

IS THERE A DESIGN PATH TO CREATING VENTURES?

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ABSTRACT

Design graduates increasingly pursue self-employment, yet prevailing entrepreneurship models remain grounded in an either technology or market-anchored venture creation logic. These perspectives assume that ventures originate either from technological novelty or from an identifiable market need, which are assumptions that do not fully explain how many design-driven ventures emerge. Drawing on Danneels et al.'s [5] anchor-based framework, Vogel's [10] venture triggers, and Sarasvathy's [11] Bird-in-Hand principle, this paper explores whether an additional pathway better captures the early formation of design-led ventures. Through two qualitative Case Studies of early-stage design entrepreneurs, we examine how founders' articulate motivations, engage in creative processes, and make decisions during venture creation. The cases reveal that neither entrepreneur begins from a clear technological anchor nor a validated market gap. Instead, both founders' foreground product quality, their skillset, aesthetic expression, and user experience, while placing comparatively less emphasis on formal market analysis and financial forecasting. Based on these findings, we propose design-anchored venture creation as a third anchoring logic. This study contributes to entrepreneurial search theory and design entrepreneurship by demonstrating how identity-based and practice-based motivations can precede opportunity formation. We argue that recognising design anchoring has implications for entrepreneurship education and opens new avenues for theorising creative-led venture emergence.

Keywords: Design entrepreneurship, entrepreneurial journey, venture creation

1 INTRODUCTION

A substantial share of design graduates pursue self-employment after they graduate [1], leading to growing interest in how design education can better prepare students for venture creation and the commercialisation processes. Entrepreneurship education has traditionally focused on opportunity recognition, market validation, and technology commercialisation [2, 3, 4] as central starting points of venture creation. The methods are often problem based with inspiration from a market need, or new technology that could have alternating effects in the market [5]. Entrepreneurship research has commonly explained venture creation through two dominant starting logics: technological-driven ("technology push") and market-driven ("market pull") [5]. In technology-driven pathways, founders begin with a technological innovation and search for viable market applications. In market-driven pathways, founders start from an identified customer need or market gap and develop solutions accordingly. Recent work has formalised these as technology-anchored and market-anchored venture creation logics, showing that the initial anchor shapes subsequent search processes and influences which types of founder experience support early venture performance.

Design entrepreneurs have been described in prior literature as actors who operate at the intersection of creative practice and commercial activity, combining aesthetic exploration with entrepreneurial action [6], and their central challenge lies in reconciling artistic self-expression with the requirements of building a viable business [6]. Venture creation in design and creative fields is therefore often closely intertwined with artistic practice, aesthetic exploration, and the desire to materialise a creative vision through a tangible product or experience.

When entrepreneurship is embedded in design education however, it utilises the "narrow" view of entrepreneurship, with venture creation from a market perspective often including activities of making business plans, market research, IPR strategy, sales and finance [7,8]. This path again shows the relation

to models of that assume that venture formation begins in an external domain, often with market opportunity somehow embedded in the teaching to design students.

Empirical observations from design and creative entrepreneurship suggest that this assumption does not hold for all ventures, but it is also pointed to when it comes to art entrepreneurship. Art entrepreneurship research has similarly highlighted that venture creation is often driven by identity and personal creative vision, where the entrepreneurial pathway originates from within the individual rather than from external market or technological triggers. This paper builds on the observation that some ventures do not originate from technological novelty or clearly articulated market gaps. The research question guiding this paper is: *Is there a design approach to creating ventures that does not begin with identifying a market gap or developing new technology?*

This is an explorative study of two cases. In these cases, founders are primarily motivated to realise a particular aesthetic, experiential, or interactional vision. The venture serves as a vehicle for bringing a creative artifact or skillset into the world. Market demand and technological feasibility are acknowledged, but they function as enabling and constraining conditions rather than primary triggers of venture formation. In this paper we suggest a third anchor of venture creation, which we term design-anchored venture creation. In design-anchored ventures, the starting point is an inner creative and expressive drive rather than an external technology or market opportunity.

This study contributes to the design field and the design education field in a few different ways. We advocate for starting a new approach when it comes to venture creation in creative industries not only thinking that there need to be a market need or new technology and this can impact the way we approach teaching methods. This approach could also be used in design education. Our findings invite a rethinking of entrepreneurship as a deeply expressive and identity-forming activity, expanding the field's understanding of why and how ventures come into being, and also building on the concept of design-driven innovation [9], but not taking it as far as radical innovation.

2 THE ANCHORS OF VENTURE CREATION

Danneels et al. [5] distinguish two types of ventures based on founding intent: tech-anchored and market-anchored. Tech-anchored ventures begin with a specific technology and search for markets where it can be applied, whereas market-anchored ventures start from an unmet market need and then search for a suitable technological solution. This distinction aligns with technology-push and market-pull logics, and we also see these methods adapted in entrepreneurship education through technological focus and feasibility studies or market research as distinct activities. Founder experience determines how broad or narrow this search becomes: deep technological experience benefits tech-anchored ventures, while deep market experience benefits market-anchored ventures. Conversely, broad experience expands the search across both domains. We argue that the design entrepreneur has a different anchor than we see in the model of Daneels [5], see Figure 1.

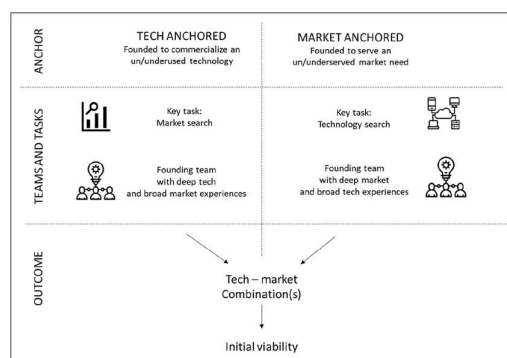


Figure 1. The model from Daneels [5] displaying the anchors of venture creation

Vogel [7] identifies three core triggers that explain why new ventures are initiated. First, resource-push triggers arise when founders possess a specific technology, capability, or resource they wish to commercialise. Second, market-pull triggers occur when an unmet customer need or market gap initiates idea generation. Third, some founders are motivated by a desire-to-start, where the aspiration to become an entrepreneur precedes any concrete idea. Together, these triggers explain the origins of venture ideas and mark the starting point of the entrepreneurial process. In contrast, Danneels et al. [5] classify

ventures based on founding anchors—either technology-anchored or market-anchored. Their framework does not focus on *why* individuals start generating ideas, but rather *where the venture begins its search*: from a technology seeking a market or from a market need seeking a solution. Whereas Vogel explains why ideas emerge, Danneels explains how early search unfolds given the initial anchor.

In addition to Danneels' et al. [5] and Vogel's [10] distinctions, Sarasvathy's [10] effectuation research introduces a third way to understand the early genesis of ventures: the Bird-in-Hand principle. This principle shows that expert entrepreneurs do not begin with a predefined market need or a specific technology, but with their means, described as *who they are, what they know, and whom they know*. Rather than searching for the "right" opportunity, they act using available resources and gradually shape opportunities through interaction with stakeholders and iterative experimentation. Sarasvathy's data demonstrate that even when expert entrepreneurs are given the same starting opportunity, they create radically different ventures by recombining their means, emphasising action over prediction.

Contrasted with Danneels, who classifies ventures by founding anchors, Sarasvathy shifts attention to founding means. While tech-anchored and market-anchored ventures begin with an external focal point, effectual entrepreneurs begin internally, letting opportunities emerge from their identity, knowledge, and networks. This suggests that design-driven entrepreneurs may follow a means-anchored logic distinct from both technology and market-anchored models.

3 CASE STUDIES

To explore how design entrepreneurs engage in venture creation, we adopted a qualitative, two case study design [12]. In our study, this approach made it possible to capture the nuanced ways in which identity, design practice, and entrepreneurial decision-making intersect during the creation of new ventures. We selected two entrepreneurs who share an educational grounding in design, though with differing specialisations and professional trajectories. Both individuals had also pursued limited formal training in business or entrepreneurship. The cases were chosen based on two criteria:

- A) Founding their own company within the design or creative industries.
- B) Active involvement in product development, branding, and business model formation, ensuring insight into early venture-creation processes.
- C) Venture is launched within the same region in order to ensure comparability of contextual conditions.

These criteria allowed us to focus on entrepreneurs whose ventures originate from creative practice but who simultaneously operate within commercial contexts.

We conducted semi-structured interviews with each entrepreneur, focusing on their motivations, identity orientations, design processes, and decision-making during venture creation. Interviews ranged from discussions of early ideation and product development to decisions about markets, organisational structure, and long-term aspirations. We were especially aware of letting the informant use their own disciplinary language. The interviews lasted on average 45 minutes and were transcribed verbatim. Interview transcripts were coded for themes related to why they started their venture, what was important for them, especially emphasising what wording they used, how they relate to market and how they talked about the entrepreneurial and creative process. We paid attention not only to what decisions were made, but why the entrepreneurs understood those decisions as meaningful or identity-expressive.

The researchers' positionality is informed by one researcher's background in design and several years of entrepreneurial experience, alongside both authors' extensive academic and research engagement within the field of entrepreneurship. This positionality shaped the interpretation and discussion of the findings, drawing on our combined perspectives and experiences.

4 CASE INTRODUCTION

The two Case Studies are entrepreneurs in the early stages of establishing businesses. The main difference is that one of the businesses, Hegren, sells mainly 'industrial design looking 'interior products and the other business, Lamovi, mainly sells consultancy services within product, service and marketing. Lamovi has a focus on both the aesthetic finish, but a passion for the user perspective and universal design. The two entrepreneurs have similar educational backgrounds in industrial design from different teaching institutions and are both in their mid to late 20s.

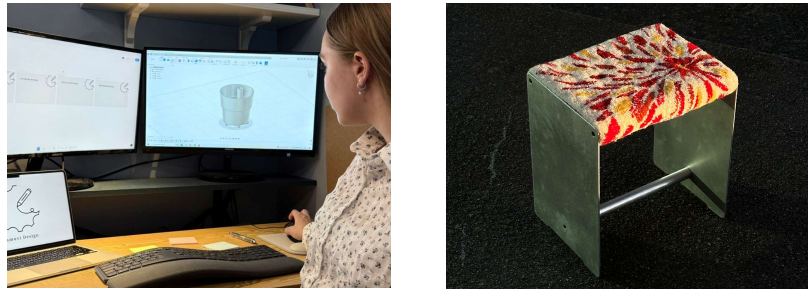


Figure 2. Pictures are from the entrepreneurs

4.1 The creator of products – one aspect of the design entrepreneur

Hegren was founded by Henrik Grevstad in 2025, shortly after completing his Industrial Design degree at a major Scandinavian university. Henrik had explored other startup ideas previously and taken several entrepreneurship courses, which he found broad in scope, though he recognised parallels between design methods and venture creation in their shared emphasis on iteration and problem-solving.

Henrik's motivation centres on creating tangible products with "meaning" and "a right to exist," drawing inspiration from conceptual art and design. His decision to establish Hegren was shaped by a concern about the outsourcing of Norwegian product manufacturing, and he built his business around locally available resources and constraints. During the first seven to eight months, he focused primarily on prototyping and product development, launching his first collection through his own online shop to gauge early market interest.

4.2 The provider of services – a second aspect of the design entrepreneur

Lamovi was founded by Lotta Linn Moen in 2025, following a bachelor's degree in Industrial Production and Management and a master's in Industrial Design. After working as a consultant in service design and gaining experience in a product-focused startup, she has always envisioned creating her own products. Lotta Linn is motivated by improving user experiences and developing solutions that "make a difference," with a particular interest in universal design and accessibility. Now seven months in, she has reached out to a small number of potential clients to understand their needs, though sales and pricing remain in an early and exploratory phase — something she acknowledges as a real challenge.

5 INITIAL FINDINGS

From the interviews, it is clear that both entrepreneurs place their primary focus on the product they aim to deliver. They are particularly attentive to the quality of the product's finish, functionality, and warranty period, as highlighted by Henrik. Lotta-Linn places even greater emphasis on her own competencies and how they can serve the needs of future customers, supporting them in creating user-friendly products.

Although both entrepreneurs have been developing their business ideas for more than six months, neither has yet carried out a structured market analysis, feasibility assessment, or formal business planning process. The processes of understanding the market have been more similar to user interviews with potential customers and more exploratory. Lotta Linn has initiated early conversations with a handful of potential customers to understand their needs, but these interactions appear to be preliminary and exploratory rather than part of a systematic approach. Similarly, Henrik has begun considering pricing for his products, but his current estimates seem primarily grounded in production costs and have not yet been validated through broader market research. During the interviews, both entrepreneurs frequently use user-centred language, often referring to "the user" rather than "the customer". In many contexts during the interview the user and the customer were effectively the same, which suggests that the mindset is more user centred.

Henrik's main motivation in being an entrepreneur is strongly linked to creating things: "I've always been fond of making things, always had a lot of ideas, and I like to work with a physical shape and create things". Lotta Linn also expressed a similar motivation and passion: "The big motivation is to create something that has a value for others, and she loves to create new things".

Overall, both entrepreneurs demonstrate a strong user-centred orientation and are highly concerned with ensuring high product quality, grounded either in user needs or personal aesthetic preferences.

They also mention their use of particular technologies, including language models for writing text and 3D-modelling tools, which they describe as *industry standard*, and not as a new technology that is entering the market.

Both further outline a range of creative processes that include drawing inspiration from external sources, sketching on paper, developing physical prototypes, and conducting user testing. Their specific methods vary depending on the nature of the project, but the overarching pattern suggests a similar approach to early-stage creative development. In addition, neither entrepreneur currently places strong emphasis on market data, purchasing criteria, or customer specifications, and both have carried out limited analysis regarding pricing. This is something they to some degree expressed was difficult, and something that they would focus more on further. Overall, the passion and values for the quality of the service and product was their main focus. From the two cases we suggest a new anchor in the current figure of Danneels et al. [5], suggested as “design-anchor” (see Figure 3). This is an addition to the other venture creation approaches that are anchored in the designer’s skillset and design vision where the designer has a drive to deliver a quality product or quality service.

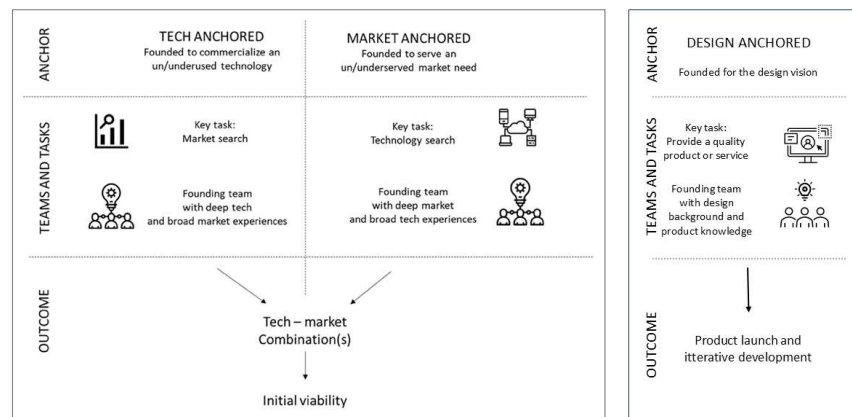


Figure 3. The model from Daneels [5] with an incorporated design-anchor for venture creation

6 DISCUSSIONS

The initial findings indicate that neither of the two design entrepreneurs begins their venture from a technology- or market-anchored starting point as described by Danneels et al. [5]. While Danneels’ model assumes that ventures originate either from a given technology seeking markets or a defined market need seeking technological solutions, the entrepreneurs in this study show limited systematic engagement with either domain. Their attention to market size, competitive positioning, or value proposition development appears minimal, and their technological choices rely on established, industry-standard tools rather than novel or proprietary technologies. Instead, both cases foreground product quality, user experience, and aesthetic expression as their central organising logics.

This orientation aligns more with Sarasvathy’s [11] Bird-in-Hand principle, in which entrepreneurs begin with their means, who they are, what they know, and whom they know, rather than with a predefined opportunity. Both entrepreneurs build on their existing competencies, personal design philosophy, and craft traditions, advancing their ventures through iterative making, prototyping, and user interaction. Commercial considerations are present, but secondary; both entrepreneurs prioritise meaningful work, aesthetic integrity, and product usefulness over financial optimisation. This echoes Vogel’s [10] observation that some ventures are triggered not by market pull or resource push, but by a desire to start, grounded in personal motivation rather than opportunity recognition.

Taken together, the findings suggest a third anchor of venture creation—an artistic- or potentially design-anchored logic—distinct from both technology- and market-anchored models. Here, the founding impulse is expressive: entrepreneurs create ventures to materialise a vision, enact a design identity, or bring a particular aesthetic or experiential concept into the world. In this pathway, the “given” at founding is neither technology nor market, but an inner creative orientation. Consequently, both technological and market domains become objects of *constrained search*, evaluated not for optimisation but for their compatibility with the intended expression or user experience.

This extends current entrepreneurship theory in three ways. First, it highlights how identity-based motivations can precede, and at times substitute, opportunity-driven logics. Second, it complements effectuation research by specifying how means-driven action unfolds within creative practice. Third, it advances understandings of entrepreneurship-as-practice by showing that making, crafting, and aesthetic judgment are not peripheral but central to venture formation in design-driven contexts. As such, design entrepreneurship reveals an alternative anchor of venture creation deserving further theoretical and empirical development, but for now we suggest there is something like a design-anchor for venture creation.

7 CONCLUSIONS

This study suggests that design entrepreneurship often originates from a means- and identity-anchored logic rather than the technology- or market-anchored logics described by Danneels et al. [5]. Across two cases, founders prioritised product quality, user experience, and aesthetic expression, advanced through iterative making, and only secondarily attended to commercial analysis. Read alongside Vogel [10] and Sarasvathy [11], the findings indicate that a desire to create—mobilising *who I am, what I know, and whom I know*—can precede opportunity search. With our initial findings we propose a design-anchoring as a distinct pathway of venture creation and call for larger comparative studies to examine its prevalence, boundary conditions, and performance implications.

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