The upside of narcissism as an influential personality trait: exploring the entrepreneurial behaviour of established entrepreneurs

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Abstract

Purpose – As research emerged in terms of how narcissism, a negative or dark trait, has been found to be constructive in enhancing entrepreneurial behaviour, there are mixed results regarding the significance of narcissism in the field of entrepreneurship. Additionally, this previous research has mostly been conducted on student or nascent entrepreneur samples within developed economies. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to explore how narcissistic traits of established entrepreneurs in an emerging economy context infuence their entrepreneurial behaviour both positively and negatively.

Design/methodology/approach – Gioia methodology was applied in the qualitative study by means of in-depth interviews, which allowed for the unpacking of narcissistic traits among established entrepreneurs in South Africa. Four themes emerged from the data, and included insights related to entrepreneurial experience influencing behaviour; business growth linked to personal development; opportunity identification versus loss; and identity separation in relation to authentic identity versus an entrepreneurial identity.

Findings – The findings of the paper contribute to creating an understanding of how to hone individual narcissistic traits for positive influences that develop entrepreneurs while also contributing to their business development, opportunity realization and identity. In addition, the findings highlighted a separation between established entrepreneurs' authentic personality and the inputs that end up resulting in the entrepreneurial personality.

Originality/value – This paper highlights the possibility of narcissism functioning as a business process involved in entrepreneurship rather than a necessary personality trait. An interesting dynamic contributed to what seems to be a constant battle between the authentic identity and the entrepreneur identity, gaining deeper insight surrounding established entrepreneurs' experiences to survive and, more importantly, thrive as entrepreneurs.

Keywords Established entrepreneurs, Narcissism, Personality traits, Entrepreneurial behaviour, Emerging economy context, South Africa, Gioia methodology

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

South Africa is globally identified as one of the key countries to consistently have low levels of entrepreneurial activity and intentions (Herrington *et al.*, 2017). Increasingly high unemployment, which currently sits at its highest level of 32.6%, is also alarming for this country (Trading Economics, 2021). Further to this, the entrepreneurial landscape continues to be challenging, with the established business rate in South Africa being five times lower than those of other countries within the African region (Herrington *et al.*, 2017). To enhance our understanding of the South African entrepreneurial landscape, one needs to understand the individual entrepreneurs that operate within this context, specifically in a developing country landscape. Therefore, due to the high unemployment rate, low entrepreneurial activity and intention as well as the low established business rate, it is crucial to focus on individual entrepreneurs in South Africa. López-Núñez *et al.* (2020) specifically highlight that the personality traits and behaviour of individual entrepreneurs enhance our understanding of the entrepreneurial landscape. However, a considerable body of research has focused on examining the personality, behaviours and related psychological characteristics of entrepreneurs (Costa and McCrae, 1992; Antoncic *et al.*, 2015). Particularly, scholars found that personality has been a predictor of entrepreneurial behaviour (Leutner *et al.*, 2014), with a great extent of research related to understanding the Big five personality traits, namely, conscientiousness, extraversion, openness to experience, agreeableness and neuroticism, as the most successful predictors of entrepreneurial outcomes (Barrick and Mount, 1991; Brockhaus, 1982; Antoncic *et al.*, 2015). Within the Big five traits, extraversion and agreeableness have been highlighted as the most significant predictors of entrepreneurial behaviour (Barrick and Mount, 1991; Brockhaus, 1982; Antoncic *et al.*, 2015; Leutner *et al.*, 2014). In a recent study, Leonelli and Masciarelli (2020) emphasize that when studying entrepreneurial personality traits, it is imperative to include both "bright" (e.g. extraversion and agreeableness) and "dark" (e.g. narcissism and Machiavellianism) in this investigation.

In line with this thinking, Hmieleski and Lerner (2016) found that narcissism is not only a dark or negative trait but could be a necessary trait of the entrepreneurial personality that could influence entrepreneurial experience and behaviour. Liu *et al.* (2021) agree and suggest that researchers should not overlook the impact of narcissism on entrepreneurial behaviour and activities when investigating personality and entrepreneurship. As the Big five traits have been researched exhaustively, we focus our effort in this paper on narcissism as a personality trait. Liu *et al.* (2019) define narcissism as entailing an "inflated positive view of self and a motivation to maintain and enhance the positive self-view" (p. 496). In a recent systematic review study, Liu *et al.* (2021) found that limited studies focus on the relationship between narcissism and entrepreneurship. However, from the 33 studies found (published between 2013 and 2020), the upper echelons theory (UET) was applied to most of those papers that focused on the relationship between narcissism and entrepreneurial outcomes. The UET (Hambrick and Mason, 1984) supports the relationship between top management's traits and firm performance. In this paper, we, therefore, draw on Hambrick and Mason's (1984) UET and investigate how entrepreneurs' narcissism traits affect established entrepreneurs' behaviour. We consider established entrepreneurs to be a suitable empirical context for our study because the entrepreneurs' personality traits will have a direct impact on the existing entrepreneurs' behaviour and experience since the entrepreneur is often considered as being part of top management of the existing firms. Established entrepreneurs are defined as those entrepreneurs who have been actively practising as owners or managers of their businesses for more than three and a half years (Bosma and Kelley, 2019). Previous research has often focused on student and nascent entrepreneurs (Mathieu and St-Jean, 2013; Hmieleski and Lerner, 2016) and the nascent stages of the entrepreneurial process in understanding the link between personality traits, entrepreneurial intention and behaviour

(Shirokova *et al.*, 2016; Esfandiar *et al.*, 2019; Liu *et al.*, 2019; Antoncic *et al.*, 2015; Shirokova *et al.*, 2016). By focusing on established entrepreneurs in this paper, additional perspectives such as understanding the personal and business growth of entrepreneurs; opportunity identification as well as entrepreneurial identity in relation to the narcissistic traits from those who have been actively functioning as experienced entrepreneurs (Bosma and Kelley, 2019) can be explored.

We focus on the narcissistic traits of established entrepreneurs for three main reasons. Firstly, recent work explored the link between narcissism and entrepreneurship (Liu *et al.*, 2019; Al-Ghazali and Afsar, 2021; Liu *et al.*, 2021), as scholars suggest that narcissism is seemingly "an underlying construct explaining entrepreneurship" (Mathieu and St-Jean, 2013, p. 528). Narcissism has also been positively associated with entrepreneurial motivation, intentions and action (Hmieleski and Lerner, 2016; Jonason and Webster, 2010; DeNisi, 2015; Klotz and Neubaum, 2016; Shepherd, 2015; Wu *et al.*, 2019). However, contrary to this thinking, Miller (2015, p. 3) referred more often to narcissism as the "downside to the entrepreneurial personality or a negative characteristic". The prevalence of traits such as narcissism among experienced entrepreneurs has been a growing area of interest, especially in terms of how a trait that was considered negative (Miller, 2015; Furnham *et al.*, 2013) has been found to be constructive in enhancing entrepreneurial behaviour (Hmieleski and Lerner, 2016; Al-Ghazali and Afsar, 2021). As there are mixed results regarding the significance of narcissism in the field of entrepreneurship, this paper extends the current literature related to the entrepreneurial personality and psychology by exploring the detail of the narcissistic layer of entrepreneurs. The work summarized above highlights the importance of continuous entrepreneurial research within the context of emerging markets. Yet, the relationship between narcissism and entrepreneurial behaviour has not been investigated in a developing country context such as South Africa. Secondly, these previous work, although limited, found that the relationships between narcissism and entrepreneurial intentions and performance are more complex. Liu *et al.* (2021) call for an investigation into the interaction effects of narcissism and entrepreneurship by emphasizing other personality traits than the Big five. This view is supported by the person-environment (P-E) fit theory which indicates a direct association between an entrepreneur's environment and other personality traits (Leung *et al.*, 2021). Furthermore, insights are investigated into how narcissism may, in fact, be an integral personality dimension of those who are established entrepreneurs. Thirdly, there have been several descriptions of this multi-faceted trait, with the commonalities highlighted in the descriptions being found in one of the most common narcissism measurement instruments: The narcissism personality inventory (NPI). The NPI is one of those quantitative measurement scales in the field which have been developed, revised and modified by scholars over many decades (Raskin and Hall, 1979; Ames *et al.*, 2006). Scholars such as Hmieleski and Lerner (2016) and Mathieu and St-Jean (2013) call for research following the qualitative route in analysing narcissism within entrepreneurship, and therefore, this study aims to contribute to the literature in this space while aiming to achieve a more holistic and balanced view of entrepreneurial behaviour.

By applying Gioia methodology and thematic analysis, this study explores whether established entrepreneurs possess narcissistic traits, and how those narcissistic traits have played a positive or negative role in their behaviour throughout their entrepreneurial journey. Telephonic interviews were conducted with 12 established entrepreneurs in various industries in South Africa. After an extensive literature review on narcissism as well as the entrepreneurship personality, specific narcissistic traits – which were the most cited within the referenced literature – have been identified as the most common. These traits include an inflated positive view of self (Liu *et al.*, 2019; Navis and Ozbek, 2016), self-enhancement (Liu *et al.*, 2019; Twenge *et al.*, 2008), superiority

(Macenczak *et al.*, 2016; O'Reilly *et al.*, 2014), entitlement (Liu *et al.*, 2019; Macenczak *et al.*, 2016) and exhibitionism (Macenczak *et al.*, 2016; Twenge *et al.*, 2008; Mathieu and St-Jean, 2013).

Considering the purpose and direction of the study, the research questions are:

- How do the individual narcissistic traits influence the entrepreneurial experience and behaviour of established entrepreneurs?
- How do the individual narcissistic traits influence business growth in comparison to personal development of established entrepreneurs?
- How do the individual narcissistic traits influence opportunity identification and/or loss of established entrepreneurs?
- How do the individual narcissistic traits influence the entrepreneurial identity of established entrepreneurs?

The paper makes several contributions. The paper's findings provide insights into the multi-dimensionality of narcissism, normally viewed as a dark or negative trait, within entrepreneurship. Specifically, we highlight the positive role of narcissism in relation to entrepreneurial behaviour. Secondly, four themes emerged from the data, and the findings provide a deeper understanding of the nuances and details around the influences of the identified narcissistic traits on entrepreneurial psychology and decision-making. We extend the literature regarding the UET by suggesting that entrepreneurial behaviour is influenced by an entrepreneur's experience. The P-E fit theory adds a dimension that reflects the possibility of personality traits functioning as a business process involved in entrepreneurship rather than a necessary personality trait. Thirdly, identity separation through the development of an authentic identity and entrepreneurial identity are highlighted as a unique finding in the context of an established entrepreneur sample. Finally, Gioia methodology and a qualitative approach are followed, which allow for greater in-depth interpretation of the findings.

Theoretical foundation
Narcissism as an entrepreneurial personality trait
Extensive research continues to be done on the personality traits that are dominant in entrepreneurs with the aim of understanding their drivers and motivators (Wiklund *et al.*, 2019). Other research effort focus on understanding personality traits that could predict entrepreneurial success (Leutner *et al.*, 2014). As success has often been difficult to define, research around entrepreneurial personality characteristics has evolved with the aim of attempting to predict and understand entrepreneurial behaviour (Antoncic *et al.*, 2015). At the same time, researchers emphasized the relationship between entrepreneurial behaviour and the Big five traits, where extraversion and agreeableness have been highlighted as the most significant predictors of entrepreneurial behaviour (Barrick and Mount, 1991; Brockhaus, 1982; Antoncic *et al.*, 2015; Leutner *et al.*, 2014). The seminal work of Mathieu and St-Jean (2013) seemingly began the discussion around the inclusion of narcissism as an underlying and important construct explaining entrepreneurship. Leonelli *et al.* (2016) found that if entrepreneurs are narcissistic and have a high level of extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, openness to experience and internal *locus* of control, they positively influence start-up innovativeness. Since 2013, narcissism has recently also been investigated in terms of gender differences between women and male entrepreneurs and Leonelli (2021) found that women entrepreneurs are less narcissistic than their male counterparts. The transition from viewing narcissism as a disorder to a common personality characteristic among individuals has allowed for a significant building of understanding that has contributed to literature on narcissism within an organizational context as well as in the

entrepreneurial field (Macenczak *et al.*, 2016; Mathieu and St-Jean, 2013; Liu *et al.*, 2019). Furthermore, authors are calling for an agenda for further in-depth research that focuses specifically on the relationship between narcissism and opportunity identification and risk-taking (Leung *et al.*, 2021; Liu *et al.*, 2021). Further to this, Leonelli (2021) compared narcissistic women and male entrepreneurs and found that narcissistic women entrepreneurs engaged less in risk-taking activities than men.

Narcissism has been defined in several layers. Scholars highlight the exaggerated nature of the way those who are narcissistic view themselves in a positive light, and feel important and entitled (Hart and Adams, 2014; Macenczak *et al.*, 2016). The need for dominance appears as a consistent description of narcissism in describing its key attributes (Gerstner *et al.*, 2013; Martinsen *et al.*, 2019), and this is also linked to descriptions that emphasize the need for "control, status, power and achievement" (Martinsen *et al.*, 2019, p. 166; Mathieu and St-Jean, 2013; Liu *et al.*, 2019). In describing the commonality of narcissism further, scholars referred to the personality dimension as above, emphasizing dominance, entitlement, high self-esteem and an inflated sense of self-importance as key attributes (Williams *et al.*, 2018). In line with the extremities of narcissism, scholars have further described narcissists as those who actively seek fame, power, admiration and superiority, while believing they are the most intelligent and the most attractive (Mathieu and St-Jean, 2013; Wang, 2019; Raskin *et al.*, 1991; Holtzman and Strube, 2010; Twenge *et al.*, 2008; Macenczak *et al.*, 2016). Narcissistic individuals have been observed as being "dominant, overconfident, and have a high need to [sic] control, status, power and achievement" (Martinsen *et al.*, 2019, p. 166). Furthermore, Martinsen *et al.* (2019) have described narcissism as having positive associations with self-esteem and leadership. The above traits explaining narcissism are similar to a description of entrepreneurs, in that they have been described as people who like and prefer authority and superiority; being in control; confident; high self-esteem, etc. (Mathieu and St-Jean, 2013; Liu *et al.*, 2019).

Theories supporting the relationship between narcissism and entrepreneurship
The P-E fit theory indicates that individuals are attracted to a work environment (success, power, wealth) that matches their characteristics (personalities, traits) (Leung *et al.*, 2021). Wiklund *et al.* (2019) describe how entrepreneurs are often linked to work that they are connected to and passionate about while aiming to leave a legacy and "make a mark on the world" (Wiklund *et al.*, 2019, p. 582). This description is closely linked to some of the outcomes expected by narcissists in their quest to source projects and to lead. Liu *et al.* (2021) agree that the P-E fit theory indicates that individuals are attracted to environments that are compatible with their attitudes, values, knowledge, skills, abilities and personality and that the P-E fit has stronger explanatory power for the individual's outcome than either personal or environmental factors alone. Therefore, these scholars, such as Leung *et al.*, 2021, argue that the P-E fit theory supports a positive link between narcissism and entrepreneurship, as narcissists normally have a strong desire to seek attention, power and admiration, which are, in turn, traits that are strongly associated with the entrepreneurial identity.

In the meta-analyses on narcissism and entrepreneurship studies conducted by Liu *et al.* (2021), they found that the UET provides a strong theoretical underpinning for understanding top management's narcissist traits on firms' decisions and performance. Hambrick and Mason (1984) further suggest that firm performance is influenced by top management and entrepreneurs' experience and personal traits. For example, Leonelli *et al.* (2019a) found that based on this theory, narcissistic CEOs either adopt entrepreneurially oriented strategies which could enhance firm performance or it could weaken a positive correlation between entrepreneurial orientation and firm performance. In another study,

Leonelli *et al.* (2019b) identified two sides of a narcissistic entrepreneur: the exhibitionist side who engages in risk-taking situations, bolder firm strategies and extreme proactiveness, whereas the manipulative side is related to entitlement and willingness to exploit and manipulate others for personal gain. For example, the UET provides support for their results which indicate that the exhibitionist side have a positive effect on entrepreneurial orientation, while the manipulative side of narcissism has a negative impact. Based on this theory, we are expecting that the narcissistic traits of established entrepreneurs influence their entrepreneurial behaviour both positively and negatively.

The relationship between specific narcissistic traits and entrepreneurial behaviour

Several scholars agree that narcissism certainly plays a key role in influencing entrepreneurs in various ways (Mathieu and St-Jean, 2013; Hmieleski and Lerner, 2016; Klotz and Neubaum, 2016; Liu *et al.*, 2019; Navis and Ozbek, 2016; Leung *et al.*, 2021). However, some scholars have suggested that these narcissistic traits can play a negative role (Hmieleski and Lerner, 2016; Navis and Ozbek, 2016) on entrepreneurs' behaviour, while others suggest that narcissism is a multi-dimensional trait which can predict certain positive entrepreneurial outcomes (Macenczak *et al.*, 2016; Klotz and Neubaum, 2016; Judge *et al.*, 2009). Drawing on the UET (Hambrick and Mason,1984) and P-E fit theory (Leung *et al.*, 2021), we expect that there will be a link between some of the individual narcissistic traits (inflated positive view of self, self-enhancement, superiority, entitlement and exhibitionism) and entrepreneurial behaviour. Table 1 summarizes these individual narcissistic traits from the literature.

The positive versus negative views of the individual narcissistic traits and entrepreneurship

It is evident from Table 1 that narcissistic traits are not automatically associated with specifically positive or negative outcomes in a consistent or linear way (DeNisi, 2015; Hmieleski and Lerner, 2016). The key is to build a greater knowledge of the individual narcissistic traits in detail and aim to deeply understand how these traits have played a role in the entrepreneurial experience and behaviour of an established entrepreneur, as well as being the reason that this behaviour is the outcome. As drawn from Table 1, the discussion below illustrates how the individual narcissistic traits are positively and negatively related to entrepreneurs.

Inflated sense of self. On the positive side, the influences under this trait are linked to the psychology, personal development and behaviour of the individual, with positive influences on self-assurance, self-esteem and the ability to influence people and make others adopt their vision. Positive influences also involve entrepreneurs having the ability to sell themselves and their businesses well. An inflated view of self has negatively been linked to entrepreneurs believing they can make anything happen with any resource, which has been said to negatively impact on their decision-making as well as entrepreneurial success (Navis and Ozbek, 2016; Al-Shammari *et al.*, 2019). That a bias towards risk-taking can have a negative side is that the risk-taking could mean that entrepreneurs make risky financial decisions and investments (Foster *et al.*, 2011). This decision-making has also been linked to overconfidence or an inflated view of self. Beyond the influence on decisions, overconfidence can also affect the entrepreneur through this trait evolving into denial and anxiety (Navis and Ozbek, 2016; Hmieleski and Lerner, 2016).

Superiority. Superiority has delivered positive influences to entrepreneurial behaviour through a drive related to a motivation for progression, autonomy and independence, resulting in entrepreneurs prioritizing this result. The need for superiority, authority and dominance (identified narcissistic traits) also have the association with negative influences due to the possibility of these traits alienating stakeholders, increasing mistrust and encouraging micro-managing (Miller, 2015, p. 3). Furthermore, Miller (2015) highlights the risk that when

Narcissistic traits	Description	References
Inflated positive view of self	This view of self and "overconfidence" is seen as central to entrepreneurship Overconfident Inflated sense of self	Liu *et al.* (2019), Navis and Ozbek (2016) Martinsen *et al.* (2019) Macenczak *et al.* (2016)
	Inflated and positive view of self Described as self-efficacy (big component of entrepreneurial personalities) Self-confidence	Twenge *et al.* (2008) Mathieu and St-Jean (2013) O'Reilly *et al.* (2014)
Self-enhancement	Positive self-view Attention-seeking and taking credit from others Low empathy Risk-takers	Liu *et al.* (2019, p. 496) Twenge *et al.* (2008) O'Reilly *et al.* (2014) Miller (2015), Chatterjee and Hambrick (2007); Foo (2011), Holland and Shepherd (2013)
Superiority	Authority The need to dominate the environment Described as dominant and have a high need to control and have power Feelings of superiority	Liu *et al.* (2019, p. 496) Gerstner *et al.* (2013) Martinsen *et al.* (2019) Macenczak *et al.* (2016)
Entitlement	Dominance Entitlement Feelings of entitlement	O'Reilly *et al.* (2014) Liu *et al.* (2019, p. 496) Macenczak *et al.* (2016)
Exhibitionism	Sense of entitlement Strong need for validation and applause from others Constant desire for admiration	O'Reilly *et al.* (2014) Liu *et al.* (2019, p. 496) Macenczak *et al.* (2016)
	Social extraversion which is more linked with exhibition and public displays for attention and praise than for the sake of forming emotional connections with people Grandiosity	Twenge *et al.* (2008) O'Reilly *et al.* (2014)

Source: Own compilation

narcissistic traits are extreme, they may result in negative outcomes such as aggressive and ruthless behaviour of entrepreneurs due to the strong need for achievement and power (Bélanger, 2011).

Entitlement. The positive influences of entitlement include an increased sense of confidence, as well as the expression of it linked to similarly high levels of self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is strongly associated to entrepreneurial behaviour (Miller, 2015; Martinsen *et al.*, 2019). Arrogance, the perception of entitlement and the inability to accept criticism are also narcissistic traits that have been said to negatively influence the entrepreneurial journey (Wales *et al.*, 2013; Navis and Ozbek, 2016). This has been linked to such individuals being labelled as disagreeable, less flexible and being conformists due to the need to ensure success so as to gain validation and praise (Martinsen *et al.*, 2019, p. 170; Twenge *et al.*, 2008).

Exhibitionism. Exhibitionism brings about positive influences to entrepreneurial behaviour through the expression of high levels of motivation, as well as the desire to be visible and to be recognized (Macenczak *et al.*, 2016). the negative influences are related to entrepreneurs having a lack of flexibility and awareness when it comes to changing plans, as well as low empathy and a lack of intimate connection with people (Twenge *et al.*, 2008).

Research method

An exploratory approach by means of semi-structured in-depth interviews with 12 established entrepreneurs in South Africa were conducted. As indicated previously, only established entrepreneurs who had operated their businesses for longer than three and a half years (Bosma and Kelley, 2019) were included in the sample. Purposive sampling was used for participant selection, and this technique was suitable as the nature of the study required the judgement of the researcher to be used in the selection of the sample that would have the experience required for the achievement of the research questions (Saunders and Lewis, 2018). The initial participants were selected based on the researcher's networks and referrals; all of the participants provided their permission to take part in the interview process upon receipt of interview request and consent documentation. These participants were all established entrepreneurs and were purposefully selected based on their tenure as managers/entrepreneurs for longer than three and a half years. Their industries were also considered so as to ensure that a variety of industries was included in the sample. The minimum of 12 participants was based on an ideal number to ensure a suitable exploratory process while also aiming for the research process to reach saturation (Zikmund *et al.*, 2013). While varying sample sizes were suggested across different studies from six respondents to as many as 30 (Guest *et al.*, 2006; Marshall *et al.*, 2013; Burmeister and Aitken, 2012), the more highlighted recommendation was based on a greater consideration of the quality and richness of the data that was being collected (Dibley, 2011; Fusch and Ness, 2015; Saunders and Lewis, 2018). Based on this understanding, saturation is normally reached with 12 participants; therefore, this is an acceptable sample size, and saturation was reached with the sample of 12 participants in this study.

Gioia methodology was used whereby a qualitative study with an inductive approach is conducted. According to Gioia *et al.* (2013), this method can generate new concepts and grounded theories not only via impressionistic studies but also via qualitatively rigorous inductive studies. Therefore, as researchers are of the opinion that entrepreneurship is a social and contextual phenomenon (Brush *et al.*, 2009), Gioia methodology is particularly suitable to investigate established entrepreneurs in this study. Practically, this Gioia approach was a fitting choice, as the researchers wanted to gain a deeper understanding of the exploration around whether narcissistic traits existed according to participants' own descriptions of themselves, and to establish to what extent those traits had influenced their entrepreneurial behaviour, both positively or negatively. It was also important to explore the influence of those traits when looking at the start of their entrepreneurial journeys and where they were at the time of the interview. Gioia methodology is furthermore the best suited methodology used in this study as the findings should make sense to both the informants and scholars (Gioia, 2021) in the field of entrepreneurship. To fulfil that, Gioia (2021) argues that the research needs to report first-order (informant-centred) and second-order (theory centred) data and findings. This process is conducted through thematic analysis illustrated in Figure 1 presented later in the paper.
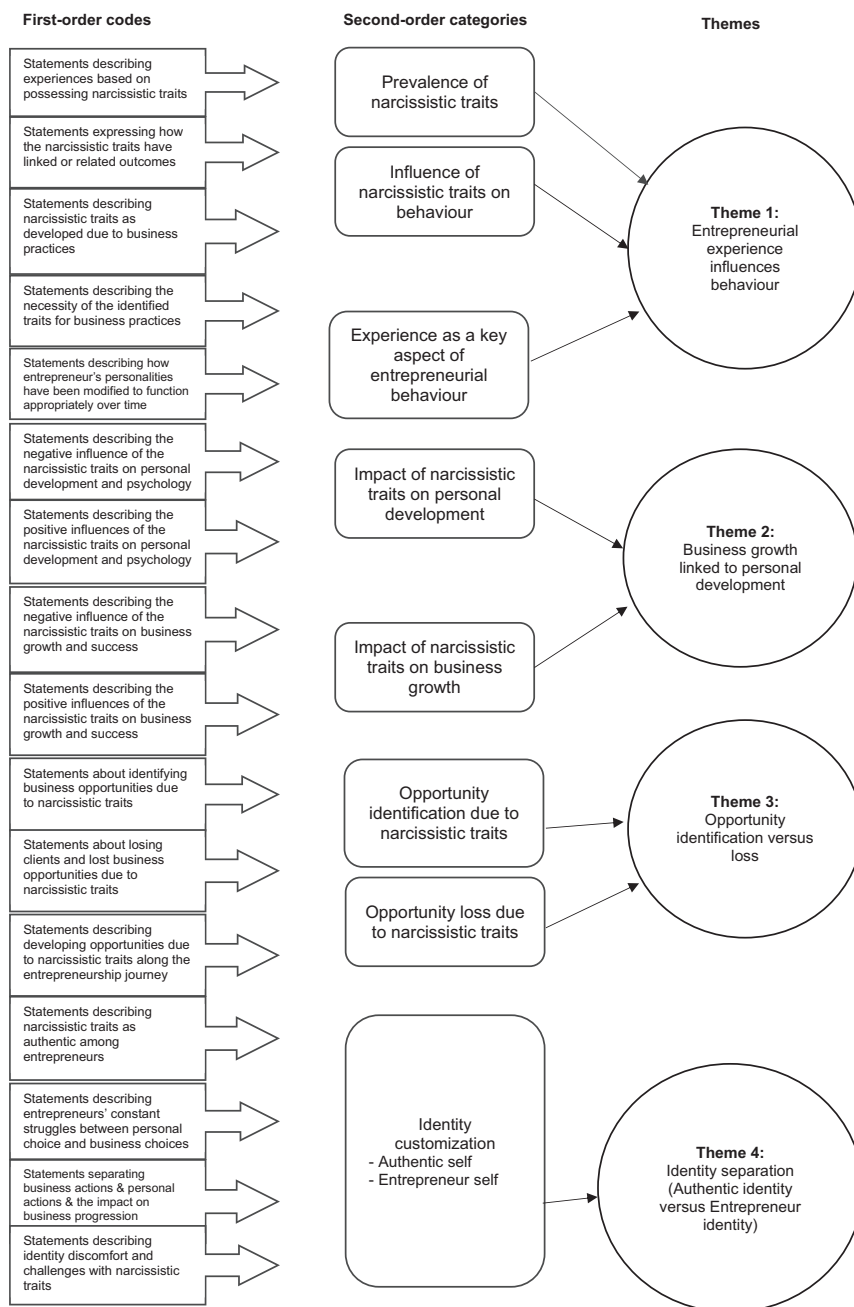
First-order codes

Statements describing experiences based on possessing narcissistic traits

Statements expressing how the narcissistic traits have linked or related outcomes

Statements describing narcissistic traits as developed due to business practices

Statements describing the necessity of the identified traits for business practices

Statements describing how entrepreneur's personalities have been modified to function appropriately over time

Statements describing the negative influence of the narcissistic traits on personal development and psychology

Statements describing the positive influences of the narcissistic traits on personal development and psychology

Statements describing the negative influence of the narcissistic traits on business growth and success

Statements describing the positive influences of the narcissistic traits on business growth and success

Statements about identifying business opportunities due to narcissistic traits

Statements about losing clients and lost business opportunities due to narcissistic traits

Statements describing developing opportunities due to narcissistic traits along the entrepreneurship journey

Statements describing narcissistic traits as authentic among entrepreneurs

Statements describing entrepreneurs' constant struggles between personal choice and business choices

Statements separating business actions & personal actions & the impact on business progression

Statements describing identity discomfort and challenges with narcissistic traits

Second-order categories

Prevalence of narcissistic traits

Influence of narcissistic traits on behaviour

Experience as a key aspect of entrepreneurial behaviour

Impact of narcissistic traits on personal development

Impact of narcissistic traits on business growth

Opportunity identification due to narcissistic traits

Opportunity loss due to narcissistic traits

Identity customization
- Authentic self
- Entrepreneur self

Themes

Theme 1:
Entrepreneurial experience influences behaviour

Theme 2:
Business growth linked to personal development

Theme 3:
Opportunity identification versus loss

Theme 4:
Identity separation (Authentic identity versus Entrepreneur identity)

Figure 1.
Summary of coding process and emerging themes

Trustworthiness of the research

To ensure the trustworthiness of the research, the potential participants were provided with a broad understanding of the research questions, which was based on understanding the entrepreneurial personality. To avoid either mitigating or exacerbating the respondents' narcissistic tendencies, the key term "narcissism" was left out of the initial briefing, to avoid possible responder bias which had the potential to jeopardize the outcome of the study. Furthermore, were the individual narcissistic traits not introduced or prompt by the interviewer during the interviews. However, if the participants mentioned these traits, they were identified through thematic analyses during the data analyses phase. After the telephonic briefing, potential participants were sent informed consent letters and consent forms, which participants were requested to confirm their voluntary participation by returning them so that the interview could be carried out.

Measurement and analysis

As indicated, data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth, telephonic interviews which were conducted between January and March 2020, before the COVID-19 pandemic. The aim was to conduct interviews with questions that allowed participants to provide their experiences and perceptions and also allowed for the gathering of key insights that contributed to the study. This research aimed to identify new insights and gain new information; therefore, it was important to collect and analyse the data at an individual level for the purposes of the study.

The NPI was adopted for this qualitative study and was used as a guideline to explore the prevalence of narcissism within the respondents, and there was particular attention paid to avoid self-reporting bias. A structured interview schedule was used to explore the entrepreneurs' experience and understanding of their own narcissistic traits that existed. Central to the development of the questions was the NPI-16 as modified by Ames *et al.* (2006), which allowed for the exploration of the identified narcissistic traits within the participants. The NPI and its derivatives are commonly used (Al-Shammari *et al.*, 2019; Pinto and Patanakul, 2015), and allowed the researcher to establish the prevalence of narcissistic traits and for the participants to provide insights into how those traits influenced their own behaviours. Pinto and Patanakul (2015) have highlighted ways in which to use the NPI as a modified version, especially in line with the qualitative methodology route that was used in this paper. Few studies have used the qualitative route in analysing narcissism within entrepreneurship, and therefore, this study aims to contribute to the literature in this space. Opportunity was found in using a derivative of the scale previously used in Liu *et al.* (2019) study to gain a better understanding of the narcissism traits that influence entrepreneurial behaviour.

Once the interviews were transcribed, the data was analysed using ATLAS.ti, which assisted with the coding process as well as the process of identifying common themes from the interviews. The Gioia approach is centred around identifying key themes and common insights that emerged from the data collected from the interviews (Saunders and Lewis, 2018; Zikmund *et al.*, 2013). Due to the nature of the study, thematic analysis was used so as to identify and analyse the patterns or themes that were found in the qualitative data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The aim of the thematic analysis process was to ensure robust analysis of the data that was gathered, and very importantly, to ensure that themes found within the research were clearly represented through the analysis approach (Zikmund *et al.*, 2013). The coding and analysis process involved several reiterations, where emergent themes were identified based on ongoing analysis and the recommended method of constant coding (Saunders and Lewis, 2018). The process of analysis was thorough and comprehensive, and the emergent themes were analysed in the context of the research questions (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Results

Sample demographics

Table 2 below describes the sample of 12 established entrepreneurs (owned a business for longer than three and a half years) who participated in the study and summarizes their gender, age and respective industries. The sample consisted of five females and seven males. Beyond a diversity in gender, the researcher aimed to interview individuals who were active within a variety of industries, and the sample included two participants who operated businesses in the marketing industry, two in fashion and retail and three of the participants were within the events and hospitality industry. The other five participants operated respectively in content and digital media, entertainment and media, information technology (IT) consulting, music and talent management and financial services and property development. Thus, it is evident from Table 2 that the participants operated in diverse industries.

Thematic analysis

In the process of thematic analysis as prescribed by Braun and Clarke (2006), the coding process produced 210 zero-order codes (refer to the complete code list provided in Appendix). By using Gioia methodology (Gioia *et al.*, 2013; Gioia, 2021), the beginning of the analysis translated into first-order codes, thereafter, second-order categories were developed, and during the final stage, the emergent themes or aggregate dimensions were compiled. Figure 1 summarizes this coding and theming process, and the following can be observed: The first-order codes were translated into 16 categories, which were then categorized according to eight second-order categories. These categories were described as follows: prevalence of narcissistic traits; influence of narcissistic traits on each other; experience as a key aspect for entrepreneurs; impact of narcissistic traits on personal development; impact of narcissistic traits on business growth; opportunity identification due to narcissistic traits; opportunity loss due to narcissistic traits; and identity customization, which was split into authentic identity and entrepreneur identity.

The second-order categories were then summarized further into four key themes that highlighted the more significant findings of the study:

(1) Theme 1: Entrepreneurial experience influences behaviour.

(2) Theme 2: Business growth linked to personal development.

(3) Theme 3: Opportunity identification versus loss.

(4) Theme 4: Identity separation – authentic identity versus entrepreneur identity.

Participant	Gender/Age	Industry/No. of years as entrepreneur
Participant 1	Female/35	Luxury Marketing and PR/7 years
Participant 2	Female/38	Fashion and Retail/5 years
Participant 3	Male/45	Financial Services and Property Development/16 years
Participant 4	Male/36	Content and Digital Media/5 years
Participant 5	Female/35	Fashion and Retail/4 years
Participant 6	Male/30	Entertainment and Media/7 years
Participant 7	Male/29	Events and Hospitality/13 years*
Participant 8	Female/37	Marketing and Branding/5 years
Participant 9	Male/34	Events and Hospitality/12 years
Participant 10	Female/30	Events and Hospitality/10 years
Participant 11	Male/35	Music and Talent Management/9 years
Participant 12	Male/38	IT Consulting/6 years

Note: *Participant 7 started his/her business at the age of 16

Table 2.
Description of the sample

RQ1. How do the individual narcissistic traits influence the entrepreneurial experience and behaviour of established entrepreneurs?

Theme 1: Entrepreneurial experience influences behaviour
The findings from the interview data indicated in the second-order categories were found to constantly highlight how prior entrepreneurial experience had had a direct impact on behaviour for established entrepreneurs. Prior entrepreneurial experience refers to the starting and managing of a business, in line with describing an entrepreneur's life in business in its various forms, especially considering the sense of unpredictability and uncontrollable nature of entrepreneurship, and with the understanding of each individual and unique experience when it comes to entrepreneurship (Merida and Rocha, 2021; Clarke and Holt, 2019; Morris *et al.*, 2012; Byrne and Shepherd, 2015). The prevalence of self-confidence, self-efficacy and an inflated positive view of self were often linked to experience, in relation to trial and error and consistency around success. One participant stated in response to their confidence levels:

> I really believe that I am good at what I do. I have been doing it for longer – twelve years. I've seen it come and go, change and morph, so I know I'm really good at what I do;

While another noted, "We have seen positive success. For me I believe in outcomes [. . .] So in terms of our core function there is verifiable proof that we can do this".

In further establishing the participants' behaviour based on their entrepreneurial experience, several participants expressed their high confidence around the ability to sell based on experience and successes, which has developed an inflated positive view of self. One of the participants indicated, "My strongest skill to start off is sales. I can sell. I do sell myself well and I sell the business well"; while another further explained their confidence in dealing with clients: "I can sell them my vision. And I've seen people sometimes believe in my vision more than I do".

Some of the participants were aligned to the realities of this type of circumstance, and expressed how they found it easy to change course. One participant even explained how it is important to change course:

> One thing I learnt early on in my business is that if I have a vision of something and whatever I was doing at the time is not getting me to that vision, I shift and shift quickly. Because if you don't shift quickly you get stuck and it takes longer for you to shift.

Another participant supported this notion, stating:

> I'm not married to a set of actions or outcomes. I'm married to the idea that we must do the things that will be better in the long term than things that are going to be worse in the long term.

While the participants reflected on their varied reactions to changes in their plans, they mostly aligned on the strength of their visions, with some illustrating more flexibility than others when it came to actively making changes to reach their desired outcomes.

Exhibitionism was often referred to by participants, in explaining how time had allowed them to realize the necessity of exhibitionist behaviour, in that it serves as a way to profile, to increase attention for work and to increase their public profile. Participants expressed a dichotomy in terms of how experience in entrepreneurship had impacted on their behaviour. There were negative parts to the experience too, with participants noting complacency, lack of attention to detail, mismanaged outputs and even the ignoring of feedback, as the

behaviour they had exhibited due to their experience. They linked this type of behaviour to their high confidence and their inflated view of self, stating:

> After achieving something, the mind sometimes takes it as an absolute that you are now great at something. So, it always results in you taking your foot off the pedal for one or other thing, and sometimes that comes back to bite you

And furthermore:

> The moment you walk into that environment with that big head, with that 'I'm the authority', you already get people's tensions up and that level of respect drops, and the judgement increases.

RQ2. How do the individual narcissistic traits influence business growth in comparison to personal development of established entrepreneurs?

Theme 2: Business growth linked to personal development
The combination of the impact of certain narcissistic traits, more especially the inflated sense of self, and how they played out in their business growth versus their own personal development was interesting. Entrepreneurs referred to how they built up extremely high levels of confidence over time, with some even referring to the levels as irrational and expressed how this allowed them to be more resilient, thus being able to bounce back quickly. They also referred to how these levels incited courage, which moved them to start and do things they had minimal experience in, and also helped them with influencing others through narratives and persuasiveness through selling, impacting on clients, customers and teams.

Participants were also tasked with considering whether they found it important that people recognized their work, which would reflect on the motivation to exhibit. Several discussions around the complexities of recognition were introduced here. Some participants took time to reflect on what recognition meant for them, with them concluding that recognition meant referrals. Other participants spoke about recognition as an important part of their personal development, describing entrepreneurs as people who thrive on recognition. One participant stated, "[. . .] as a human being recognition does motivate me. I have an ego like everyone else, and being told you're amazing is awesome". Some participants then spoke about recognition for their work being important because it shows the impact they have made:

> As an entrepreneur the biggest compliment is a referral [. . .] the biggest compliment is you making an order; it's you referring me. Referrals for an entrepreneur are massive. That's absolutely the biggest compliment you can ever pay.

Other participants described recognition as a form of success, and questioned why an entrepreneur would be doing the work they do if they do not get recognized, especially by the people they are catering for through their businesses; "My businesses have recognition at the centre. You're choosing, you're buying, you're giving me money, you're referring, you're giving us the work, that's the recognition".

Another participant expressed how recognition and praise are motivational because they make the environment for business easier:

> As a person I know that if somebody feels good about me and my work then things are easier and much better than you having to always prove yourself. It's easier to achieve when the energy and space is conducive for that.

The idea around recognition and praise helping with business continued to be a key insight that was emphasized often throughout the interview process. From the above, it is clear that participants linked their business growth to personal development and there is no separation between the two.

RQ3. How do the individual narcissistic traits influence opportunity identification and/ or loss of established entrepreneurs?

Theme 3: Opportunity identification versus loss
In referring to the impact of high levels of confidence, participants expressed how high levels of confidence resulted in their visualizing much bigger possibilities in terms of potential business and opportunities, and enhanced their ability to execute on those opportunities. One participant explained:

When I walk into a room and people see the confidence I have, they automatically have confidence in my ability. I believe there is nothing I can't do. I operate on that confidence

And another expressed,

[. . .] having an inflated positive view of self gives you thick skin, which is very necessary in this space. You go through a lot of 'no' as an entrepreneur, and they bounce off you and you keep going because you have thick skin. This is important, to keep going. It builds resilience. Also, having an inflated positive view of self makes you immune to 'no'. It just means the other person is wrong. So, you just carry on because you think the other person doesn't know what they are doing."

In terms of opportunity loss, this came up several times when entrepreneurs would explain how the inflated positive view of self would have them behaving in ways in which they would be very selective about the opportunities they actively pursued due to overconfidence, and would then have reduced business progress due to loss of opportunities; over-promising and under-delivering, resulting in a loss of clients. One participant stated, "The confidence we have in our skills and ability becomes our downfall because we neglect key fundamentals, and even clients".

RQ4. How do the individual narcissistic traits influence the entrepreneurial identity of established entrepreneurs?

Theme 4: Identification of separation: authentic identity versus entrepreneur identity and subsequent behaviour
An interesting dynamic was introduced through the theme of identity separation. In the context of the research, identity separation, which is often referred to in psychology studies, is where entrepreneurs were constantly referring to two separate identities within themselves (Koepke and Denissen, 2012; Schwartz, 2007). It is an aspect that seems to be linked to the way in which the established entrepreneur has actively learned through their entrepreneurial journey, and developed a dynamic personality that encompasses authentic and developed traits that they draw on so as to influence their behaviour and succeed on their entrepreneurial journey.

This separation was found predominantly in the research around the exhibitionism trait. While the exhibitionist trait was seemingly prevalent among entrepreneurs, the complexity comes in the insights around how the trait came into play practically. In reference to being asked if they felt they were ordinary or extraordinary, one participant indicated:

> I'm drawn to both descriptions, because in my regular life I may function as ordinary, however in
> business I have to function as extraordinary or special in order to succeed.

In reference to how entrepreneurs use the exhibitionist trait, another said, "We have to put
ourselves out there – look at us, we are the best. That's what we do to get clients. It's helped
us get clients into the door". Similarly, another stated:

> The reason I would show off is to sell more; it doesn't come naturally to me as a person, but the
> reality of running a company is that you have to show off, you have to sell, therefore you have to
> tell people how amazing you are; that's the nature of the job.

Some participants spoke about the importance of aligning the highlighting of achievements
to sourcing work or clients and having a strategic outlook to highlighting achievements or
showing off. In general, most of the participants found difficulty with the concept of
highlighting one's own achievements, even though, in reality, they had probably had to do it
for the purposes of sourcing business. In elaborating on this conundrum, some participants
expressed how they found more value in getting authentic recognition. These descriptions
highlighted exhibitionism as an important part of business practice, and a way in which to
source, reach and keep clients.

Discussion of the findings
One of the overarching discussions around the entrepreneurial personality focuses on the
ability of personality traits to significantly impact on entrepreneurial outcomes (Barrick and
Mount, 1991; Brockhaus, 1982; Antoncic et al., 2015; Leutner et al., 2014). We confirm this
notion in this paper; however, we extend previous work by focusing on a personality trait
beyond the Big five traits. Narcissism is normally viewed as a dark trait, yet there is
evidence that narcissistic traits can influence entrepreneurial behaviour positively
(Hmieleski and Lerner, 2016; Liu et al., 2021). In this study, we found that the established
entrepreneurs in this study portrayed narcissistic traits that contributed both positively and
negatively to their entrepreneurial behaviour and journey.

With regard to RQ1 (Theme 1): entrepreneurial experience influences behaviour, the
findings in this paper confirm the link between the entrepreneurial experience and behaviour
findings of Hmieleski and Lerner (2016), Klotz and Neubaum (2016), Liu et al. (2019) and Navis
and Ozbek (2016). Specifically, we found that the experience of established entrepreneurs
actually allows them to access certain narcissistic traits that are specifically for the purposes of
functioning as an entrepreneur. Entrepreneurs' experience, especially in relation to established
entrepreneurs, seems to indicate that the prevalence of the traits was directly related to their
behaviour, with participants often highlighting how mistakes and learnings over time have
helped them to develop or access traits that have allowed them longevity as entrepreneurs.
This finding builds on the UET, which states that firm performance is influenced by top
management and entrepreneurs' experience and personal traits (Hambrick and Mason, 1984).
Our findings confirm that it is not the only firm performance that is influenced by experience
but also that the UET can be extended to include entrepreneurial behaviour, which is
influenced by experience and specifically narcissistic traits. This finding, therefore, confirms
the likelihood of the prevalence of dark triad characteristics, which include narcissism (Leonelli
and Masciarelli, 2020), among established entrepreneurs due to the difficult and challenging
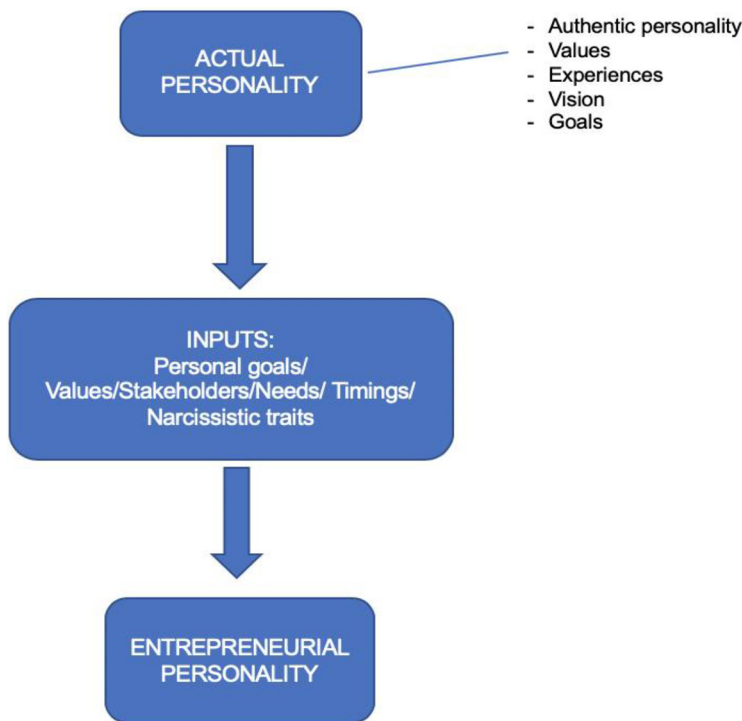experience of entrepreneurship (Hmieleski and Lerner, 2016; Kautonen et al., 2015).

Regarding RQ2 (Theme 2): Business growth linked to personal development, the
findings highlight how the personal development of the entrepreneur and the business
journey do not seem to be mutually exclusive, and actually seem to be integrated in terms of
how they are influenced and the outcomes thereof. Participants often referred to their own

growth, especially in line with courage, self-efficacy and higher self-confidence. These findings agree with the findings by previous scholars (Miller, 2015; Martinsen *et al.*, 2019), who highlight how narcissism influences the entrepreneurial journey through positively influencing self-efficacy, self-esteem and self-assurance. Furthermore, our findings confirm the positive influences on personal development that include an increased ability to influence people, which also impacts on the entrepreneurs' confidence and courage (Klotz and Neubaum, 2016; Hotchkiss, 2003; Liu *et al.*, 2019; Navis and Ozbek, 2016); this, in turn, is directly linked to business growth. The ability for narcissistic traits to serve as a motivating influence for entrepreneurs was commonly emphasized by the participants and was also highlighted as one of the main outcomes across the identified traits (Hmieleski and Lerner, 2016; Liu *et al.*, 2019; Al-Shammari *et al.*, 2019; Martinsen *et al.*, 2019; Navis and Ozbek, 2016). Again, in line with the previous literature (Hmieleski and Lerner, 2016; Liu *et al.*, 2019; Al-Shammari *et al.*, 2019; Martinsen *et al.*, 2019), motivation remains an important element, especially as it has been expressed as being highly influential in terms of influencing entrepreneurs to stay within the challenging entrepreneurial field.

Opportunity identification versus loss is evident in *RQ3* (Theme 3), and the findings in this paper support the notion found in the literature that describes how entrepreneurs have learnt to channel narcissistic traits, which are often deemed as negative into constructiveness (Hmieleski and Lerner, 2016; Miller, 2015; Furnham *et al.*, 2013). This constructiveness has been described in several ways by participants, and the findings extend the literature through providing a deeper understanding of how the outcomes directly influence decision-making in business as well as business outcomes, whether in realized opportunity or loss. Overconfidence, arrogance and entitlement have also resulted in negative business outcomes, where participants expressed how selective business pursuits have resulted in reduced business opportunities, stunted growth and a loss of clients. This can be linked to the literature that describes issues around bad decision-making as well as egotistical behaviour (Navis and Ozbek, 2016; Hmieleski and Lerner, 2016; DeNisi, 2015; Hotchkiss, 2003).

Regarding *RQ4* (Theme 4): Identity separation, an emerging insight in the findings and extension to the literature, adds an interesting complexity to the understanding of the entrepreneurial personality and how the prevalence of narcissism influences identity. Very often, in responding to the questions in the interview schedule, participants would query whether they should respond as themselves or respond based on how they would function as entrepreneurs. As this response and separation became more common, it became clear that there seemed to be a movement towards accessing certain personality traits to effectively perform as an entrepreneur. This finding differs with the findings of Leonelli *et al.* (2019a), who state that generally, entrepreneurs use their firm as a means to express themselves and reach their goals, which implies that there is no separation between the entrepreneurs' personal and business identities. However, Leonelli *et al.* (2019a) conducted a quantitative study on start-up entrepreneurs, whereas in our study, identity separation might be a unique realization that established entrepreneurs have been able to establish over time and through various experiences. Figure 2 illustrates the separation between established entrepreneurs' authentic personality and the inputs that end up resulting in the entrepreneurial personality. These inputs include narcissistic traits which are more intrinsic to entrepreneurs, such as the need for dominance, self-belief and self-confidence – even overconfidence (Liu *et al.*, 2019; Al-Shammari *et al.*, 2019; Navis and Ozbek, 2016; Macenczak *et al.*, 2016); it seemed that participants also often reflected on the traits they had learnt to access so as to practice and seemingly succeed as entrepreneurs.

Building on the P-E fit theory regarding the ability to predict entrepreneurial outcomes through drawing on information from personalities (Leutner *et al.*, 2014; Brandstätter, 2011), this study adds a dimension that reflects the possibility of personality traits functioning as a

ACTUAL
PERSONALITY

- Authentic personality
- Values
- Experiences
- Vision
- Goals

INPUTS:
Personal goals/
Values/Stakeholders/Needs/ Timings/
Narcissistic traits

ENTREPRENEURIAL
PERSONALITY

Source: Own compilation

business process involved in entrepreneurship rather than a necessary personality trait. Established entrepreneurs seem to have learnt through their experiences that there are certain aspects of their personality, whether authentic or not, that are critical business functions that help them grow their businesses and have influenced them positively on their entrepreneurial journeys. There is little literature that deals specifically with this dynamic, where participants have likened some of the narcissistic traits to business functions. This is seen where, for example, exhibitionism is compared to a functional process such as sales or marketing and referred to when drawing on such a trait purposely for such functional outcomes.

This is also the case in terms of the emerging insight indicated in the second-order categories around the authentic identity and the entrepreneurial identity, where they seem to interchange depending on the entrepreneur's circumstances and requirements. Leung *et al.*, 2021 argue that the P-E fit theory supports a positive link between narcissism and the entrepreneurial identity. Through the development of the emerging themes from the study that are highlighted in Figure 1, it seems the entrepreneurs have formed a dynamic personality that encompasses authentic and developed traits that allow them to behave in ways that allow them to survive, manage and flourish on their entrepreneurial journey. This is further reinforced in Figure 2, which illustrates how the actual personality in reference to one's values, experiences, visions and goals is influenced by inputs such as personal goals, values, stakeholders, needs, timings and narcissistic traits, which then form into the entrepreneurial personality.

Conclusion

Exploring and understanding the influences of the identified narcissistic traits have, in line with the literature, allowed for the demonstration of the multi-faceted nature of narcissism and how it has been described as impactful on the entrepreneurial journey (Macenczak *et al.*, 2016; Klotz and Neubaum, 2016; Judge *et al.*, 2009). It was clear when unpacking the responses from the participants that the established entrepreneurs in this study indeed portrayed narcissistic traits that influenced their entrepreneurial behaviour and journey both positively and negatively. Based on the research questions, four themes emerged from the findings whereby deeper insight is gained around the types of personality dimensions established entrepreneurs have learnt to access through their experiences to survive, and more importantly, thrive as entrepreneurs. As there are mixed results regarding the significance of narcissism in the field of entrepreneurship, this paper draws from the UET and P-E fit theory in providing insights into how narcissism may, in fact, be an integral personality dimension of established entrepreneurs. Specifically, the UET supports the findings surrounding *RQ1* (Theme 1), which indicates how narcissistic traits indeed seem to be an integral personality dimension for entrepreneurs, as it has strong influences on their entrepreneurial behaviour (Leonelli *et al.*, 2016; Leonelli *et al.*, 2019b; Leonelli, 2021).

For *RQ2* (Theme 2), the influence of narcissistic traits on business growth and personal development was also found to not be mutually exclusive, and is rather connected, in that the personal development of the entrepreneur has been found to link to the influence on the growth of the business (Klotz and Neubaum, 2016; Hotchkiss, 2003; Liu *et al.*, 2019; Navis and Ozbek, 2016). Regarding *RQ3* (Theme 3), opportunity identification and loss was also largely influenced by the narcissistic traits identified, with some traits having an influence at both ends of the spectrum of loss or opportunity. We found that established entrepreneurs have learnt to channel negative narcissistic traits into constructiveness (Hmieleski and Lerner, 2016; Miller, 2015; Furnham *et al.*, 2013). The more established an entrepreneur (longer in business and more experienced) is, the more they are able to use negative narcissistic traits to their advantage. Finally, the P-E fit theory supports *RQ4* (Theme 4), which highlights that the authentic identity and the entrepreneurial identity seem to interchange depending on the entrepreneur's circumstances and requirements. As illustrated in Figure 2, it was found in what seems to be a constant battle between the authentic identity and the entrepreneur identity, how the actual personality in reference to one's values, experiences, visions and goals is influenced by inputs such as personal goals, values, stakeholders, needs, timings and narcissistic traits, which then form into the entrepreneurial personality (Liu *et al.*, 2019; Al-Shammari *et al.*, 2019; Navis and Ozbek, 2016; Macenczak *et al.*, 2016).

Theoretical and practical implications

Extension of the literature on narcissism as a positive personality trait

This paper contributed to the continuous literature related to the entrepreneurial personality and behaviour in a developing country context, more especially the emerging literature around the positive role of narcissism, more often viewed as a dark trait, in relation to entrepreneurial behaviour. These influences were initially indicated by scholars who discussed the positive nature of narcissism within entrepreneurship (Hmieleski and Lerner, 2016; Liu *et al.*, 2019; Navis and Ozbek, 2016; Liu *et al.*, 2021), and the exploration of further details around the positive influences provides a greater understanding of narcissism within entrepreneurship. Furthermore, practically, the findings contribute to creating an understanding of how to hone different narcissistic traits for positive influences that develop entrepreneurs while also contributing to their business development and opportunity realization. These are important insights that can be applied practically, specifically for business leaders, scholars, policymakers

and investors. This includes stakeholders who fund and source partnerships with entrepreneurs, and whose work involves having a deeper understanding of the motivations of entrepreneurs so as to gauge their likelihood of success. These findings are also helpful in providing further details to different elements of the entrepreneurial personality and subsequent behaviour that allow for a better understanding of what instigates courage, perseverance and much-needed motivation on the challenging entrepreneurial journey.

Extension of the upper echelons theory and person-environment fit theory

The existing literature and P-E fit theory was expanded by providing insights on the dynamics that involved the development of an authentic identity and an entrepreneurial identity for established entrepreneurs. This seems to be a unique finding depending on the experience and how long an entrepreneur has been in business. The paper explored the ability of entrepreneurs to not only be aware of the active separation of these identities but also to access them accordingly, based on their perceptions and the outcomes they require as entrepreneurs at a specific point in time. In this paper, we also extended the literature on the UET to include not only firm performance as an outcome of experience but also entrepreneurial behaviour.

Using Gioia methodology and qualitative route in analysing narcissism

This study contributed to using Gioia methodology, which are used in social and organizational studies, in the field of entrepreneurship. As entrepreneurship is viewed as a social and contextual phenomenon (Brush *et al.*, 2009) and entrepreneurs are seen as social agents, this methodology could be used. Other scholars conducting qualitative research in the field of entrepreneurship might be encouraged through this study's findings to use Gioia methodology in future studies. Furthermore, as only a few studies have used the qualitative route in analysing narcissism within entrepreneurship, the opportunity was found in using a derivative of the NPI scale previously mostly used in quantitative studies (Raskin and Hall, 1979; Ames *et al.*, 2006; Liu *et al.*, 2019). This enabled us to gain a better understanding of the narcissism traits that influence entrepreneurial behaviour, whereby we identify unresolved issues that need further attention, highlight possible future research opportunities and determine the main directions for future research.

Exploring narcissistic traits as a business process

The paper also makes a practical contribution in understanding the way in which entrepreneurs conduct business. While literature refers to the ability to predict entrepreneurial outcomes through drawing on information from personalities (Leutner *et al.*, 2014; Brandstätter, 2011), this paper adds a dimension that reflects the possibility of personality traits functioning as a business process involved in entrepreneurship rather than a necessary personality trait. Established entrepreneurs seem to have learnt through their experiences that there are certain aspects of their personality, whether authentic or not, that are critical business functions that help them grow their businesses and have influenced them positively regarding their entrepreneurial behaviour. There is limited literature that deals specifically with this dynamic, where participants have linked some of the narcissistic traits to business functions. This could also serve as a direction for future research. Practically, narcissistic traits as a business process could be used to source and develop entrepreneurs; the research has also highlighted the importance of not limiting this sourcing to the "entrepreneurial personality", and instead, understanding the intricacies of personalities and individual's experiences that can make them more likely to survive and grow within the field of entrepreneurship. The opportunity to access narcissism as a tool provides an additional layer to the recruitment of entrepreneurs and also

provides a variety to the types of people who would be considered as likely individuals to succeed as entrepreneurs.

Limitations and future research

No study is without limitations. The way the sample was selected could be a limitation as the researchers made use of their own networks to recruit the participants. Sample bias could also occur due to the limited number of interviews, as well as a limited representation of ethnic groups. Therefore, there is an opportunity to extend this kind of exploratory study to further ethnic groups within the scope of established entrepreneurs. A future suggestion also includes increasing the sample size in a similar study. Furthermore, conducting this kind of study in different geographical territories may also provide deeper and more diverse entrepreneurial insights from other developing and developed countries. A further limitation could have occurred due to the subject matter, the various points in the interview in which definitions and understanding of content had to be clarified, as well as the way in which all the interviews were conducted, which was telephonic. This could have resulted in interpretation and response bias due to the depth of discussions in the interviews as well as the questions that needed defining and clarity of scope. Finally, the model of separation identity of authentic and entrepreneurial personality was conceptual in nature based on the participants' responses and was not tested empirically. Therefore, the generalizability of the study is limited. It is recommended that future research test the model of separation identity on other samples than established entrepreneurs as well as on samples in developed economies. There is an opportunity for further research based on gaining more insights specific to this dynamic and whether it applies to samples beyond this study.

The study provided further insights into the prevalence of narcissism being linked to specifically identified traits, and there is also scope for further research based on confirming narcissism being based on those traits identified in this study. There is also an important discussion related to the opportunity for further research, as there is likely a prevalence of other dark triad traits such as Machiavellianism and psychopathy (Leonelli and Masciarelli, 2020) among more experienced entrepreneurs, where there is an indication of a high probability that these traits have developed due to the harsh, uncertain and challenging experience of entrepreneurship (Hmieleski and Lerner, 2016; Kautonen *et al.*, 2015). These authors suggest that the traits will likely increase in individuals as they progress to becoming established entrepreneurs.

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Appendix

○ Self vs industry
○ Importance of client referrals
○ In between ordinary and special
○ Industry impacting sense of self
○ Info-based decision-making
○ Motivation through passion
○ Sense of entitlement
○ Learning from specific experienced group
○ Self-assurance rework
○ Focus on work vs seeking recognition
○ Struggle with exhibitionism
○ Not reaching potential
○ Frequency of bad decisions
○ Self vs clients
○ Difficulty with compliments
○ Confidence in ability influence people
○ Ease of manipulation
○ Importance of failure
○ Importance of being a seller
○ Clarity of entrepreneurial goal
○ Importance of good reputation
○ Calculating risk
○ Hating authority and hierarchy
○ Importance of authority and hierarchy
○ Preference for authority
○ Negative side of authority not being recognized
○ Negative impact of entitlement
○ Positive impact of exhibitionism
○ Lack of need for validation from others
○ Most impactful trait in entrepreneurship
○ Self-doubt
○ View of self as ordinary
○ Importance of perseverance
○ Belief in everyone's abilities
○ Self-assurance re-strength in sales
○ Seeing self as visionary
○ Appreciation of compliments
○ Difficulty with manipulation
○ Separate business from self
○ Personal capacity – follow authority
○ Not wanting to manage people
○ Commanding respect
○ Enjoying leadership
○ Motivation through leadership
○ Management of stakeholders – difficulty
○ Handling team members
○ Respect from clients
○ Ease of changing course
○ Enjoying attention
○ Not wanting to be the face of the business
○ Taking on work with no capacity
○ Dominating the environment as motivation
○ Acceptance of unplanned outcomes
○ Ability to inspire others
○ Importance of showing your struggle

○ Frustration with being a leader
○ Management of stakeholders – action
○ Importance of communication
○ Frustration with people not aligning in thinking
○ Preference for delegation
○ Getting no respect from industry
○ Work speaking for itself
○ Having high expectations of others
○ Importance of exceeding expectations
○ Importance of impact
○ Difficulty with changing course
○ Sceptic regarding feedback
○ Importance of understanding outcomes
○ Difficulty with attention
○ Importance of recognition
○ Highlight business vs self
○ Preference for authentic recognition
○ Confidence in ability
○ Filling a gap in market
○ Confidence being a motivator for action
○ Impact of ego on business
○ Negative impact of ego on business
○ Self-conviction impacting action
○ Being held to high standard with no capacity
○ Passion driving conviction
○ Negative impact of not dominating environment
○ Self-confidence – presence
○ Belief in being better than others
○ Importance of being adaptable
○ Not believing in being a visionary
○ The need for manipulation
○ Not enjoying telling stories
○ Need for validation
○ Motivation through validation
○ Preference to make final decision
○ Not preferring authority or delegation
○ Giving respect to get respect
○ Importance of recognition for client growth
○ Sharing of successes as a highlight
○ Not seeking recognition
○ Overconfidence being used against you
○ Importance of making decisions
○ Seeing self as extraordinary
○ Awareness of being ahead
○ Frustration due to being too far ahead
○ Drawing on guidance from others
○ People having different drive and vision
○ Being discerning about learning from others vs experience
○ Uncertain about ability to sell
○ Difficulty with selling self
○ Importance of exhibition
○ Not overconfident
○ Motivation through recognition
○ Belief in positive impact
○ Negative of recognition – fear of peaking too early

(continued)

Table A1.
Code list

○ Importance of stakeholders
○ Handling team members with empathy
○ Importance of respect for work done
○ Importance of thinking ahead
○ Importance of feedback
○ Difficulty with highlighting achievements
○ Sceptic regarding praise
○ Struggle with entitlement
○ Lack of need for exhibitionism
○ Using others to sell self
○ Lack of confidence
○ Positive impact of overconfidence
○ Enjoying sharing stories
○ Having high expectations of self
○ Importance of support structure
○ Preference for leadership
○ Ability to challenge leadership
○ Self-moderation
○ Understanding responsibility to others
○ Negatives of risk-taking
○ Preference for recognition vs respect
○ Clarity on who you want respect from
○ Desire to teach
○ Understanding when to change course
○ Importance of maintaining positive image
○ Dominance causing complacency
○ Getting constant validation
○ Uniqueness leading to success
○ Feeling empowered from learning
○ Motivated by opportunity
○ Issue with people taking credit on their own
○ Embracing validation
○ Importance of celebrating others
○ Biggest mistakes linked to finances
○ Preference for sharing stories intimately
○ Under-using ability to sell
○ Positives of risk-taking
○ Preference for micro-management
○ Changing course due to intuition
○ No emotions re highlighting achievements
○ Negative impact of overconfidence
○ Negative – confidence only being linked to success
○ Dominating environment through customer-centricity
○ Negatives of power
○ People spreading negative information
○ More capable than others but restricted
○ Doubting ability to influence people
○ Willingness to take risks
○ Doing things themselves due to stakeholder challenges

○ Issues with perfectionism
○ Lack of satisfaction due to need for validation
○ Lack of need for power
○ Highly impactful trait in entrepreneurship
○ Importance of resilience
○ Not relying on people for favours
○ Struggle with uncertainty
○ Importance of getting to know the team
○ Importance of vision
○ Micro-managing due to passion
○ Lack of need for respect
○ Frustration with people not behaving like them
○ Lost opportunity due to assumed success
○ Positive impact of entitlement
○ Being both ordinary and special
○ Being treated as threat due to high potential
○ Importance of guiding others
○ Challenge with hierarchy
○ Balancing the need to exert power
○ Seeing the vision come to life
○ Leadership teaching humility
○ Thinking people are as capable as them
○ Preference for constructive feedback
○ Struggle with personal attachment to business
○ Incompetence dominating industry
○ Weakness in sales
○ Preference for unplanned outcomes
○ Threaten so as to get things done
○ Using common interests for connection
○ Encouraging an exploratory environment
○ Self-motivation
○ Respect through fear
○ Lack of need for attention
○ Showing off for intimidation purposes
○ Power resulting in self-assurance
○ Importance of self-belief
○ Complexity of seeing self as extraordinary
○ Stories are an important part of sales
○ Motivated by autonomy
○ Preference for autonomous teams
○ Opportunity in delegation
○ Preference for leading through others
○ Motivated by being able to fulfil potential
○ Firing people that have to be micro-managed
○ Getting respect through providing value
○ Building credibility within your team
○ Importance of being ahead for credibility
○ Need for recognition negatively influencing business decisions
○ Positives of self-enhancement
○ Negatives of exhibitionism
○ Motivation through execution

Table A1.