs remain concentrated within a relatively isolated subset of research on team processes and team properties. In contrast, outward-looking research on investment, strategic growth, and international entrepreneurship largely omits explicit relational perspectives. Conflict, resilience, team reflexivity, team formation, team dynamics, transactive memory systems, and trust emerge as prominent relational constructs but are often isolated from ecosystem-level inquiry. Notably, ecosystem actors such as incubators and universities typically appear as contextual background rather than as influential agents shaping intra-team dynamics, suggesting a disconnect between ecosystem discourse and relational team mechanisms across multiple theoretical and empirical contexts. The study contributes to human-centred entrepreneurship research by offering a high-resolution analysis of relational concepts in ET scholarship. It clarifies how interpersonal relationships are presented in ET studies and identifies blind spots, particularly the limited integration of relational themes into ecosystem-level research. It also highlights opportunities to better integrate entrepreneurial ecosystem stakeholders, including academia, support organisations, policymakers, and industry actors, to strengthen collaboration, trust-building, and the development of resilient startup teams.

Keywords: Entrepreneurial Teams, Interpersonal Relationships, Relational Orientation, Human-centred Entrepreneurship, Meta-analysis

1. Introduction

Interpersonal relationships are a key mechanism through which entrepreneurial team (ET) members build trust, cohesion, mutual support, collaboration, knowledge exchange, and other attitudes and attributes that contribute to both venture performance and the team's internal climate (Anderson and West, 1998; Francis and Sandberg, 2000; Love *et al.*, 2021). This internal climate, in turn, underpins the team's long-term success, which can carry over to other ventures, and subsequent team formations (Patzelt, Preller and Breugst, 2021).

Although interpersonal relationships are a crucial element of team functioning, the ET research field lacks a systematic mapping of studies related to interpersonal relationships. Such mapping facilitates an understanding of how relational themes and concepts are positioned within ET scholarship in relation to other topics, enabling the identification of both research gaps and studies that can be drawn upon. Additionally, it offers a lens for connecting new research to the broader development of the field by relating and juxtaposing arguments with those of other scholars.

This study addresses this need by mapping the themes and concepts related to interpersonal relationships in existing research on entrepreneurial teams (ETs). Using machine learning and natural language processing techniques, including topic modelling (Grootendorst, 2022) and text network analysis (Van Eck and Waltman, 2007), supported by LLM-assisted text extraction (Foisy *et al.*, 2025), and applied to a corpus of 916 abstracts from peer-reviewed papers published over the past three decades, the study identifies thematic clusters and semantic patterns that naturally emerge from how researchers describe and frame their work.

While conventional ET research prioritises performance as the primary outcome of team functioning, this study shifts focus to intra-team relational aspects, thereby suggesting an alternative research lens for a more human-centred investigation of ETs. In addition to examining relational orientations in ET scholarship, it contributes to a broader understanding of the field by providing a detailed breakdown of research streams, which helped locate relational concepts in this study and may guide future research aiming to deepen and expand ET knowledge in other areas.

2. Analytical Framework

This study focuses on relational orientations in ET scholarship, understood as analytical perspectives that foreground interpersonal relationships, socio-emotional processes, and socially embedded interactions within entrepreneurial teams. Researchers address relational aspects through diverse frameworks, including 'interpersonal relationships', 'social capital', and 'kin ties' (e.g. Klotz *et al.*, 2014; Lazar *et al.*, 2020). Although these frameworks emphasize different aspects of relational phenomena, such as relational structures, relational qualities, and interaction dynamics, they converge in treating relational aspects as important elements for understanding and developing teams, thereby supporting a more human-centred view of entrepreneurial teams.

Because relational orientations are dispersed across many studies, rarely appear as a central focus, and described using varying terminology, they are difficult to identify systematically across large scholarly corpora. To address this challenge, this study adopts elements of a qualitative meta-analytical approach (Timulak, 2009), supported by computational methodologies, to aggregate key concepts and explore thematic patterns and commonalities across studies. This differs from conventional bibliometric studies, which typically map authors, citation patterns, thematic trends, and dominant journals or institutions, and from literature reviews, which usually examine a smaller set of carefully selected publications in depth. Instead, the present analysis develops theoretical arguments at a higher level of abstraction while drawing on a large corpus of primary research. By combining a large dataset with a focused research question, it addresses a widely recognised yet underexplored area of team processes (Jones *et al.*, 2019; Horvatinovic, Mikic and Dabić, 2023; Zayadin *et al.*, 2023).

Performance-oriented entrepreneurial research largely defines ET success through venture survival, business goal achievement, and financial performance. An earlier bibliometric study has already pointed out the dominance of performance orientation in entrepreneurial scholarship (Wales *et al.*, 2021). At the level of intra-team research, scholars have long established the term 'task orientation' (e.g. Forsyth, 1983; McGrath, 1984), which translates performance orientation from the higher venture level to the level of intra-team relationships. In contrast, scholars also recognise 'relational orientation' within teams and highlight the task–relationship dichotomy (e.g. Vanderheyden, Lommelen and Cools, 2010; Zhou, Vredenburg and Rogoff, 2015). 'Relational orientation' generally refers to socio-emotional aspects of team processes, including of interpersonal relationships, affective ties, team cohesion, and interpersonal alignment, as well as the overall socio-emotional climate within a team (Vanderheyden, Lommelen and Cools, 2010). This tension between dominant performance-centred perspectives and more relational, human-centred perspectives motivates the present study.

This study identifies relational orientation through scholars' use of relational terms, defined here as terms signalling bidirectional and relational aspects of team-member interactions. By contrast, some concepts may imply bidirectional interaction without reflecting relational aspects; such terms are not considered relational. Non-relational terms, in turn, do not signal bidirectionality at all.

3. Methods and Data

This meta-analysis uses a data-driven approach on a large dataset to identify patterns in how scholars use constructs belonging to a relatively narrow analytical perspective within a broader domain of scholarship. It aims to track relational orientations across three structural levels of the scholarship: macro - across the whole corpus; meso - within a collection of documents belonging to a distinct thematic topic within the corpus; and micro - at the level of how specific concepts co-occur and relate to other concepts across multiple documents within a selected thematic topic.

The corpus consists of peer-reviewed abstracts that inherently contain key information on each study. Unlike many literature reviews and bibliometric studies, the selection criteria included not only journal articles but also book chapters and conference papers. The inclusion of a wider range of publication types ensured broader coverage of peer-reviewed materials that better reflect research on ETs, and allowed the assembly of a corpus of sufficient size for the chosen computational methods.

Abstracts of peer-reviewed articles, book chapters, and conference papers published between 1995 and 2025, written in English, and at the final stage of publication were downloaded from the Scopus database on 24 February 2026. The following search query was used to identify matches in publication titles, abstracts, or keywords:

("entrepreneurial team" OR "new venture team*" OR "startup team*" OR "start-up team*" OR "cofounding team" OR "founding team*" OR "founder team*")*

The search criteria also excluded publications that do not belong to the disciplines of business, management and accounting; economics, econometrics and finance; social sciences; decision sciences; or psychology. The search yielded 955 publications, of which 34 were missing abstracts and 5 were duplicates; these were excluded from the analysis, resulting in 916 abstracts selected for analysis.

While the further use of several computational approaches may seem complex, it was justified by the distinct purpose each served in enabling the level of detail required for the investigation and in linking macro-, meso-, and micro-levels of the ET scholarship corpus structure. An LLM was first used to pre-process each document in order to maximise natural clustering and reduce noise in further analyses. Building on this, topic modelling allowed to identify latent thematic topics across the corpus, producing a high-level view on the structure of the ET scholarship. Term network analysis was applied to 'zoom in' into each of these topics identifying terms clusters and relations between terms that would otherwise remain unseen.

The analytical procedure consisted of four sequential steps, each building on the results of the previous step: (1) verbatim extraction of the substantive focus of each study from their abstracts using Mistral-Small-3.2 LLM, released in June 2025 and featuring improved reasoning capabilities (Mistral AI, 2025); (2) identification of latent topics using BERTopic (Grootendorst, 2022); (3) construction of term networks using VOSviewer (Van Eck and Waltman, 2007) for each identified topic separately; and (4) interpretation of results using data derived from both topic modelling and term network analysis, supported by close reading of selected documents.

Verbatim extraction of the substantive focus of each study was a necessary step to reduce noise in subsequent topic modelling and term network analysis, while ensuring that the original use of terms by scholars remained intact. For each abstract, the LLM was prompted to extract text segments that define the core conceptual content of the study, omitting the research scaffolding, which may include non-substantive elements such as contextual background, procedural narrative, contributions of the research, and other forms of text that connect the study to the research field rather than describe its essence.

In order to identify thematic topics within the corpus, we applied BERTopic, an unsupervised topic modelling technique that clusters documents based on semantic patterns in the text (Grootendorst, 2022). BERTopic has also been shown to outperform other topic modelling techniques in terms of topic coherence when applied to short texts similar in length to the abstract excerpts used in this study (McInnes and Healy, 2017; Groot, Aliannejadi and Haas, 2022). The granularity of clustering was adjusted using the UMAP dimensionality reduction model and the `min_cluster_size` parameter, which were configured to produce a number of topics aligned with the size and complexity of the corpus, i.e. 10 to 15 topics.

Further, for each of the 14 topics identified with BERTopic, we generated a term co-occurrence network. For this, we employed VOSviewer software, which applies natural language processing algorithms to generate noun-phrase co-occurrence networks (Van Eck and Waltman, 2007). Fourteen subsets of documents, one network per topic, were processed using VOSviewer's default clustering settings, resulting in 14 term networks. Each network was configured to include noun-phrases that occur in at least three documents and are thus considered to have significant presence in the corpus. Co-occurrences within individual documents were excluded, as the analysis focused on cross-document co-occurrence patterns.

Finally, analysis of topic representations computed by BERTopic, term networks generated with VOSviewer, and close reading of selected documents were used to interpret the content of the generated topics and to examine the distribution and occurrence of relational concepts across the corpus.

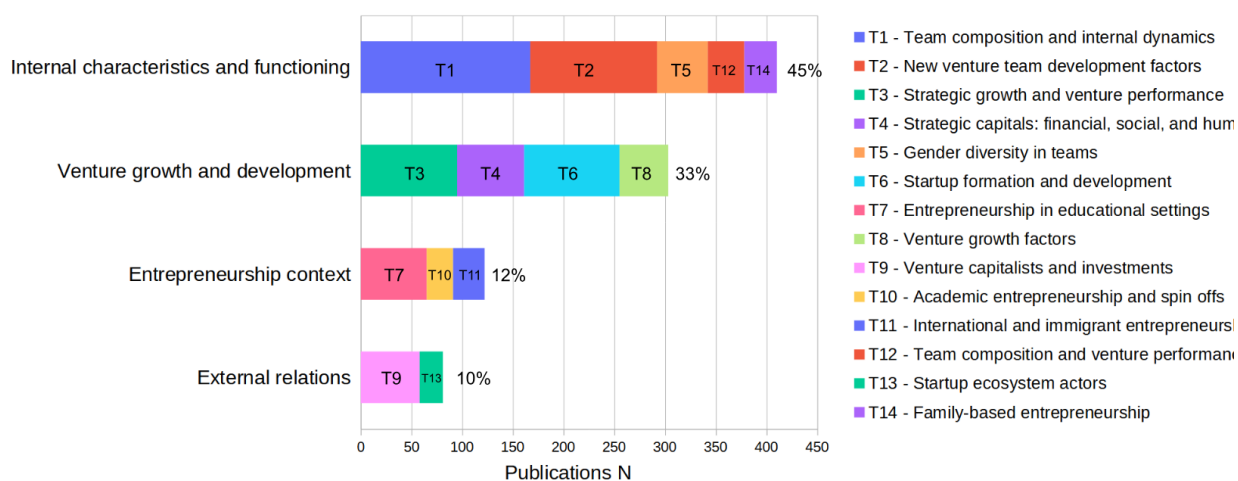
4. Results

The findings include a high-level mapping of the ET research field based on the interpretation of 14 distinct topics identified using BERTopic (see Table 1), and a more detailed analysis of relational constructs using term network analysis conducted separately for each identified topic.

Table 1: Topics identified using BERTopic

	Topic Name	Docs N	Weight	Top 10 representative terms
T1	Team composition and internal dynamics	167	18%	conflict, diversity, passion, resilience, team performance, leadership, entrepreneurial teams, cognitive, decision, influence
T2	New venture team development factors	125	14%	founding teams, ventures, founders, entrepreneurial teams, behaviors, venture teams, strategy, entrepreneurial team, new ventures, new venture teams
T3	Strategic growth and venture performance	95	10%	founding team, growth, venture, firms, ventures, founders, startup, ceo, new ventures, effect
T4	Strategic capitals: financial, social, and human	66	7%	capital, social capital, entrepreneurial, investors, venture, funding, impact, role, founders, founding team
T5	Gender diversity in teams	50	5%	women, entrepreneurs, gender diversity, social, ventures, equity, women entrepreneurs, role, founding teams, female entrepreneurs
T6	Startup formation and development	94	10%	digital, entrepreneurial, startups, freelancers, development, entrepreneurs, start ups, factors, key, innovation
T7	Entrepreneurship in educational settings	65	7%	students, entrepreneurial, entrepreneurship, development, entrepreneurial teams, study, competencies, factors, results, entrepreneurs
T8	Venture growth factors	48	5%	growth, knowledge, entrepreneurial, ntbfs, human capital, organizational, venture, strategic, capabilities, factors
T9	Venture capitalists and investments	58	6%	vcs, investment, startup, venture capitalists, entrepreneurial, evaluation, risk, decision making, based, venture capital
T10	Academic entrepreneurship and spin offs	26	3%	spin offs, university spin, academic spin, usos, university spin offs, parent universities, academic spin offs, founding team, internationalization, entrepreneurial
T11	International and immigrant entrepreneurship	31	3%	immigrant, experience, founding team, entrepreneurial, new ventures, firm, international responsiveness, esg performance, strategic orientation, foreign
T12	Team composition and venture performance	36	4%	diversity, new, venture, team composition, founding team, environmental, team diversity, hybrids, survival, led hybrids
T13	Startup ecosystem actors	23	3%	business angels, entrepreneurs, startups, accelerator, investors, ai, academic, failures, bas, funding
T14	Family-based entrepreneurship	32	3%	family, entrepreneurs, ownership, family ties, contributions, family non family, family co, family co founders, team members, relative

The 14 identified topics were thematically grouped into four higher-level research streams, reflecting dominant orientations in ET scholarship (see Figure 1). These streams cover key directions in how scholars address fundamental questions about ETs: what they are, how they grow and develop, where they operate, and what their external relations are.

**Figure 1: Identified topics grouped into high-level research streams.**

The largest research stream, comprising close to half of the corpus, focuses on teams' internal characteristics and functioning. This stream includes topics such as team composition and internal dynamics, factors of a new venture development, gender diversity in teams, team composition and venture performance, and family-based entrepreneurship. These themes represent the main strands of intra-team-oriented ET scholarship, which often address relational aspects of team functioning.

A research stream focusing on venture growth and development accounts for over a third of the corpus. This stream includes topics covering both strategic and operational dimensions that are critical for ventures. The strategic dimension involves venture orientation in terms of growth and performance, and capital orientation, where financial, social and human capital are the most prominent. The operational dimension consists of topics on startup formation and development, and factors of a venture growth.

Entrepreneurship contexts are prominent in a research stream that accounts for 12% of the corpus and includes three quite distinct topics: entrepreneurship in educational settings, academic entrepreneurship and spin-offs, and international and immigrant entrepreneurship.

The smallest research stream comprises 10% of the corpus and focuses on ETs' relations with external actors. Two topics within this stream cover relations with venture capitalists and investment, and with broader entrepreneurial ecosystem actors.

Collectively, these four streams cover three levels of ET research from Entrepreneurial Ecosystem (EE) structural perspective: the stream on ET internal characteristics and functioning addresses the micro level; venture growth and development covers the organisational meso level; and the streams on entrepreneurship context and external relations reflect the broader EE level. This distribution suggests that scholars are almost equally concerned with intra-team characteristics and processes as with aspects extending beyond ETs' internal functioning. Nevertheless, the prominence of the topic of team composition and internal dynamics underscores that an intra-team orientation remains central, and relational aspects are emerging as an important focus of many investigations.

While topic modelling enabled the identification of latent thematic topics in the corpus, term network analysis provided a more granular view within each topic. Only terms occurring in at least three documents were included in the networks, and relational terms constitute a subset of all identified terms. Before proceeding to the results of a deeper analysis of relational concepts in the corpus, it is worth noting that in 10 out of 14 topics, "performance" appears as a highly central term, reflecting a conventional instrumental perspective on ETs. Two more topics are dominated by the slightly more inclusive term "success". The two remaining topics, in which neither "performance" nor "success" are salient, cover themes related to startup ecosystem actors and family-based entrepreneurship. In light of this performance-oriented dominance, the examination of relational orientations becomes even more valuable, as it represents an alternative and underexplored analytical perspective.

Relational terms mostly appear in topics related to team composition, internal dynamics, and new venture team development factors. Family-based entrepreneurship revolves around "family ties", an inherently relational concept, though it does not specify the relational orientations involved. Such a relatively isolated concentration of relational terms suggests that intra-team relational concepts remain largely invisible in outward-looking topics that do not explicitly address internal team functioning. This may be attributed to the conventional tendency of meso- and macro-level research streams to approach ET issues through economic, structural, and institutional lenses. This pattern may also reflect methodological constraints, whereby both macro-level and meso-level studies tend to treat intra-team relational aspects as implicit background conditions rather than as measured variables.

To better understand how relational concepts are positioned within the two topics in which these concepts are most prominent, it is useful to examine term co-occurrence networks generated for each topic based on the documents they contain. Figure 2 presents a term network for the 'Team composition and internal dynamics' topic. While the size of each node in the network reflects the frequency of term co-occurrences across documents, the term scores shown in the top-right corner, derived from the c-TF-IDF algorithm used in BERTopic, indicate the representativeness of the top 10 terms in the topic, enabling an assessment of their significance. The most prominent relational terms are underlined to facilitate their identification within the network.

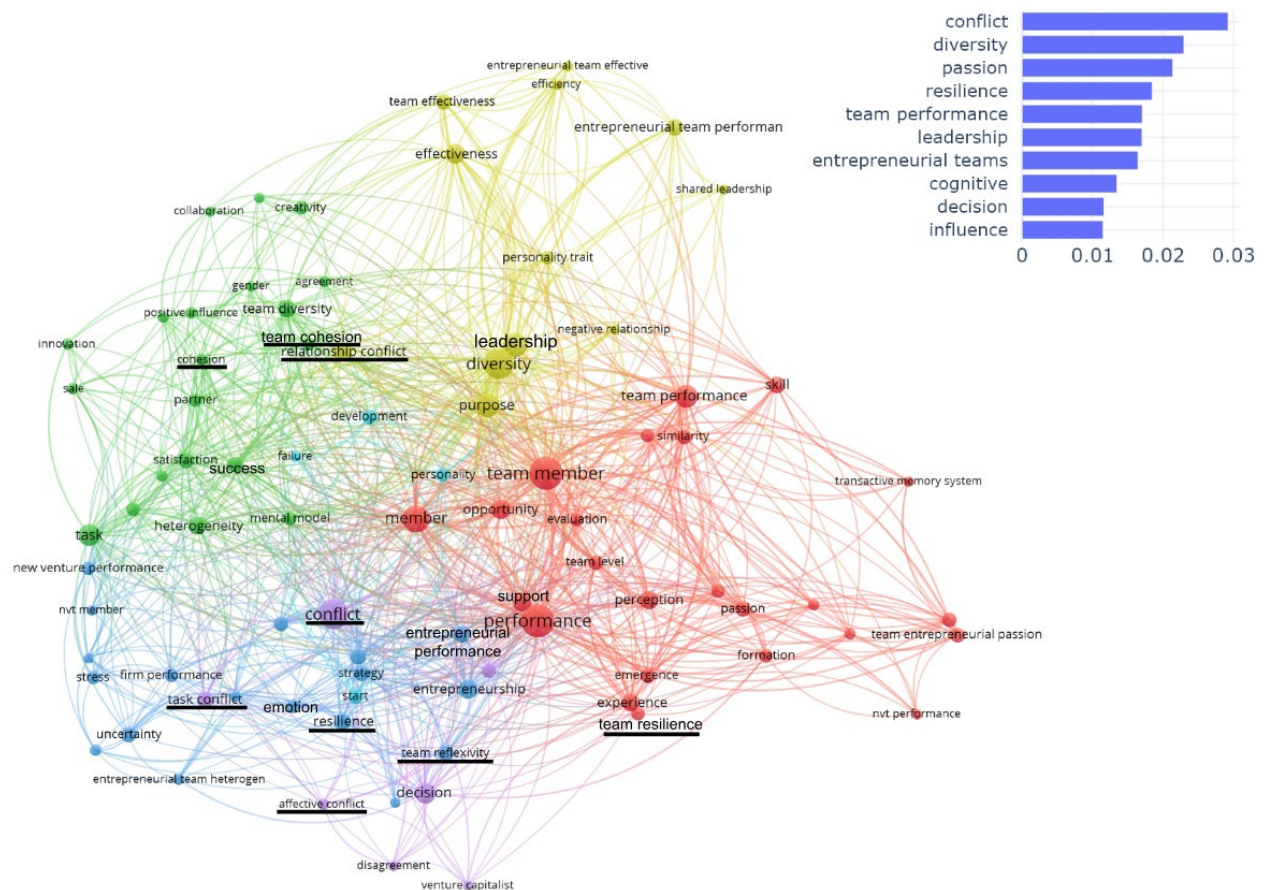


Figure 2: Term network of 'Team composition and internal dynamics' topic with top 10 representative terms scores.

'Conflict' emerges as the most prominent relational term and is largely concentrated within the 'Team composition and internal dynamics' topic. This topic also often mentions task conflict and affective conflict, as researchers tend to distinguish between these two types within the broader concept of team conflict. The results of this study suggest that task conflict appears to be more prevalent in ET scholarship, as it co-occurs with terms from five of the six network clusters and appears in twice as many documents as 'affective conflict'. The second most prominent term within this topic, 'resilience', appears to balance this emphasis on critical issues and instead reflects a desirable state sought in ETs, one that results from intra-team relational processes. This term appears in two clusters that are bridged by another relational concept, 'team reflexivity', suggesting that these concepts are of significant importance to one another.

Figure 3 demonstrates a term network for the topic 'New venture team development factors'. This topic is the second largest in the corpus and also ranks second in terms of the presence of relational terms. Interestingly, with the exception of 'team cohesiveness', the relational terms in this topic do not overlap with those from the previous topic.

The prevalent relational concepts in this topic primarily relate to entrepreneurial team formation, transactive memory systems, and trust, signalling the relational mechanisms through which ETs develop. 'Entrepreneurial team formation' appears as the most frequently occurring relational concept in this topic and is connected to 'team dynamics' through 'trust'. Both 'entrepreneurial team formation' and 'team dynamics' are conceptually close, although they focus on different stages of ET development: the former is more concerned with the early stage, while the latter relates to subsequent stages, where team cohesiveness naturally emerges as an important variable.

'Trust' also connects 'entrepreneurial team formation' and 'team dynamics' with 'transactive memory systems', which are not directly linked, suggesting the central role of trust across all three concepts. 'Transactive memory systems' are also noteworthy in that they belong to the same cluster as 'trust', within which 'performance' and 'development' are central. This points to a performance- or instrumentally oriented focus in the research domain, where 'transactive memory systems' and 'trust' are considered important.

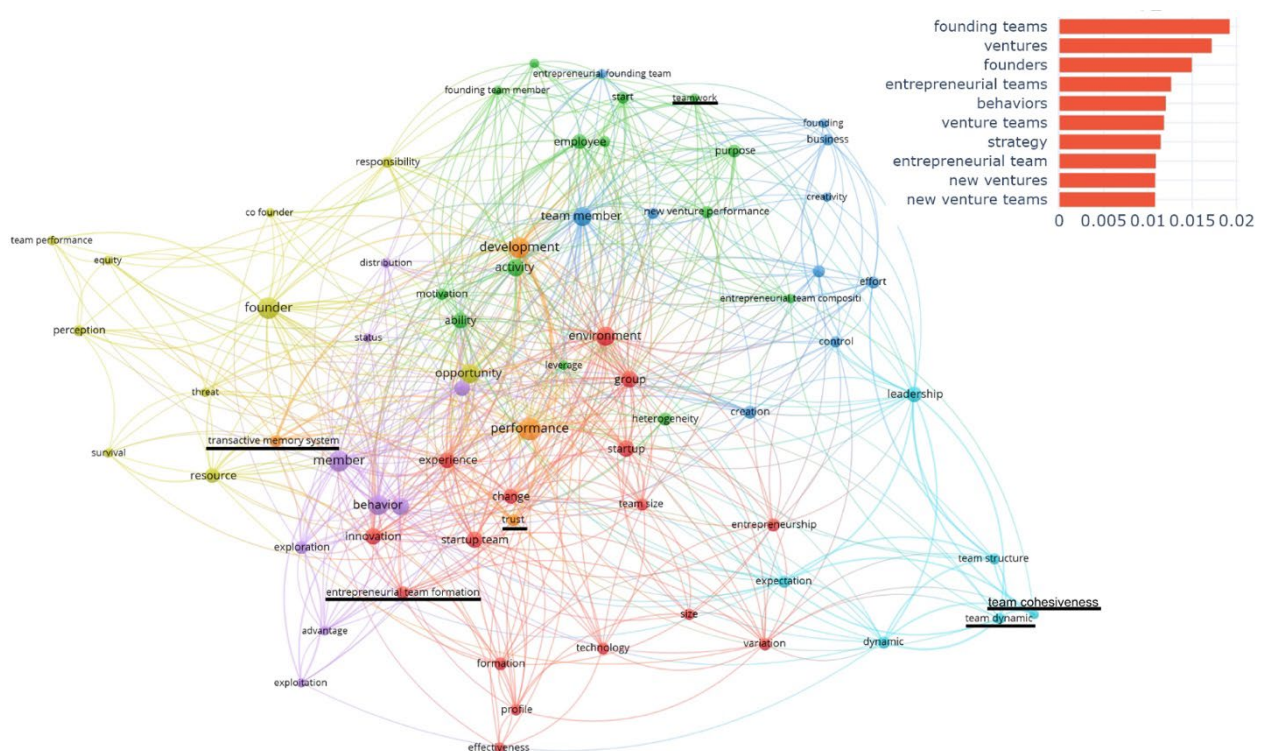


Figure 3: Term network of 'New venture team development factors' topic with top 10 representative terms scores.

5. Discussion

Although this study focuses on exploring how relational orientation is reflected in ET scholarship, we were also able to perform a high-level mapping of the entire corpus of 916 ET research publications. This mapping was necessary to situate relational concepts appropriately in relation to other research themes. Using topic modelling, we identified 14 topics and grouped them into four broader research streams, each reflecting a distinct orientation within ET scholarship.

Through topic modelling, we revealed latent themes that collectively reflect both an internal orientation, focusing on properties and dynamics within teams, and an external orientation, exploring how teams relate to their ventures, interact with their environments, and engage with broader contexts. This finding partially aligns with previous reviews of startup team literature, which identify three major foci in this domain: finance, strategy, and group dynamics (Knight, Greer and De Jong, 2020). Seven out of 14 topics (finance - T6, T9; strategy - T3, T4; group dynamics - T1, T2, T12) identified in our analysis roughly correspond to these focal areas. However, our study provides additional granularity by distinguishing seven more thematic topics. It also extends insights from previous studies by revealing an additional, specialised stream that captures contextual factors influencing entrepreneurial team activities. This observation resonates with Lazar et al. (2020), who similarly identify contextual factors as a distinct research stream within the field. Our study further advances this perspective by distinguishing entrepreneurship in educational settings, academic entrepreneurship, and international and immigrant entrepreneurship as separate topics within this stream.

While previous literature reviews describe gender as one of three dimensions of surface-level diversity, alongside age and ethnicity (Schoss, Brettel and Mauer, 2021), our analysis shows that research on gender diversity constitutes a distinct thematic cluster. This suggests that gender diversity has received more focused attention than other team diversity attributes, indicating its particular salience in current ET research discourse.

Most importantly for the focus of this study, through term network analysis that enabled detailed examination of identified topics, we were able to demonstrate that relational constructs in ET research are prominent in only two topics that differ significantly from one another. One topic highlights 'conflict' and 'resilience', bridged by 'team reflexivity', and the other - 'entrepreneurial team formation', 'team dynamics', and 'transactive memory systems' - all bridged by 'trust'. Furthermore, identified relational terms were not found to co-occur saliently

with terms referring to EE actors, even though ET relationships with these actors occupy a distinct topic. This disconnect suggests that founders are largely left alone in addressing the challenges of building cohesive and resilient teams.

This isolation of EE actors from relational constructs aligns with a broader ecosystem-level blind spot, where ET remain largely unseen within EE studies (Roundy, 2025). Consequently, the development of internal relational capacities within ETs is frequently overlooked in the EE context. While EE scholars increasingly recognize entrepreneurship as a collective achievement (Stam and Van De Ven, 2021), the prevailing literature continues to focus primarily on individual entrepreneurs as the central nodes of the ecosystem (e.g., Alvedalen and Boschma, 2017; Stam and Van De Ven, 2021). Extending this analytical focus to encompass ETs and their specific relational needs would contribute to the design of more effective, tailored forms of relational support (Mason and Brown, 2014). Furthermore, given the inherently interdependent nature of the EE, internal team relationships should not be viewed as isolated, private assets; rather, they represent a vital element of the larger ecosystem's cultural and social dimensions (Spigel, 2017).

6. Conclusions

While the approach of this meta-analysis has certain limitations related to its ability to detect only very explicit relational concepts that frequently appear in documents, and its inability to detect unique yet important relational concepts for the research field, it nevertheless provides a relatively comprehensive overview of relational orientation within the ET scholarship, offering detailed evidence of how relational concepts relate to each other and to other terms, and how they cluster within the corpus. This detailed view of the scholarship opens avenues for further exploration that could build on the results of this study to provide a deeper understanding not only of how relational concepts are positioned, but also of the types of research associated with relational orientation in ET research, and how these types address the needs of practitioners, thus facilitating the identification of research gaps and bringing the value of research results closer to EE stakeholders. Alongside deeper exploration of relational orientations, it would also be useful for future research to examine the positioning of performance-oriented analytical perspectives to better understand what constitutes their prevalence, and potentially to reframe the identified performance-oriented pillars so as to orient them more towards people involved in ET formation and development, thereby contributing to the research field with a strengthened human-centred analytical perspective.

Ethics Declaration

Ethical clearance was not required for this research.

AI Declaration

In writing this paper, AI tools were used solely for proofreading.

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