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# Resilience Through Constraint: How First-Generation American Restaurateurs Construct Entrepreneurial Meaning, Adaptation, and Legacy

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## Abstract

*This study explores how first-generation American (FGA) restaurateurs navigate entrepreneurial stress and construct intergenerational legacies in the face of economic, cultural, and emotional constraint. Drawing on 19 in-depth interviews and guided by Creation Theory, the study theorizes opportunity as an emergent process shaped by psychological capital, identity, and adaptive capabilities. The findings reveal four layered types of stress – chronic, social, psychological, and existential – each driving coping responses, skill-building, and crisis-induced innovation. Through this journey, restaurateurs develop pattern recognition and operational versatility, ultimately framing their ventures as moral and legacy-driven enterprises. This research contributes to entrepreneurship theory by deepening understanding of necessity entrepreneurship, disaggregating entrepreneurial stress, and reframing legacy as a central entrepreneurial outcome. For the hospitality sector, it highlights how FGA entrepreneurs build cultural resilience and economic meaning in overlooked spaces, offering insights for inclusive policy and education.*

**Key Words:** *Necessity Entrepreneurship, Creation Theory, Entrepreneurial Stress, First-Generation Americans, Constraints*

**Track:** *Ethically Driven Innovations*

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## Introduction

Entrepreneurship is often celebrated as a pursuit of innovation and autonomy. However, for many first-generation American (FGA) restaurateurs – especially immigrants – entrepreneurship is more about survival, adaptation, and familial responsibility under constraint (O'Donnell et al., 2024). Operating at the intersection of economic necessity, cultural displacement, and limited resources, these individuals engage in emotionally driven, improvisational, and legacy-oriented entrepreneurship. Yet, dominant theories frequently assume access to resources, opportunity, or volition (Clough et al., 2019), rendering these lived experiences underrepresented. While existing research on necessity entrepreneurship acknowledges structural antecedents such as lack of employment alternatives, it overlooked the emotional, cognitive, and adaptive dynamics involved in actualizing such ventures (Nikiforou et al., 2019). Models of entrepreneurial stress remain underexplored among FGA entrepreneurs, particularly in terms of how they manage adversity in real time (Shepherd et al., 2011). These gaps limit our understanding of how constrained entrepreneurs develop resilience, improvise with scarce resources, and carve durable business pathways forward. Our study addresses these gaps by examining how stress, coping, and identity interact in the daily decision-making of immigrant restaurateurs.

Additionally, much of entrepreneurship literature adopts a discovery view of opportunity, assumes resource access and market alertness (Shane & Venkataraman, 2000; Zellweger & Zenger, 2023) that is unrealistic for those operating under constraint. This study aligns with Alvarez & Barney's (2007) study of Creation Theory, which posits that opportunities are constructed through iterative action, commitment, and resource reconfiguration in

uncertain environments. Based on 19 in-depth interviews, we present a grounded conceptual model that theorizes entrepreneurial stress as a processual experience that gives rise to emergent pattern recognition, shaped by psychological capital and adaptive capabilities.

Our findings expand theories of necessity entrepreneurship by revealing the psychological and emotional dimensions that shape entrepreneurial behaviors under uncertainty (Dimitriadis, 2021). We also extend models of stress and coping by theorizing distinct stress types and their relationship to identity and resilience (Branzei & Abdelnour, 2010). Finally, we reframe opportunity construction as grounded in identity, emotion, and intergenerational aspiration, rather than strategic market discovery (Alvarez & Barney, 2007; Arikan et al., 2020). This study positions FGA restaurateurs not as passive actors, but as resilient agents who build opportunities through constraint, adaptation, and emotional labor – offering insights for theorizing entrepreneurship as a form of social transformation in marginalized communities in hospitality sector.

## **Literature Review**

### ***Theoretical Foundations***

Traditional entrepreneurship research has been dominated by the opportunity discovery perspective, where opportunities exist independently and are identified by alert entrepreneurs (Baron & Ensley, 2006; Shane & Venkataraman, 2000). This logic assumes access to information and resources, and market visibility - conditions rarely met by constrained actors (Arikan et al., 2020). In contrast, Creation Theory offers an alternative view, contending that opportunities are not found, but constructed through the actions, commitments, and iterations of entrepreneurs over time (Alvarez & Barney, 2007). Entrepreneurs often begin without a clear in sight, creating meaning and building viability through trial, error, and adaptation under uncertainty (Alvarez & Sachs, 2023). While this lens has been applied resource-limited contexts, its application to necessity-driven, immigrant entrepreneurship in hospitality remains limited.

### ***Necessity Entrepreneurship***

Necessity entrepreneurship refers to business creation driven by limited employment alternatives or economic displacement (Acs, 2006). This framing contrasts necessity entrepreneurs with opportunity entrepreneurship and views it as reactive, resource-constrained, and low-growth (O'Donnell et al., 2024). Dominant research emphasizes macro-structural factors such as poverty or exclusion, while neglecting individual agency and adaptive cognition. As a result, necessity entrepreneurship is depicted as a survivalist and of limited developmental value (Hilson et al., 2018). Critics argue that this framing misrepresents the full spectrum of motivations and outcomes. Emerging work (e.g., Dencker et al., 2021; O'Donnell et al., 2024) reframes necessity entrepreneurship as contextually embedded, emotionally meaningful, and even legacy-oriented. This reorientation is particularly relevant in foodservice sector – where low entry barriers intersect with cultural identity and community value – necessity-driven ventures can become platforms for reclaiming agency and imagining future possibilities.

### ***Entrepreneurial Stress and Coping***

While entrepreneurial stress has gained growing attention in recent research, particularly within high-stakes, uncertain environments, it is often framed as an individual pathology (e.g., burnout) or as a performance barrier (Stephan, 2018; Uy et al., 2013). Such views neglect the situated, relational nature of stress that emerges from entrepreneurs' embeddedness in volatile environments. Rauch et al. (2018) argue that stress is not incidental but central to entrepreneurial behavior, cognition, and persistence. In marginalized contexts such as immigrant or necessity-driven ventures, stress tend to be more chronic and under-theorized. While studies such as Branzei & Abdelnour (2010) who discuss resilience in extreme cases, and similarly Shepherd et al. (2011) explore emotional processes learning from failure, they both fall short of addressing daily psychological coping or theorizing the venture survival stressors outside failure events. Uy et al. (2013) demonstrates that coping styles affect entrepreneurs' well-being across time, moderated by prior entrepreneurial experience. These studies suggest that stress and coping are adaptive processes are continuous, relational, and emotional in shaping entrepreneur's identity, meaning, and venture viability – particularly in emotionally demanding fields like hospitality.

## ***Self-Identity***

Entrepreneurial identity theory offers a valuable lens for understanding how individuals' self-concepts influence venture behaviors, motivations, and responses to adversity, not merely to generate profit (Fauchart & Gruber, 2011). This identity dimension becomes especially salient under constraint or marginalization, influencing how adversity is interpreted and addressed. For example, Powell & Baker (2014) show that founder identity types – growth-oriented Darwinian, community-centered Communitarians, or values-driven Missionaries – guide their strategic responses to adversity. Similarly, Cardon et al. (2009) link entrepreneurial passion to identity salience, influencing resilience and adaptability in high-pressure environments. However, identity remains under-theorized in necessity-driven immigrant entrepreneurship, where entrepreneurial activity is fueled by cultural preservation, moral responsibility, or intergenerational aspiration rather than economic growth. While family considerations are occasionally acknowledged in small business literature (Stephan, 2018), legacy-building is rarely treated as a central entrepreneurial outcome. Calás et al. (2009) advocate for expanding entrepreneurship research to include cultural meaning-making and emotional investments, especially for marginalized entrepreneurs. This underexplored intersection – identity, emotion, and long-term vision – demands deeper qualitative investigation.

## **Method**

To explore how FGA restaurateurs navigate entrepreneurial stress and construct resilient business pathways, we adopted a qualitative, interview-based design grounded in interpretivist approach. This approach allows us to access the lived experiences and sensemaking processes of FGA entrepreneurs operating under constraint, which enhances validity and enables realistic causal inferences (Fu & Simmons, 2021; Von Soest, 2023).

## ***Sampling Procedures and Informants***

We utilized purposive sampling to recruit participants who identify as first-generation immigrants and currently own or operate food-related businesses in the U.S. Eligible participants were age 18 or older, had at least three years of foodservice industry experience, and held active managerial roles. The sample was diversified by business types (e.g., restaurant, catering, food truck), gender, tenure, and entrepreneurial role. To achieve sample triangulation, participants were recruited through LinkedIn, ethnic business associations, researcher's connections, and snowball sampling (Legendre et al., 2023). Nineteen in-depth interviews were conducted with FGA restaurateurs (see Table 1) whose businesses ranged from full-service restaurants to food wholesale, with participants serving as owners, chefs, or partners across 3 to 20 years of experience.

**Table 1. Informant Information**

ID	Type of Business	Position	Tenure in the Industry
I-1	Special Eatery	Service/Inventory Manager & Partner	3+
I-2	Catering	Owner/Founder	5+
I-3	Catering	Owner/Manager	5+
I-4	Consultant	Owner	10+
I-5	Franchiser	Owner	15+
I-6	Food Truck	Owner	10+
I-7	Consultant	Owner	15+
I-8	Restaurant	Owner	5+
I-9	Food & Non-Alcoholic Beverage	Owner/President	5+
I-10	Ethnic Food	Owner	10+
I-11	Food Specialty Store	Owner	5+
I-12	Restaurant	Executive Chef/Partner	5+
I-13	Bar	Owner	3+
I-14	Restaurant	Owner/Chef	15+
I-15	Special Eatery	Owner	5+

I-16	Special Eatery	Owner/Founder	5+
I-17	Special Eatery	Owner/Operator	5+
I-18	Specialty Food Wholesale	Executive Chef/Food Wholesaler	20+
I-19	Restaurant	Owner	5+

### ***Data Collection***

We developed a semi-structured interview protocol in three steps: reviewing entrepreneurship literature, consulting academic experts, and piloting with industry professionals. The final interview guide covered participants' backgrounds, motivations, challenges and constraints, coping strategies, business development, and future plans. Questions were open-ended and conversational to elicit rich, self-directed narratives. Two trained interviewers ensured data dependability and confirmability through peer debriefings and audit trails. Data saturation was reached by the 13<sup>th</sup> interview, with six additional conducted for validation (Guest et al., 2006). All interviews were conducted in English, audio-recorded with consent, and transcribed accurately. Conversations lasted between 16 and 47 minutes, averaging approximately 32 minutes in length.

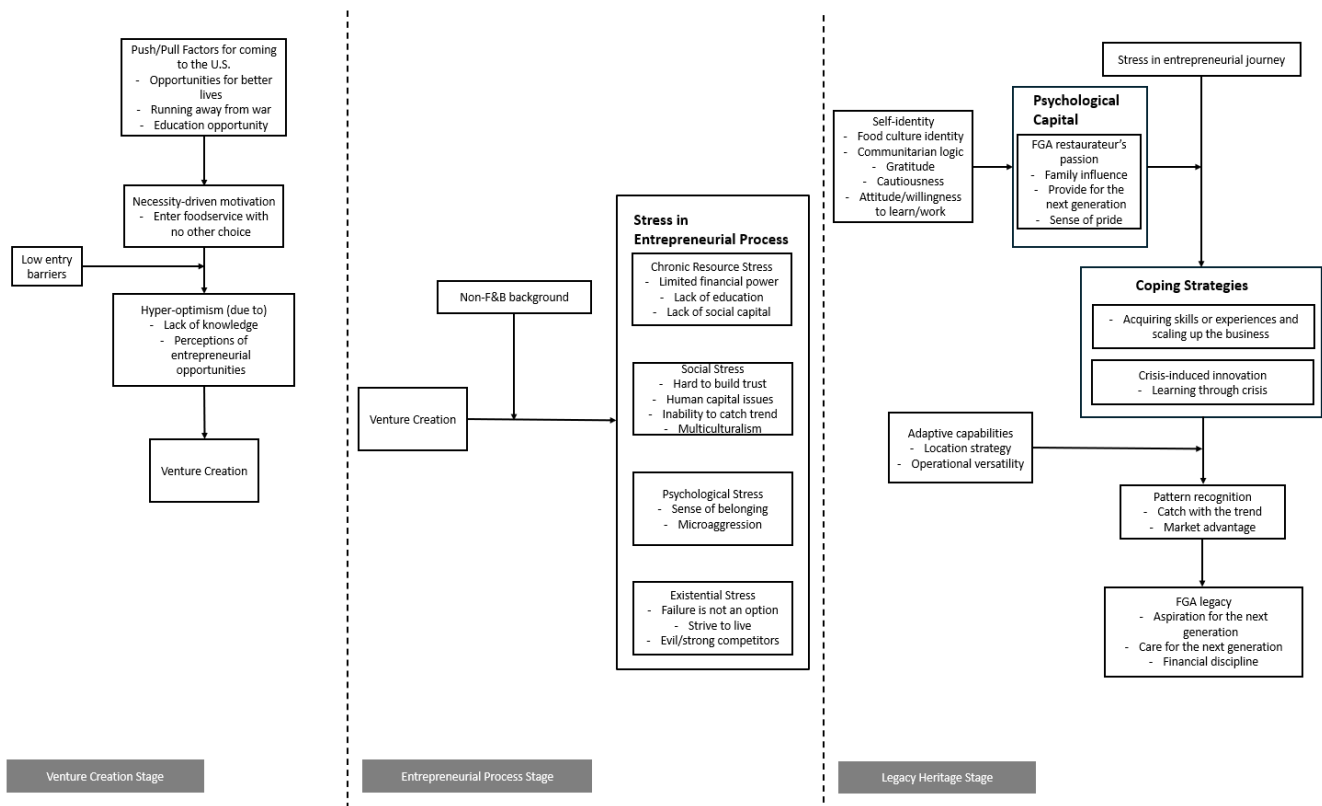
### ***Data Analysis***

In line with established thematic analysis procedures, the authors followed six steps: data immersion, initial coding, theme development, and subsequent review, refinement, and articulation of thematic constructs (Braun & Clarke, 2006). After familiarization with the data, initial codes were generated inductively across the dataset. Three researchers participated in coding, and discrepancies were discussed to ensure interpretive alignment. Codes were then grouped into higher-order themes and categories (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). To ensure trustworthiness, the research team iteratively refined the coding structure, and engaged in multiple rounds of theme clustering to generate a cohesive conceptual model.

### **Results and discussion**

Through thematic analysis, our findings reveal a dynamic process marked by necessity-driven motivations, context-specific stressors, identity-based resilience, and the construction of entrepreneurial meaning over time. The emergent model illustrates a process in which necessity and hyper-optimism give rise to multifaceted stress that triggers coping strategies, moderated by psychological capital, ultimately fostering adaptive capabilities and FGA legacy. The conceptual framework of this study is outlined in Figure 1.

### **Figure 1. First-Generation American Restaurateurs Meaning Construction Framework**



### ***Entry of Foodservice Entrepreneurship***

Participants entered the food business largely out of necessity, often facing limited employment opportunities due to immigration status, lack of local credentials, or language barriers. Entrepreneurship was not framed as an aspirational choice but as a constrained pathway to stability. Despite these limitations, participants exhibited a form of hyper-optimism, grounded in cultural familiarity with food and a perceived ease of entry into the industry. Many lacked formal culinary training or business education, yet believed success was attainable because they could “cook well” or that “people love my food.” This optimism reflects a cognitive bias common in early-stage entrepreneurs, but in our study, it was amplified by incomplete information and immigrant idealism. Rather than discovering predefined opportunities, these entrepreneurs created and shaped their own business spaces within the constraints they encountered, consistent with Creation Theory (Alvarez & Barney, 2007). The motivation to start was thus shaped by necessity, but the actions taken reflected agency, iterative learning, and emotional investment.

### ***Multidimensional Stress in the Entrepreneurial Journey***

Participants reported significant stress that evolved throughout the entrepreneurial journey. This stress was not monolithic, but rather clustered into four types. *Chronic resource stress* stemmed from financial limitations, lack of access to social capital, and low levels of formal education or business literacy. Entrepreneurs struggled with cash flow, credit-building, and compliance. *Social stress* emerged from distrust, unreliable partnerships, shortage of professional human capital, and the demanding nature of multiculturalism. Many participants also described being isolated from mainstream networks and being cautious about choosing collaborators. *Psychological stress* was marked by a fragile sense of belonging, experiences of racial microaggressions, and invisible labor. Being a first-generation American, the sense of “not being seen” or being constantly questioned added to the emotional toll. *Existential stress* involved fear of failure and the looming sense that the business was fragile, the burden to provide for the family, and hyper-competition. These forms of stress collectively disrupted

the myth of the self-made entrepreneur and revealed the emotional undercurrent of constrained entrepreneurship, which is a dimension underexplored in dominant narratives (Shepherd et al., 2011).

### ***Coping and Psychological Capital***

In response to these stressors, participants activated a range of coping strategies including both behavioral and affective. These included continuous acquirement of skills and experiences, as well as developing innovativeness through crisis. The effectiveness and sustainability of these coping responses appeared to hinge on psychological capital, particularly their reliance on faith-based beliefs, support from family and ethnic networks, and the sense of pride developed over time. Participants who narrated stronger internal resources demonstrated higher capacity to reframe setbacks and adapt their behavior. The commonly cited phrase “I can’t go back” illustrates the internalized, identity-driven commitment that buffered against burnout and the demanding environment. Moreover, we found that self-identity – which is often tied to cultural pride and moral obligation, served as a critical antecedent to psychological capital. Entrepreneurs perceived their work as not merely an income-generation, it was also a continuation of cultural lineage and a symbol of immigrant perseverance, particularly for their descendants.

### ***Adaptive Capabilities and Pattern Recognition***

As entrepreneurs accumulated experience, many began to shift from reactive coping toward proactive adaptation, developing operational versatility in managing their businesses. These adaptive capabilities included strategic decisions such as concept expansions, product diversification, customer relationship management, and scaling up growth strategies. Over time, such efforts cultivated a form of intuitive learning, and this learning was not codified in formal plans, but rather evolved through trial-and-error and reflective action, consistent with effectual logic in entrepreneurship (McMullen & Shepherd, 2006; Sarasvathy, 2001). Entrepreneurs learned to detect recurring market signals and customer behaviors, thereby enhancing their ability to catch with the trends and secure modest but meaningful advantages. Pattern recognition emerged as a cognitive outcome of navigating crisis and constraint, enabling participants to act with greater confidence and foresight. Rather than relying on prediction, participants emphasized the importance of being observant, flexible, and willing to test new approaches, especially when operating under persistent uncertainty and limited resources.

### ***FGA Legacy and Intergenerational Aspiration***

The ultimate outcome of these entrepreneurial journeys was not framed purely in terms of financial gain, but in the form of FGA legacy. Participants commonly expressed a future-oriented desire to build something meaningful for their children – whether by transferring business skills, funding education, or instilling values such as resilience, discipline, and perseverance. This legacy orientation was moral, emotional, and future-focused, rooted in lived experience and framed through family spirits. Rather than seeing their ventures as static entities, participants viewed them as vehicles of transformation, both personal and generational. This legacy-building impulse is often intersected with cultural preservation and upward mobility, reflecting a multidimensional definition of entrepreneurial success. This finding extends current entrepreneurship theory by foregrounding legacy as an outcome of entrepreneurial action, especially in constrained immigrant contexts. It also underscores the need to move beyond narrow economic definitions of entrepreneurial success toward multidimensional, identity-infused outcomes (Calás et al., 2009; Powell & Baker, 2014).

### **Conclusions and Implications**

This study examines how FGA restaurateurs construct entrepreneurial meaning and opportunity within structurally constrained environments. Additionally, this study sought to understand how FGA restaurateurs navigate the entrepreneurial journey – with the constraints of migration, limited resources, and high industry competition – and cope with bricolage. The conceptual model developed in this study advances understanding of FGA entrepreneurship by highlighting four novel contributions. First, we introduce a series of stressors – chronic, existential, social, and psychological – that are rarely differentiated in prior entrepreneurship studies. Second, we highlight the role of psychological capital and self-identity in shaping coping strategies. Third, we

demonstrate how adaptive capabilities emerge and enhance pattern recognition within constrained settings. Fourth, we conceptualize the FGA legacy as a morally anchored entrepreneurial outcome. By adopting a creation theory lens (Alvarez et al., 2024), and by integrating identity, emotion, and resilience into the opportunity formation process, this study offers a more holistic and culturally grounded understanding of necessity entrepreneurship.

### ***Theoretical Implications***

This study contributes to entrepreneurship research in several ways. First, it offers empirical support for creation theory which posits that opportunities emerge through iterative action and commitment, especially under high uncertainty (Alvarez et al., 2024; Townsend et al., 2018). Unlike traditional views emphasizing strategic foresight and market alertness (Busenitz, 1996; Gaglio & Katz, 2001), our findings illustrate that FGA entrepreneurs often begin without clear opportunity structures, instead building them through adaptive behavior and emotional labor. Second, we extend the entrepreneurial stress literature by disaggregating stress into four interrelated categories. Existing work often examines stress as a single construct primarily linked to performance or burnout (Stephan, 2018; Uy et al., 2013). By differentiating between chronic resource stress, existential fears, social disconnection, and psychological belonging, we offer a more nuanced understanding of how stress is experienced – especially in hospitality-based necessity entrepreneurship.

Third, we integrate psychological capital and self-identity into necessity-based entrepreneurship. While previous studies acknowledge emotional resilience and identity formation (Fauchart & Gruber, 2011), these are rarely linked to coping mechanisms in constrained settings. Our model shows that self-identity – particularly when rooted in cultural and intergenerational values – both fuels and sustains entrepreneurial persistence, and act as a psychological buffer in the face of prolonged adversity. Finally, this study advances a legacy-centered perspective on entrepreneurship. In contrast to profit or growth-driven outcome models, FGA restaurateurs in our sample articulated success in moral and intergenerational terms, namely, providing for descendants and transmitting values. This finding expands the scope of entrepreneurial outcomes and aligns with feminist and critical entrepreneurship perspectives that call for more pluralistic, non-market-driven measures of impact (Calás et al., 2009).

### ***Practical Implications***

This study offers several implications for entrepreneurship support organizations, policymakers, and hospitality education programs serving immigrant communities. Support initiatives should address the specific stressors faced by FGA restaurateurs, including chronic financial constraints, psychological isolation, and limited social capital, through targeted training in financial literacy, mentorship for navigating bureaucratic and partnership complexities, and access to culturally responsive mental health resources. Hospitality training programs should broaden their approach to include nontraditional, necessity-driven entrepreneurs who despite lacking formal training, bring cultural knowledge and experiential resilience. Inclusive bridge programs that combine operational basics with culturally attuned support and language assistance can help foster more equitable and sustainable pathways. Policymakers and investors should recognize that FGA restaurateurs prioritize legacy-oriented and intergenerational goals over short-term profit. Supporting family-based business education and succession planning can enhance economic mobility while preserving community stability. Finally, immigrant food entrepreneurs should be recognized not as marginal actors but as key contributors to economic stability and cultural continuity, meriting expanded access to credit, rent protections, and recovery funding.

### ***Limitations and Future Research***

This study is not without limitations. First, our sample focused on FGA restaurateurs within the U.S., which may limit generalizability to other cultural contexts. Future studies might compare immigrant entrepreneurs across industries or regions to assess the transferability of our model. Second, while we identified different types of stress, we did not systematically map which stressors lead to which coping responses. Quantitative follow-up studies could test these relationships and explore potential moderators such as gender and tenure in the industry.

Third, while our data highlighted self-identity and legacy as central themes, deeper longitudinal work could explore how these constructs evolve over time, especially as businesses transition across generations. Future studies may also incorporate perspectives from family members or employees to provide a more relational understanding of immigrant entrepreneurship.

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