E-ISSN: 3108-4176

APSSHS

Academic Publications of Social Sciences and Humanities Studies

2026, Volume 7, Issue 1, Page No: 147-162

Available online at: https://apsshs.com/

Annals of Organizational Culture, Leadership and External Engagement Journal

# Constructing Entrepreneurial Realities: ESO Narratives and Transitional Entrepreneurship in a Post-Industrial City

**Yousef Al-Qahtani[1]*, Fahad Al-Salem[1], Abdullah Al-Harbi[2]**

1. Department of Organizational Leadership and Corporate Governance, Faculty of Business Administration, King Saud University, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.
2. Department of External Communication and Strategic Relations, Faculty of Economics and Management, King Abdulaziz University, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia.

**Abstract**

This study explores how narratives articulated by entrepreneurial support organizations (ESOs) within Detroit's evolving entrepreneurial ecosystem shape and construct the social realities of transitional entrepreneurs. It contributes both conceptual and applied insights intended to mobilize meaningful support, inform the development of policies and programs, and support further empirical inquiry into transitional entrepreneurship. The research employs a multi-case study strategy, examining two ESOs operating in Detroit: one that focuses on advancing high-growth ventures and facilitating access to financial resources for technology-oriented entrepreneurs, and another that emphasizes everyday entrepreneurship (particularly within underserved populations) while cultivating a broader, more diverse resource base. Data are analyzed through thematic analysis of organizational materials and interviews conducted with ESO leadership. Narratives generated by ESOs actively influence transitional entrepreneurs in Detroit by shaping their social identities, directing how they engage with the entrepreneurial ecosystem, and articulating a shared vision of a future in which these entrepreneurs play a pivotal role. This study enhances the conceptualization of transitional entrepreneurship by extending existing definitions to foreground the role of institutional actors, such as ESOs, and the narratives they deploy to structure opportunities and constraints. In addition, it expands the boundaries of the concept by incorporating technology start-up founders and emphasizing the contribution of transitional entrepreneurs to post-industrial urban environments, particularly in relation to community transformation and urban development.

**Keywords:** Transitional entrepreneurship, Narrative, Entrepreneurial ecosystem, Entrepreneurial support organization, Case study

**How to cite this article:** Al-Qahtani Y, Al-Salem F, Al-Harbi A. Constructing Entrepreneurial Realities: ESO Narratives and Transitional Entrepreneurship in a Post-Industrial City. Ann Organ Cult Leadersh Extern Engagem J. 2026;7(1):147-62. https://doi.org/10.51847/rsXPldAYbN

**Received:** 21 March 2026; **Revised:** 04 June 2026; **Accepted:** 08 June 2026

**Corresponding author:** Yousef Al-Qahtani

**E-mail** ✉ yousef.qahtani@gmail.com

## Introduction

Post-industrial urban centers in the United States (US), including Detroit, Kansas City, and St. Louis, have increasingly positioned entrepreneurial startups as central mechanisms for socioeconomic regeneration [1]. Transitional entrepreneurs create a considerable share of these ventures, a group often encompassing veterans, immigrants and refugees, women and other marginalized populations, as well as individuals from economically disadvantaged backgrounds who have navigated significant adversity in pursuing entrepreneurial paths [2, 3] Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic intensified existing pressures on this population, widening disparities in access to resources and opportunities compared to entrepreneurs who do not face systemic marginalization [4]. In this context, it is important to investigate how transitional entrepreneurs interpret their social and institutional environments as either supportive or restrictive of their ventures. While prior scholarship has largely focused on well-established ecosystems such as Silicon Valley and technology-driven hubs like Boston and Austin, comparatively little attention has been paid to less developed, post-industrial cities such as Detroit.

Commonly referred to as the Motor City due to its historical association with the "Big Three" automobile manufacturers, Detroit ranks among the largest post-industrial cities in the US and possesses a longstanding legacy of industrial production and innovation [5]. The city has a predominantly Black population, is home to thousands of immigrants and refugees, contains numerous neighborhoods marked by economic hardship and structural poverty, and has experienced a complex history of racial tensions and socioeconomic disparities despite ongoing revitalization efforts [6, 7]. As such, Detroit is a particularly suitable context for examining how transitional entrepreneurs perceive their entrepreneurial ecosystems as either enabling or constraining their entrepreneurial activities [8].

Since entrepreneurs operate within interconnected systems rather than in isolation, depending on networks of actors, institutions, and support mechanisms, it is essential to examine the role of entrepreneurial support organizations (ESOs) within the wider ecosystem. This study investigates how ESOs contribute to constructing the social reality of transitional entrepreneurs, with particular emphasis on the narratives these organizations advance within the entrepreneurial ecosystem. To do so, we adopt a multi-case study design [9], focusing on two leading ESOs in Detroit, MI: one oriented toward neighborhood-based entrepreneurs and the other toward technology-sector entrepreneurs. We contend that the narratives promoted by these ESOs are especially significant, as they communicate visions of possible success for transitional entrepreneurs and, in doing so, can influence both their identities and their behaviors [10, 11].

This article advances the literature on transitional entrepreneurship in multiple respects. While [12] suggest that "this form of entrepreneurship is defined by the circumstances in which the entrepreneur finds themselves, more so than their goals and ambitions in the way a high growth technology or venture capital backed entrepreneur would" (p. 3), we emphasize the importance of sociohistorical conditions and institutional arrangements within entrepreneurial ecosystems in shaping the opportunities available to transitional entrepreneurs. Drawing on prior work highlighting the impact of entrepreneurial narratives [13, 14], this study examines how ESO-driven narratives shape the social realities experienced by transitional entrepreneurs. In doing so, we intentionally move beyond binary categorizations that position technology startups and transitional entrepreneurs as separate or opposing groups. For example, we highlight how Omer Kiyani created "smart gunlock" technology inspired by his exposure to gun violence in Detroit [15] and how Darren Riley established JustAir, a technology firm focused on monitoring neighborhood air quality, informed by his family's experiences with asthma [16]. Lastly, we propose that the insights generated here may inform policymakers and ESOs in designing more inclusive entrepreneurial ecosystems that provide essential support for transitional entrepreneurs in post-industrial cities such as Detroit.

## *Literature review*

We begin by reviewing the developing body of research on transitional entrepreneurship and subsequently argue for the importance of analyzing the role of ESOs within the broader entrepreneurial ecosystem. We then examine how entrepreneurial narratives shape both individual-level and broader socioeconomic outcomes, with particular attention to their narrative functions, before offering a more detailed overview of the entrepreneurial ecosystem in Detroit.

### *Transitional entrepreneurs*

In the Editors' Note introducing the Special Issue on transitional entrepreneurship in the Journal of Developmental Entrepreneurship [2] framed the concept as relating to entrepreneurial activity undertaken by individuals from communities who confront and move beyond serious hardship to create ventures that facilitate meaningful changes in their life trajectories (p. 2). This special issue followed the first colloquium dedicated to transitional entrepreneurship, partially supported by the Ewing M. Kauffman Foundation, reflecting the growing interest among policymakers, funding bodies, and scholars in issues of inclusion and exclusion in entrepreneurial contexts. Contributions to the issue focused on groups such as veterans, immigrants and refugees, women, other minority populations, and individuals from economically disadvantaged environments, as well as "other historically marginalized groups" (p. 3). The editors intentionally adopted a broad definition to encourage extensive scholarly discussion of the concept's boundaries (p. 3), while also suggesting that emphasizing shared experiences of marginalization could stimulate new directions within mainstream entrepreneurship research.

At the same time [12], argued in the same special issue that the concept requires clearer limits to prevent it from becoming overly inclusive and losing analytical usefulness. They highlighted that not all women entrepreneurs or immigrant entrepreneurs experience marginalization, particularly those who migrate with substantial financial resources and clear entrepreneurial objectives. Consequently, they proposed restricting the definition to individuals striving to escape highly unfavorable or desperate conditions within developed economies (p. 1). In their view, transitional entrepreneurship is the process by which individuals alter their life circumstances through entrepreneurial activity (p. 3).

This perspective both overlaps with and differs from that offered by [3], who co-edited another Special Issue on transitional entrepreneurship in the Journal of Small Business Management. They define transitional entrepreneurs as individuals who experience marginalization—whether social, institutional, cultural, or resource-based—because of their community affiliation, and who pursue entrepreneurial ventures to improve their social or economic position (pp. 1081–1082). Their formulation provides greater clarity about what constitutes "significant adversities" [2]. It explicitly adopts the concept of marginalization, which has long been associated with structural inequality, stigma, and exclusion. Unlike [12], their approach includes entrepreneurs from marginalized contexts in both developing and developed economies. For example, their special issue includes research examining how women entrepreneurs in Ethiopia navigate conflict situations [17], as well as studies exploring the developmental contributions of transnational Latina entrepreneurs in the United States [18]. By foregrounding marginalization, they also distinguish transitional entrepreneurs from those operating within economies undergoing systemic transition e.g., [19].

Importantly, empirical evidence demonstrates that transitional entrepreneurs are significantly influenced by actors outside the individual level, including both personal networks and institutional structures. For instance, family relationships play a crucial role in shaping entrepreneurial, ethnic, and work-related values among Chinese immigrant entrepreneurs in the Netherlands, enabling them to pursue less conventional forms of business activity [20]. Because many transitional entrepreneurs lack access to formal institutional mechanisms—such as established credit histories—informal financial arrangements, such as trade credit, become essential. These relationships, involving customers, suppliers, trade associations, and other stakeholders, provide important support [21]; observed that trade credit can range from postponed payments for goods to the provision of small cash advances used for investment purposes (p. 1110), often regulated by norms tied to kinship, industry practices, religion, and reputation. Additionally, in contexts where formal institutions are weak or absent, informal structures—such as innovation-supportive cultures and flexible regulatory environments—can compensate and promote entrepreneurial activity [22]. Incubators also contribute by offering access to skills development (human capital), networks (social capital), and financial resources. However [23], found that many such initiatives fall short because they do not sufficiently account for the specific contextual constraints faced by transitional entrepreneurs. At a broader level, macro-environmental conditions can serve as "external enablers," though their benefits are unevenly distributed; for example, reliable internet access has been shown to benefit male entrepreneurs more than female entrepreneurs in a study covering 61 countries [24]. Building on this literature, the present study examines how these various external influences interact within an integrated entrepreneurial ecosystem, rather than functioning as isolated forms of support.

### *Entrepreneurial ecosystems and ESO narratives*

Advocates of the entrepreneurial ecosystem perspective maintain that entrepreneurial activity does not occur in isolation but depends on a complex arrangement of material, spatial, social, and cultural actors and initiatives that interact in mutually reinforcing ways to encourage entrepreneurial action, improve venture outcomes, and support regional economic development [25, 26]. From this standpoint, entrepreneurship is inherently situated within specific contexts and cannot be separated from the broader social, political, and economic environments in which it unfolds. Rather than being simply a collection of organizations, an entrepreneurial ecosystem also encompasses the interconnections among those organizations, along with the underlying norms, values, and discursive practices that shape these relationships [8, 27, 28]. Such ecosystems consist of regional firms, public institutions, and governmental bodies, as well as regulatory frameworks, educational institutions, mentorship networks, cultural dynamics, and diverse forms of human and social capital within a given locale. Among these actors, entrepreneurial support organizations (ESOs) are particularly influential, defined as entities intentionally established to stimulate entrepreneurial activity and deliver various forms of assistance to entrepreneurs [29]. However, empirical studies have largely focused on a limited set of ESO types—namely, incubators, science parks, accelerators, maker spaces, and co-working environments—while overlooking other forms. In addition [29], demonstrate, through a systematic review of 377 peer-reviewed studies, that the notion of "support" is most often framed in functional or instrumental terms (such as mentoring, sponsorship, and skills training), with relatively little attention to relational or identity-related dimensions.

To investigate how entrepreneurial ecosystems influence transitional entrepreneurship in post-industrial contexts, we adopt a narrative lens, focusing on the discursive practices of key ESOs. Narratives can be understood as communicative structures that organize events into meaningful sequences, typically linking actions and occurrences over time rather than presenting isolated fragments [30]. By situating actors, institutions, and events within broader and evolving systems of meaning that constitute the social world [31], narratives enable both those who tell them and those who hear them to interpret and make sense of reality. Research in organizational studies highlights the central role of narratives and storytelling in processes such as sensemaking, identity formation, knowledge transfer, and mechanisms of control and resistance across organizational settings [31, 32]. Within entrepreneurship specifically [13], suggests that narratives allow individuals to identify and act upon new venture opportunities by recognizing tensions or dissatisfaction with existing conditions, while simultaneously adopting an entrepreneurial identity characterized by an active role in shaping future outcomes (p. 328). In line with this [10], argues for the importance of a narrative-based approach to analyzing entrepreneurial ecosystems, emphasizing the relevance of underlying cognitive and cultural dynamics (p. 233) [11]. He proposes that narratives within entrepreneurial ecosystems perform at least six interconnected roles. First, they transmit cultural knowledge by enabling indirect learning among ecosystem participants and disseminating information about norms, values, rules, and best practices. Second, they support sensemaking across temporal dimensions—past, present, and future—allowing actors to navigate complex constellations of events, institutions, and experiences. Third, narratives contribute to identity formation at both individual and ecosystem levels by defining boundaries and distinctive characteristics. Fourth, they serve a legitimizing function by reinforcing existing interpretations of actions and events and by increasing the perception that the ecosystem is natural and unquestioned (p. 240). Fifth, narratives help attract attention to the ecosystem, thereby facilitating access to tangible resources such as funding and skilled labor. Finally, they help align and coordinate diverse stakeholders, enabling collective efforts toward shared objectives. Despite these contributions, existing research primarily examines how narratives shape entrepreneurial ecosystems at a macro level, rather than investigating how individual ESOs may produce differing or even conflicting narratives within the same ecosystem. For example, although [11] analyzes the competition between "Rust Belt" and "revitalization" narratives in the US Midwest, his comparison focuses on how overarching success narratives in three cities—Warren, OH, Youngstown, OH, and Chattanooga, TN—contrast with narratives of regional decline, rather than exploring internal inconsistencies among entrepreneurial success narratives themselves. This tendency may reflect the broader orientation of entrepreneurial ecosystem research, which often emphasizes collaboration among interconnected actors [25], while paying less attention to divergent interests and stakeholder priorities. In contrast, the present study focuses on two ESOs operating within the same ecosystem but oriented toward different entrepreneurial groups—technology startups and neighborhood-based small businesses. Rather than seeking a unified narrative of entrepreneurial success, we examine how ESO narratives may both overlap and diverge as they engage with distinct groups of entrepreneurs, many of whom are transitional and experience marginalization. By highlighting these tensions—rooted in unequal power relations across entrepreneurial categories—we foreground the complex social conditions faced by transitional entrepreneurs in Detroit and demonstrate how competing ecosystem narratives influence their trajectories.

Our approach deliberately avoids simplistic binary distinctions, such as rigid separations between technology startups and neighborhood-based small enterprises. While technology ventures are often associated with high-growth trajectories supported by venture capital, in contrast, transitional entrepreneurs who emerge from marginalized contexts are notable exceptions. For instance, several technology entrepreneurs in Detroit and elsewhere have pursued ventures shaped by experiences of adversity [15, 16]. Furthermore, many neighborhood businesses have long incorporated advanced technologies into activities such as procurement, accounting, scheduling, marketing, and delivery—well before the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated digital adoption—thereby continually redefining what constitutes a "technology entrepreneur" e.g., [33]. Nevertheless, significant inequalities persist—particularly in a predominantly Black city such as Detroit—where minority entrepreneurs face structural barriers related to access to capital, governmental support, tax incentives, market opportunities, and workforce development [5-7, 34]. In addition, both academic research and policy attention tend to prioritize a relatively small segment of high-growth, high-value ventures in sectors such as technology, biomedical innovation and services, rather than the broader population of "everyday" entrepreneurs [35], who operate across diverse industries and scales, including small or family-owned firms, local retailers, service providers, restaurants and neighborhood-based craftspeople.

Given this overview of the relevant literature, the guiding research question for this study is: How do ESO narratives influence transitional entrepreneurship in Detroit?

## Materials and Methods

Drawing on a social constructionist perspective of entrepreneurship—which emphasizes how everyday texts and subjective interactions shape entrepreneurial actions and practices [36] —this study employs a multi-case study design [9, 37] to examine two leading ESOs in Detroit, referred to here as RegionalESO and TechESO (pseudonyms).

### *Data collection*

According to [37], a case study represents both a methodological process and the outcome of an investigation, aimed at producing a detailed and context-rich understanding of a specific unit—whether an individual, organization, initiative, or any "bounded system" of interest (p. 7). Rather than seeking broad generalizability, case studies are intended to facilitate comparison with similar cases see also [38]. A multi-case design extends this logic by examining multiple sites to identify patterns of similarity and difference, while also enabling the development of theoretical insights regarding underlying assumptions and contextual constraints [9]. Such approaches are particularly useful for gaining deeper insight into phenomena that have received limited scholarly attention [39]. Prior research has used case study methods to explore entrepreneurial dynamics; for example [40] investigated the motivations of social entrepreneurs in East Africa, while [41] examined how German soccer clubs respond entrepreneurially within a transforming industry.

In this study, RegionalESO and TechESO were selected as focal cases because, although they share certain resources and a common objective of supporting the development of Detroit's emerging entrepreneurial ecosystem, they differ significantly in their scope and intended beneficiaries **(Table 1)**. RegionalESO prioritizes fostering entrepreneurship among residents, particularly in underserved communities, whereas TechESO focuses on supporting high-growth ventures, primarily in the technology sector. Notably, both organizations fall outside the five dominant ESO categories typically emphasized in the literature—namely, incubators, science parks, accelerators, maker spaces, and co-working spaces [29]. Although this article focuses on their activities during 2020–2021, the data are drawn from a broader ethnographic study of Detroit's entrepreneurial ecosystem, within which we engaged with key stakeholders in multiple capacities throughout the research process.

**Table 1.** Key differences between RegionalESO and TechESO.

| Category | RegionalESO | TechESO |
|---|---|---|
| **Origins** | Established in 2007 as a philanthropy-driven initiative focused on entrepreneurial development, now housed within one main organization, but originally formed through collaboration among multiple regional entities | Founded in 2018 as an independent nonprofit organization by a single founder, to produce research on entrepreneurial ecosystems |
| **Regional focus** | Concentrated on Southeast Michigan, with a particular emphasis on Detroit | Focused on the broader US Midwest, while maintaining a strong emphasis on Southeast Michigan |
| **Mission** | Aims to advance socioeconomic empowerment and regional community development, using entrepreneurship as one of its key tools to achieve this goal | Seeks to expand entrepreneurship across Michigan, with a specific emphasis on attracting national venture capital and angel investors to high-growth entrepreneurs and opportunities in the region |
| **Scope of activities** | Provides grants to other entrepreneurship support organizations (ESOs) and partner groups, offers direct funding to entrepreneurs, runs entrepreneurial programs, and delivers technical training to partner organizations | Engages in research activities and develops data-driven programming intended for ESOs and partner organizations |
| **Support for entrepreneurs** | Both direct and indirect support mechanisms | Primarily indirect support |

Source(s): Table by Lucas and Mitra

The RegionalESO case study relied heavily on several key sources: an 81-page annual report from RegionalESO ( , a 34-page opportunity report covering 2020–2021 prepared by an affiliated organization, CityESO (based on data collected and funded by RegionalESO), and in-depth interviews with its chief executive and communications director (totaling 128 min and yielding 42 pages of single-spaced transcripts). For the TechESO case, relevant materials included a 28-page ecosystem report released in 2021, a 2021 research report produced by a partner organization, VencapESO (co-authored with TechESO), and an in-depth interview with TechESO's founder and chief executive (totaling 66 min and resulting in 17 pages of single-spaced transcripts). Accordingly, across both cases, the analysis draws on institutional narratives directed at key stakeholders, materials developed in collaboration with or for these stakeholders (e.g., CityESO, VencapESO), and interview data from central organizational actors. This diverse dataset enables not only an examination of how these ESOs portray the entrepreneurial ecosystem but also an analysis of the narrative frameworks that underpin these portrayals. All interview data received approval from the university's Institutional Review Board as an exempt study, with all identifying details anonymized.

### *Data analysis*

The dataset was examined using qualitative thematic analysis [42], an approach applicable to both realist and constructionist inquiries. Our analytical stance aligned with a "contextualist" orientation, positioned between essentialist and constructionist perspectives. This position recognizes that individuals actively interpret their experiences while also acknowledging how broader social conditions shape those interpretations, without disregarding the material constraints of reality (p. 81). According to [43], theories consist of interconnected concepts, variables, and propositions that aim to explain, predict, and generalize about real-world phenomena, grounded in empirical observation (p. 328).

Our coding strategy combined inductive and deductive logics, allowing themes to emerge from the data while also engaging with existing scholarship on transitional entrepreneurship and entrepreneurial ecosystems. We followed the six analytic stages outlined by [42]—namely, familiarization with the data and its context, initial code generation, theme identification, theme review, theme definition and labeling, and report writing. However, we emphasize that analysis did not proceed in a strictly linear sequence; rather, it involved iterative movement back and forth across stages as needed (p. 86). Additionally, our analysis operated primarily at a semantic level, focusing on meanings explicitly present in the data rather than inferring beyond what participants expressed or what texts conveyed (p. 84). Through team discussions, we moved from descriptive coding toward interpretive analysis, aiming to theorize the broader significance and implications of identified patterns (p. 84).

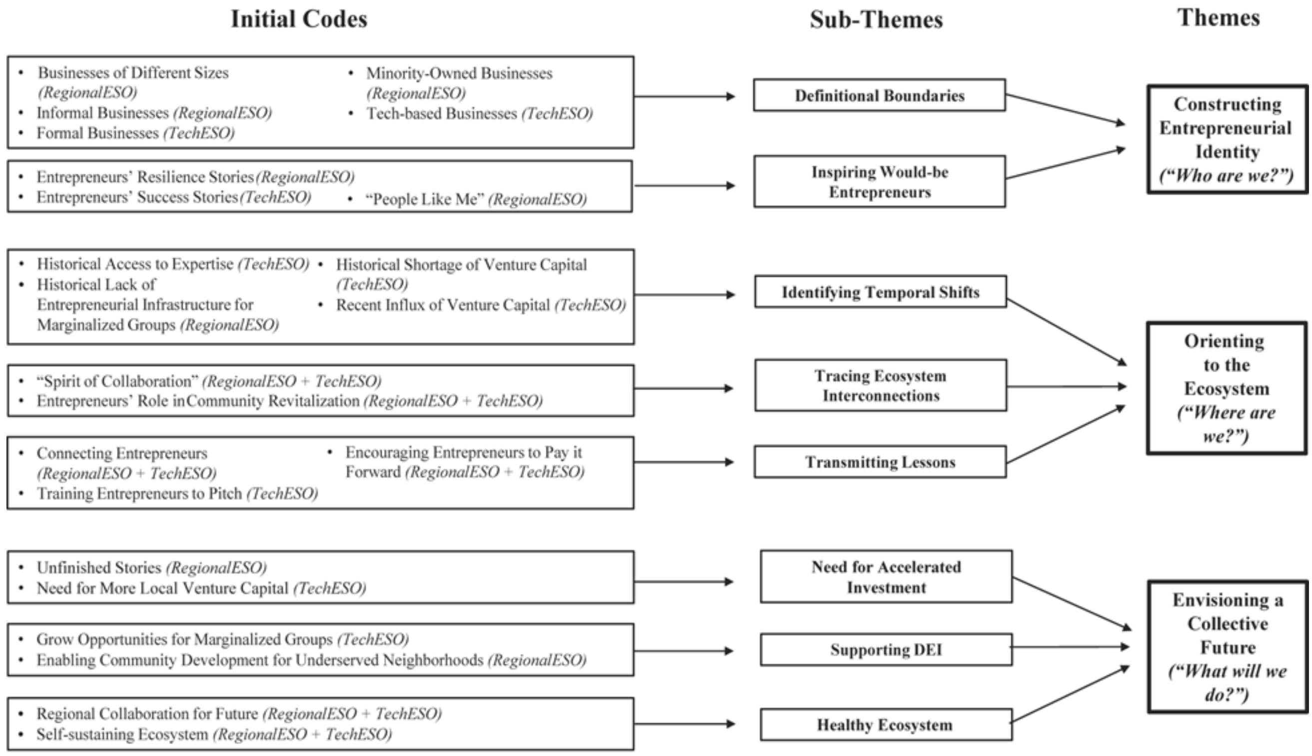
Describe codes as elements that capture features of the dataset that appear meaningful or noteworthy to the researcher (p. 88), recommending the integration of both data-driven and theory-informed coding strategies [42]. This approach parallels [44] concept of "first cycle coding," which serves as an intermediary step linking raw data to theoretical interpretation through identifying recurring patterns using various coding techniques. In line with our contextualist stance and combined inductive–deductive and semantic approach, coding within the ESO case studies included categories such as attributes, contrasts, intensity or frequency, evaluative judgments, in vivo expressions, key concepts, stated values, domains, and causal relationships (pp. 82–194).

For example, consider the following excerpt, which we coded under the label' people like me": "How can entrepreneurship be made tangible for a young person questioning their future in the city?" In this instance, attribute coding was used to generate a bottom-up code emphasizing the importance of rendering entrepreneurship accessible and relatable to youth in underserved communities. Likewise, the statement, "Detroit stands out for combining industrial strength with intellectual capacity … this momentum reflects a culture marked by creativity, persistence, and determination," was coded to capture the values "creativity, determination, and grit." As analysis progressed, the initial code "grit" was revised to "resilience" after identifying multiple in vivo references to resilience across the dataset. Given [11] recommendation to examine ecosystem narratives holistically rather than focusing solely on individual words (p. 204), our units of analysis ranged from words and phrases to sentences and, occasionally, entire paragraphs. In several cases, multiple codes were assigned within a single sentence.

The subsequent steps of identifying themes from codes, reviewing their coherence, and developing thematic "stories" [42], pp. 89–92) were conducted iteratively through continuous engagement with the data, existing literature, and the evolving codebook. Throughout this process, some codes were removed, others merged, and others subdivided. For example, codes relating to how ESOs represented themselves were excluded from the final analysis because they did not directly address the research question. The codes "grit" and "resilience" were combined into a single category labeled "resilience stories." We further distinguished between "resilience stories" and "success stories," with the latter referring to narratives that did not emphasize overcoming adversity.

Additionally, the code "shortage of capital" was divided into two separate categories: one capturing historical conditions (historical shortage of capital) and another addressing forward-looking responses (need for future capital). This refinement process reduced overlap and enabled clearer thematic grouping. As part of this refinement, "need for future capital" was later relabeled and elevated to a sub-theme termed "need for accelerated investment," which was then incorporated under the broader theme "envisioning a collective future." Sub-themes, as described by [42], function as nested thematic elements that help organize complex themes and illustrate hierarchical relationships within the data (p. 92).

The final thematic structure is presented in **Figure 1**. In this figure, all initial codes are displayed along with the ESO in which each appeared most prominently, although many codes were observed across both organizations. The analysis yielded 23 initial codes, 8 sub-themes, and 3 overarching themes. In the following section, we present an "analytical narrative" [42], supported by key excerpts from the dataset, to address the research question.




**Source(s):** Figure by Lucas and Mitra

**Figure 1.** Coding structure and thematic map

## Results and Discussion

The research question examined how ESO narratives influence transitional entrepreneurship in Detroit. The findings indicate that this occurs through three interrelated mechanisms: shaping entrepreneurial identity, directing entrepreneurs' understanding of the ecosystem, and constructing visions of a shared future.

### *Constructing entrepreneurial identity*

In shaping entrepreneurial identity (i.e., defining "who we are"), ESOs establish boundaries of belonging while also encouraging potential entrepreneurs to see themselves as part of the entrepreneurial community.

### *Definitional boundaries*

Boundary construction played an important role in enabling ordinary Detroit residents to recognize themselves within the entrepreneurial ecosystem, although at times it also reinforced conventional understandings of entrepreneurship. As the CEO of RegionalESO explained, many residents in local neighborhoods do not identify with the typical images used when discussing entrepreneurs. She further emphasized that RegionalESO has been deliberately working to reshape this dominant narrative. Business scale was frequently emphasized, with RegionalESO and its partner CityESO framing entrepreneurship as encompassing small, micro, and family-run enterprises. This framing also extended entrepreneurship to include informal economic activities, which is particularly relevant for low-income immigrant populations. In its report [45], noted that most Detroit residents associate entrepreneurship with self-employment, owning a family business, or owning a franchise (p. 13) and that more than 40% of residents perceive themselves as entrepreneurs (p. 4). In this way, the ESOs attempted to integrate everyday understandings of entrepreneurship—especially among economically vulnerable and marginalized groups—into formal policy discourse.

These boundary expansions often appeared in combination, particularly when highlighting both small business ownership and the role of Black and minority entrepreneurs. For example [46], reported that its strategic focus had evolved toward maintaining and strengthening support systems for very small enterprises—those employing between 2 and 50 people—with particular attention to microbusinesses led by women and people of color in Detroit and Wayne County (p. 45). Similarly, [45] broadened the definition of entrepreneurship to include individuals who own, manage, or invest in businesses of any scale, including informal and unregistered activities such as providing paid neighborhood services, as well as individuals who work to address community challenges (p. 17). This description illustrates how formal business activity and informal economic practices were combined to expand the definition of entrepreneurship, aligning closely with emerging understandings of transitional entrepreneurship e.g., [2].

Nevertheless, these expansive narratives had clear limits and were primarily promoted by RegionalESO and its affiliated partners, who focused more on "everyday" entrepreneurs rather than high-technology sectors [35]. By contrast, TechESO framed entrepreneurship as formal, high-growth, technology-driven ventures that do not operate in informal economic spaces; it also emphasized improving access to networks and resources for Black and other underrepresented entrepreneurial groups (further expanded below).

### *Inspiring entrepreneurs*

Both RegionalESO and TechESO constructed narratives designed to motivate emerging entrepreneurs by emphasizing stories of resilience, highlighting major success trajectories, and fostering identification through the idea that entrepreneurs are "people like me."

Resilience narratives were most prominently used by RegionalESO, portraying local entrepreneurs as individuals who persist despite adversity, including disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, its report (2021) featured Danielle North, a Detroit resident who established Kidz Kingdom, a children's play center, in response to the lack of accessible indoor recreational spaces in her neighborhood. After launching her business, she faced pandemic-related challenges and landlord conflicts but ultimately secured support through the Small Business Administration, including loan relief and rent forgiveness. [46] portrayed her journey as one of continuous adaptation and persistence, noting that she remained committed to her community mission and expected to keep adjusting her business model as new challenges arose (p. 41). Such narratives served both as motivational examples for other transitional entrepreneurs and as illustrations of how ESOs support entrepreneurial transitions.

In contrast, TechESO primarily emphasized narratives of exceptional entrepreneurial success aligned with the "unicorn" model of highly scalable, high-growth firms [47]. For instance, it highlighted StockX, an online platform for luxury goods, which in 2020 secured $275 million in venture capital funding, described as one of the largest funding rounds in Michigan's history [48], p. 9. This group of high-growth firms also included transitional entrepreneurs, such as the Detroit Maid Group, an online platform for cleaning services, which gained visibility in major media outlets, including Fortune and Good Morning America [48], p. 19. The founder, Danielle Smith, grew up working in her family's pizza business, where she developed an early understanding of the realities of entrepreneurship, including both positive and negative dimensions [49], p. 10. She later gained technical training through another Detroit ESO, where many participants were Black women and other transitional entrepreneurs from underserved areas. Similar to the Kidz Kingdom narrative, Detroit Maid was presented as part of a broader pathway through which ESOs help individuals progress from small-scale ventures to larger enterprises, contributing to wealth creation (p. 7). These accounts also reflect how ESOs transmit knowledge through training and encourage entrepreneurial reciprocity, a theme revisited later in the section.

Finally, ESO narratives—particularly those from RegionalESO—emphasized "everyday entrepreneurship," portraying entrepreneurs not as exceptional figures but as ordinary individuals similar to "people like me." The communications director of RegionalESO explained that the organization's narrative strategy had evolved to focus on helping ordinary Detroit residents view their city as a place of opportunity through entrepreneurial engagement. This approach aimed to make entrepreneurship relatable for individuals who might not otherwise consider starting a business:

National media coverage may briefly mention that businesses are emerging in Detroit, but the key question is how this resonates with residents in specific neighborhoods. The challenge is to make entrepreneurship meaningful for people living in areas such as Six Mile and Schaefer. This is done by highlighting local businesses such as Lush Yummy Pies and other neighborhood entrepreneurs who have achieved success within the city. The goal is to connect with young people who may be uncertain about their future and help them see possibilities for themselves within the city.

By emphasizing specific local neighborhoods, this narrative strategy made entrepreneurship feel tangible and accessible for residents in underserved areas, enabling them to imagine potential futures within their own city. This excerpt also connects to the broader theme of envisioning a collective future, which is discussed in detail in the following section.

### *Orienting to the ecosystem*

A second mechanism through which ESO narratives influenced transitional entrepreneurship in Detroit involved guiding entrepreneurs' understanding of the entrepreneurial ecosystem (i.e., clarifying "where are we?"). This was achieved by highlighting major historical transitions, mapping relationships among ecosystem actors, and conveying key lessons to entrepreneurs.

### *Identifying temporal shifts*

ESO narratives emphasized shifts over time within the entrepreneurial ecosystem, pointing to the region's historical concentration of technical expertise, its longstanding lack of entrepreneurial infrastructure for marginalized communities, persistent shortages of venture capital, and the more recent growth in venture investment. Reflecting structural constraints within this emerging ecosystem, only two of these temporal patterns were framed positively in relation to entrepreneurial development (namely, the presence of talent/expertise and the recent rise in investment flows). For instance, [48] observed that although southeastern Michigan has historically possessed strong intellectual and social capital, ongoing deficits in financial resources have repeatedly constrained startup development:

An examination of the past fifty years of high-growth entrepreneurship in Michigan shows that while the region has consistently maintained strong foundations in skilled talent and research capacity, it has also faced a chronic shortage of investment capital. Because of this persistent gap, many promising ventures either failed to launch or relocated to regions with more developed venture capital ecosystems to secure the financing they needed (p. 18).

The organization's founder further emphasized that although the region generates a very large number of patents, graduates doctoral researchers at high rates, and invests heavily in research, these strengths are not matched by comparable levels of venture capital, angel investment activity, or investor presence, resulting in a significant structural imbalance.

At the same time, recent data suggested that these longstanding patterns may be gradually shifting. [50] reported that "In Michigan, 88 startups received more than $257 million in venture capital investment in 2020; this represents a 19% rise over the past five years in total venture funding directed toward Michigan-based startups" (p. 16). In connection with the later sub-theme of increased investment urgency, the report also stated that "because Michigan-based venture capital firms fund 96.4% of all venture-backed startups in the state, the sustainability of the entrepreneurial ecosystem depends heavily on maintaining consistent access to capital for firms with high growth potential" [50], p. 16.

While TechESO concentrated on issues such as expertise availability, capital shortages, and investment dynamics, RegionalESO's narrative instead emphasized the historical exclusion of marginalized groups from entrepreneurial infrastructure. This exclusion directly shapes the experiences of transitional entrepreneurs. Profiling Juan Carlos Dueweke-Perez, a marketing firm founder originally from Guadalajara, the [46] report noted:

Dueweke-Perez observed that much of the city's established entrepreneurial support system had historically overlooked a wide range of community-based businesses … As a child, he assisted his mother in producing cheesecakes, which they sold door-to-door within their neighborhood. However, small-scale enterprises like his family's were rarely represented in dominant entrepreneurial narratives (p. 30).

Beyond lacking access to capital and professional networks, transitional entrepreneurs from marginalized and underserved communities often face additional challenges in developing effective marketing and operational strategies necessary for business survival. As [46] explained, "Without sufficient resources to engage professional marketing services or the knowledge required to implement effective promotional strategies, businesses owned by Black, Brown, Indigenous and queer entrepreneurs face significantly higher risks of failure" (p. 30). Such narratives enabled transitional entrepreneurs to recognize structural gaps in their development better while also directing them toward accessible resources that could help bridge these deficits at relatively low cost.

### *Tracing ecosystem interconnections*

ESO narratives mapped the relationships among actors within the entrepreneurial ecosystem, enabling entrepreneurs to understand better their own position ("where do we stand?"). This was achieved by highlighting collaborative dynamics among ecosystem participants and emphasizing the role of entrepreneurs in driving community revitalization.

The phrase "spirit of collaboration" emerged as an in vivo code across multiple instances, particularly in RegionalESO's narrative, where the emphasis was on the idea that entrepreneurial outcomes are strongest when ecosystem actors operate collectively. For example, in describing a Fellowship program for grantees, [46] noted that "RegionalESO worked with [Media] to release a set of stories showcasing participants from the 2019–2020 cohort, along with an accompanying program report. These accounts emphasized how fellows supported one another and maintained their initiatives during the COVID-19 crisis" (p. 50). Earlier in the report, it further stated that the organization had been struck by the extent to which its network, alongside funders and partners, rapidly coordinated efforts to deliver essential grant-based support during challenging conditions (p. 9). It also observed that many ESOs themselves originated in contexts of socioeconomic difficulty, which reinforced their motivation to collectively assist others experiencing crises [46]. This collaborative ethos was not limited to RegionalESO [48] similarly highlighted cooperation across ecosystem actors as a defining strength, even in the face of persistent challenges confronting startups:

The Detroit region has cultivated a strong entrepreneurial environment, supported significantly by a well-developed ecosystem of community resources. As firms scale, they can draw on networks that include mentorship, research institutions supporting innovation and product development, and funding sources that help them reach critical growth milestones (p. 6).

This passage implicitly referenced the historical limitations discussed earlier in the analysis.

ESO narratives also framed entrepreneurs as central contributors to the revitalization of disadvantaged communities, particularly through their roles in job creation and wealth generation among marginalized populations. The communications director of RegionalESO explained that the organization had gradually revised its strategic outlook to recognize better the importance of main street entrepreneurs and social enterprises in sustaining a healthy economy. The report also stressed the significance of neighborhood-based small businesses in stabilizing and regenerating local commercial areas [46]. Furthermore, it stated that small enterprises and entrepreneurial activity serve as key drivers of employment generation and economic expansion, and that providing accessible funding, resources, and support to underserved entrepreneurs can reshape economic trajectories in struggling neighborhoods, foster wealth accumulation among entrepreneurs of color and women, and improve overall economic conditions [46].Transitional entrepreneurs were portrayed as especially important in breaking cycles of unemployment and intergenerational poverty in low-income communities of color, particularly given longstanding institutional neglect and inadequate public policy responses. While this framing was most prominent in RegionalESO's discourse [48], also acknowledged the structural importance of entrepreneurs within the broader socioeconomic system, noting that "in Southeast Michigan, roughly 10% of scaling firms generate over 74% of local employment … policy makers can benefit from engaging experienced founders through structured dialogue platforms" (p. 19).

### *Transmitting lessons*

ESO narratives also demonstrated how key knowledge is transferred to emerging entrepreneurs, primarily through connecting them to ecosystem actors, training them in communication and pitching skills, and encouraging reciprocal knowledge-sharing practices.

Both organizations positioned themselves as intermediaries and connectors within the ecosystem, particularly in response to historical inequalities in access to entrepreneurial infrastructure experienced by marginalized groups. Facilitating access to networks and resources was a central priority for RegionalESO, which stated that it was increasingly committed to linking small business owners and aspiring entrepreneurs with individuals and resources capable of supporting their development [46]. This focus was grounded in the recognition that entrepreneurs from communities of color, immigrant backgrounds, and women-led businesses are often structurally disconnected from financial capital, strategic relationships, and other essential support systems [46], p. 54. Similarly, [48] emphasized that sustaining a healthy ecosystem required actively "building bridges between local institutions and entrepreneurial actors" and "promoting the inclusion of diverse candidates in employment, speaking engagements, and networking events" (p. 13).

A central form of knowledge transmission involved preparing entrepreneurs to effectively present their ventures to influential stakeholders once they were introduced through ESO networks. Pitch training was particularly critical for transitional entrepreneurs, who often lacked familiarity with venture capital expectations or formal presentation norms. This challenge was reflected in comments by TechESO's founder:

Efforts are made to ensure that entrepreneurs are well-connected within networks so they can eventually reach individuals who can open doors, and that, when such opportunities arise, they are equipped to clearly communicate their venture's value and effectively present their business to access them.

She further emphasized that the primary challenge for many entrepreneurs from marginalized backgrounds was not the viability of their ideas, but their ability to clearly express the value of their work and offerings.

Finally, ESOs also encouraged entrepreneurs to adopt a "pay it forward" approach by supporting other emerging founders, reinforcing ecosystem interdependence, and strengthening collaborative norms. Across the reports, success narratives were often paired with examples of entrepreneurs assisting others. For instance, [48] noted that when established entrepreneurs support early-stage founders, overall success rates increase, and recommended that ecosystem participants actively build networks that facilitate the exchange of knowledge, relationships, and financial resources (p. 19). Through this process, entrepreneurs not only advanced their own ventures but also contributed to ecosystem-wide learning and resilience. RegionalESO highlighted a similar example involving Juan Carlos Dueweke-Perez (introduced earlier), who helped local restaurants adapt their operations during the COVID-19 pandemic. He also "helped his clients access resources similar to those he had previously benefited from. Rather than merely leveraging the visibility typically available to better-resourced firms, he actively guided clients through parts of the ecosystem they would otherwise not have been able to navigate" [46]. Beyond supporting individual entrepreneurs, he also provided technical assistance to larger ecosystem organizations, demonstrating how transitional entrepreneurs can contribute to strengthening institutional infrastructure itself.

### *Envisioning a collective future*

Lastly, ESO narratives contributed to shaping a shared future vision for the entrepreneurial ecosystem and for transitional entrepreneurs (i.e., "what lies ahead for us?"). This forward-looking framing was organized around three sub-themes: accelerating investment, promoting diversity and inclusion, and sustaining a healthy ecosystem.

### *Need for accelerated investment*

Although ESOs acknowledged that recent years had brought some improvement in access to capital and other entrepreneurial resources, they consistently argued that achieving a shared vision of prosperity would require a significantly faster and larger expansion of investment flows. One key strategy was to present transitional entrepreneurs' journeys as incomplete, thereby emphasizing the need for additional capital to unlock their full potential. For example [46], profiled Sisters on a Roll Mobile Cafe, highlighting both its community impact and the financial barriers it continued to face:

Chef Bee estimated that expanding her team by four employees could eventually generate enough income to create new jobs. While Sisters on a Roll had made progress toward this goal, the venture remained far from fully stabilized. She explained that even at the lower end, approximately $25,000 would still be required to equip the truck and trailer for stationary food service, while the long-term objective—establishing a fully functional mobile café delivering "the flavor of love"—would require about $58,000 in additional investment (p. 26).

In this narrative framing, RegionalESO deliberately avoided portraying the venture as a straightforward success story, instead emphasizing the ongoing difficulties faced by transitional entrepreneurs such as Chef Bee, who lacked inherited wealth and access to established networks and resources. Although she founded the business to provide nutritious food to her local community, sustaining and expanding this mission required further financial support. Her case was presented alongside others as intentionally unfinished narratives, vulnerable to stagnation or collapse without continued investment inflows.

ESOs also advocated increased in-state venture capital activity, encouraging local investors to adopt a greater tolerance for risk to realize the collective economic vision. This future-oriented framing prioritized strengthening regional capital sources over reliance on investors from coastal hubs, where venture funding is typically concentrated. For instance [50], projected that "Michigan's 165 startup firms will require an additional $1.2 billion in venture capital over the next two years to support their expansion adequately" (p. 14). The report also cited a Detroit-based venture capital leader who argued that Michigan startups "require extended funding timelines and stronger local investor engagement. The success of regional venture capital firms plays a vital role in sustaining growth within the state's innovation economy" [50], p. 15.

At the same time, the report noted that Michigan-based funders' relatively cautious investment behavior posed a significant barrier to entrepreneurial expansion. The CEO of TechESO described this tension as follows:

We are seeing increasing friction between founders and investors. Entrepreneurs often feel dismissed and undervalued, which leads them to seek funding outside Michigan, where their ideas are more readily accepted. From their perspective, what they are building has strong value, yet local investors sometimes fail to recognize it. At the same time, I don't think the entire

burden lies with investors alone; improving access to capital in Michigan is a shared responsibility involving multiple actors, including stronger fundraising efforts by venture firms, increased public investment in venture capital, and direct state support for startup financing initiatives.
Rather than attributing responsibility solely to cautious investors, she interpreted the situation as a collective structural challenge requiring coordinated action among multiple stakeholders. In this framing, expanding the local investment base would not only support startup growth but also help retain entrepreneurial talent and economic value within the state, rather than losing it to coastal innovation hubs.

### *Support DEI*

ESO narratives also articulated a shared future for the entrepreneurial ecosystem centered on strengthening diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts. A central component of this vision involved expanding opportunities for entrepreneurs from historically marginalized populations [48] highlighted this imbalance, noting that:
Although Black residents represent 78% of Detroit's population, the broader startup and venture capital environment across Michigan is predominantly composed of White men, approximately 65%. To maintain and strengthen diversity in Detroit, local leadership must ensure that existing residents can access funding streams and economic opportunities emerging from the growing high-tech sector (p. 13).
In this framing, the ESO projected a future in which the proportion of Black entrepreneurs would better reflect the city's demographic composition, while also advocating for expanded initiatives targeting Black and Brown founders. The organization's leader further stressed the importance of building a genuinely inclusive entrepreneurial ecosystem rather than one dominated by established actors and existing networks.
She also pointed to structural barriers affecting entry into the technology sector for transitional entrepreneurs:
There are too few institutions creating accessible entry points into this ecosystem; instead, networks remain fragmented and separated along multiple lines, such as education level, race, and gender. Individuals without college education versus those with degrees, Black entrepreneurs versus white entrepreneurs, and women versus men often operate within disconnected spaces. Very few organizations actively work to bridge these divides and create smoother pathways into the ecosystem, and this is precisely the gap that TechESO seeks to address.
Addressing these disparities was framed as essential for future development, particularly given TechESO's report, which states that "greater team diversity is strongly associated with improved financial outcomes" [48] p. 12. This perspective was reinforced by [50], which, while acknowledging the "positive performance outcomes associated with startups led by more diverse leadership teams" (p. 22), also emphasized that "substantial gaps remain to be addressed" (p. 3). Similarly, the CEO of RegionalESO stated:
Inclusion should not be limited to visible, surface-level participation, such as small businesses like cafés or bakeries. It must also address systemic exclusion from capital access and professional networks, particularly for individuals with strong intellectual capabilities and innovative ideas who remain disconnected from opportunities in high-growth, technology-driven sectors.
A further dimension of this DEI-oriented future involved strengthening community development in underserved neighborhoods. For RegionalESO's CEO, this priority stemmed from the organization's commitment to inclusion as a core guiding principle:
Innovation-focused initiatives were valuable, and efforts were made to ensure inclusivity within those spaces; however, such approaches alone were insufficient for communities like Detroit, given persistent challenges such as unemployment and lower educational attainment levels.
Recognizing the city's historical, social, and political context prompted the organization to develop more equity-centered programs to support transitional entrepreneurs and encourage partner organizations within the ecosystem to adopt similar approaches [46] described this envisioned trajectory as one in which "underserved small businesses are supported through a well-connected, inclusive network of resources, enabling sustained growth and long-term neighborhood prosperity" (p. 43). Likewise [45] emphasized the importance of identifying "multiple leverage points within the system that can be improved to foster a more inclusive Detroit and to ensure that entrepreneurial and small business support is effectively directed toward addressing the financial constraints faced by many residents" (p. 31).

### *Healthy ecosystem*

The ESO narratives also constructed a vision of a future entrepreneurial ecosystem that would remain robust over time, grounded in regional coordination and capable of sustaining itself without continuous external dependence.
Both RegionalESO and TechESO stressed the importance of strengthening integrated regional collaboration. For example, the CEO of TechESO explained:
A thriving Detroit would significantly benefit the broader entrepreneurial environment by improving its ability to attract and retain talent. The same applies to nearby cities such as Ann Arbor and Grand Rapids, where Detroit's growth would generate

positive spillover effects. This includes attracting conferences, encouraging business relocation, improving transportation systems, and enhancing all the conditions associated with a strong urban center that supports entrepreneurship. Concentration of talent and research capacity is a critical factor in building an ecosystem that functions efficiently and contributes meaningfully to statewide economic development. Achieving a critical mass of talent and knowledge significantly enhances overall ecosystem performance.

In this view, she imagined a more dynamic urban center closely integrated with surrounding cities, forming a broader statewide entrepreneurial network. While emphasizing the importance of concentration and density, she also highlighted that the most significant benefits arise from inter-city collaboration rather than development occurring in isolation.

Similarly, the Communications Director of RegionalESO advocated for deeper cooperation not only across southeastern Michigan but also across international boundaries with Canadian partners, given Detroit's proximity to Windsor, Ontario. He stated:

There is currently very limited coordination with Windsor, even though the regional economy clearly operates across that border. Economic planning should reflect how these systems actually function in practice. We should move beyond administrative and political boundaries—both domestic and international—because the real economy extends across them. Some initiatives exist, such as a med-health cluster led by [UniversityESO], but such examples are rare, and there is a significant opportunity to expand this type of collaboration.

By emphasizing that the "real functioning economy" transcends national borders, he called for stronger cross-jurisdictional collaboration to build a more unified and inclusive regional entrepreneurial system. He later referred to the US–Canada Great Lakes Water Compact as an example of successful cross-border cooperation that could be replicated in the economic domain.

Both ESOs conceptualized a healthy ecosystem as one that could maintain and regenerate itself without relying heavily on ongoing government or philanthropic support. TechESO primarily emphasized increasing locally sourced venture capital to reduce dependence on investors from coastal financial hubs. In contrast, RegionalESO focused on strengthening support structures for established small businesses ("been-ups") alongside startups, while also promoting targeted investment in communities that could create mutually reinforcing relationships with entrepreneurs. The CEO of RegionalESO explained that the term "been-ups" was developed to describe established small businesses that were essential to long-term ecosystem stability:

During the fourth year of our Small Business Plan competition gala, we realized we needed to address the challenges faced by existing businesses, which led us to introduce the concept of "been-ups." We began distinguishing between startups and been-ups and redirected parts of our programming toward businesses that had been operating for more than three years, because prior efforts were not adequately supporting them.

Through this framing, RegionalESO highlighted that transitional entrepreneurs—particularly those operating in economically disadvantaged neighborhoods—continued to face structural challenges well beyond the early stages of business formation. As such, ecosystem sustainability depended on ensuring that these businesses could continue to access resources and, in turn, contribute to local community development.

During the data collection period, sustaining community-level development emerged as a central concern for RegionalESO, especially as the organization began scaling back its grant-making activities the following year. The CEO reflected:

We are now at a stage where we have launched many different programs, and we must carefully manage our exit strategy so that we do not unintentionally disrupt what has been built. Over time, our strategic focus has shifted more strongly toward neighborhood-level impact. We recognize that supporting small businesses in local communities is just as important—if not more important—than focusing solely on high-growth technology ventures. These two groups are interdependent: emerging high-tech firms rely on local small businesses for services and infrastructure, while small businesses depend on a vibrant entrepreneurial population to sustain their operations. Without this mutual reinforcement, both groups are at risk of decline.

In this way, RegionalESO emphasized the interdependence of community development and entrepreneurial activity as a foundation for a sustainable ecosystem. The organization increasingly saw its role as not only directly supporting entrepreneurs but also strategically investing in broader community systems that enable entrepreneurship to thrive.

This study investigated how Entrepreneurial Support Organizations (ESOs) operating within an entrepreneurial ecosystem influence the range of possibilities available to transitional entrepreneurs in post-industrial urban contexts. Using a multi-case study design [9, 37], we analyzed the narratives of two Detroit-based ESOs—TechESO and RegionalESO. The results show that ESO narratives shape transitional entrepreneurship in three main ways: they construct entrepreneurial identity (i.e., "who are we?"), they situate entrepreneurs within the broader ecosystem (i.e., "where are we?"), and they project a shared future for both the ecosystem and transitional entrepreneurs (i.e., "what will we do?"). This section discusses key implications for the growing body of research on transitional entrepreneurship.

This article contributes to the literature exploring the social mechanisms and institutional conditions that enable transitional entrepreneurs to navigate adversity and marginalization by focusing on two interconnected dimensions: the influence of entrepreneurial ecosystems and the narrative practices of ESOs in constructing social reality. First, although prior studies have examined “external enablers” [24], institutional structures [20, 21], and specific organizations such as incubators [23] in shaping opportunities and constraints for transitional entrepreneurs, our work extends this perspective by adopting an ecosystem-level lens that highlights the interaction among multiple ESOs. We argue that transitional entrepreneurs operate across diverse sectors—including both neighborhood-based small enterprises and high-growth technology ventures—and, importantly, they engage with multiple ESOs that differ in mission, orientation, and historical context. As a result, the narratives they encounter are not uniform; instead, they may interact in ways that are both complementary and competitive, jointly shaping entrepreneurial meaning and practice.

The ESOs examined in this study extend beyond the more narrowly defined incubators and maker spaces that dominate much of the existing literature [29]. Both RegionalESO and TechESO engage in a wide range of activities, including research and development, policy development, grant allocation, and indirect ecosystem facilitation, rather than providing only direct entrepreneurial support. Moreover, the nature of their support extends beyond technical or financial assistance (such as training or funding) to include identity formation, interpretation of broader economic and ecosystem trends, and the creation of connections that enable access to tacit knowledge through customers, peers, and networks. They also help entrepreneurs imagine a shared future in which they hold a meaningful position. Such forms of support are particularly significant for transitional entrepreneurs, who often originate from structurally disadvantaged environments and typically lack inherited wealth, established networks, or institutional familiarity that other entrepreneurs may possess [2, 12].

Second, our analysis reveals both alignment and variation between the two ESOs in how their narratives construct transitional entrepreneurship. While RegionalESO and TechESO both sought to broaden who is recognized as an entrepreneur, differences emerged in the limits of inclusion, particularly in TechESO, which excluded informal entrepreneurial activity and prioritized formally educated, technology-oriented founders. Both organizations also aimed to inspire aspiring entrepreneurs. Yet, they relied on distinct narrative strategies: RegionalESO, which primarily serves everyday entrepreneurs, tended to emphasize resilience and collective solidarity—frames that resonate strongly with transitional entrepreneurs—whereas TechESO, oriented toward venture-backed technology firms, foregrounded narratives of exceptional breakthrough achievement associated with high-growth “unicorn” firms.

In terms of temporal framing, both ESOs highlighted key historical and contemporary shifts within the entrepreneurial ecosystem, including both enabling factors (such as regional expertise) and structural constraints (such as limited infrastructure for marginalized groups). However, TechESO placed greater emphasis on the recent expansion in venture capital availability than RegionalESO did. Additionally, both organizations emphasized collaboration within the ecosystem and the contribution of transitional entrepreneurs to community revitalization. They also stressed the importance of connecting entrepreneurs to networks, training them in pitching skills, and encouraging them to support future founders, all of which help transitional entrepreneurs understand ecosystem interdependencies and acquire critical knowledge.

Regarding the construction of a shared future, both ESOs emphasized the importance of developing a self-sustaining and resilient entrepreneurial ecosystem. However, differences emerged in how they approached issues of increased investment and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). Regarding investment, RegionalESO tended to frame entrepreneurial ventures as “incomplete” success stories that require continued support. In contrast, TechESO focused more on investor risk tolerance and advocated for coordinated public–private investment strategies. In relation to DEI, RegionalESO prioritized place-based community development strategies in underserved neighborhoods where many transitional entrepreneurs reside. At the same time, TechESO focused on expanding direct access to resources for marginalized entrepreneurial groups.

Although this study does not claim statistical generalizability due to its qualitative comparative design, future research could explore whether similar patterns of convergence and divergence emerge in other settings, particularly among ESOs with parallel distinctions between those focused on everyday entrepreneurship and those oriented toward high-growth technology ventures.

Third, we call attention to how, in post-industrial cities like Detroit, the roles of transitional entrepreneurs and social and institutional entrepreneurs are often blurred.

In contexts like these, it becomes difficult to draw sharp boundaries between categories of entrepreneurial action. Transitional entrepreneurship is commonly understood as the study of how individuals from marginalized groups, shaped by adverse circumstances, recognize, construct, assess, or pursue opportunities emerging from those conditions of disadvantage [3]. By contrast, social entrepreneurs are typically oriented toward generating wider public benefit or addressing collective problems. At the same time, institutional entrepreneurs aim to alter or rebuild institutional structures themselves (see also [12], for distinctions between social and transitional entrepreneurship). In our study, we showed that transitional entrepreneurs are not only focused on improving their own socioeconomic trajectories but also play an active role in reshaping community and urban environments. In doing so, they also unsettle and gradually transform the functions of established institutions, including ESOs and other ecosystem stakeholders. For instance, both RegionalESO and TechESO adjusted their orientations over time—RegionalESO moving toward greater emphasis on neighborhood-based and transitional entrepreneurs, while TechESO increasingly positioned itself as a strong supporter of diversity and inclusion within startup financing systems. Furthermore, our findings question overly narrow definitions of transitional entrepreneurship. While we acknowledge the value of categorization systems [12] and accept that not all entrepreneurs from marginalized groups necessarily experience severe adversity, we caution against rigid classifications that risk flattening the complexity of urban inequality and minority lived realities in the United States.

Although existing research, including our own, has primarily examined the nature of adversity faced by transitional entrepreneurs, future work should pay greater attention to its temporal dimensions. For example, scholars could examine how the timing of adverse experiences aligns with the emergence and development of entrepreneurship. Future studies might also investigate how both personal and collective memory shape interpretations of past hardship, thereby influencing transitions into entrepreneurship. In addition, research should extend beyond identifying differences in narrative functions within ecosystems to examine how certain narratives become more dominant than others and how this prioritization affects transitional entrepreneurs and marginalized communities. Finally, while this study analyzed narrative material from only two ESOs within a single ecosystem, future work using methods such as semantic network analysis or large-scale discourse analysis across multiple ecosystem actors could provide richer insight into how ESOs collectively construct meanings around transitional entrepreneurship.

## Conclusion

Despite these limitations, this study enhances understanding of how transitional entrepreneurs interpret the environments in which they operate. We extend current perspectives on transitional entrepreneurship by highlighting the importance of narratives, which are often fragmented, competing, and internally inconsistent. The way ESOs communicate about entrepreneurship is not neutral; narratives hold power, and the stories that circulate, are repeated, and become embedded, shaping both perceptions and possibilities, ultimately influencing how entrepreneurial ecosystems evolve and what kinds of futures become achievable.

**Acknowledgments:** None

**Conflict of interest:** None

**Financial support:** None

**Ethics statement:** None

## References

1. Berlin L. How Detroit is boosting small business growth, one contract at a time. Politico Magazine. 2018 [cited 2026 May 29]; Available from: https://www.politico.com/sponsor-content/2018/01/how-detroit-is-boosting-small-business-growth?sr_source5lift_amplify&cid520181hp
2. Nair A, Chen LW. Transitional entrepreneurship. J Dev Entrep. 2021;26(3):1-11. doi:10.1142/S1084946721010032
3. Pidduck RJ, Clark DR. Transitional entrepreneurship: elevating research into marginalized entrepreneurs. J Small Bus Manag. 2021;59(6):1081-96. doi:10.1080/00472778.2021.1928149
4. Bach T. Why COVID-19 is a disaster for Detroit. US News & World Report. 2020 [cited 2026 May 29]; Available from: https://www.usnews.com/news/cities/articles/2020-04-08/why-coronavirus-is-a-disaster-for-Detroit
5. Hernandez M, McCluney CL. The Detroit hustle. MIT Sloan Manag Rev. 2020 [cited 2026 May 29]; Available from: https://sloanreview.mit.edu/article/the-detroit-hustle/
6. Detroit Future City (DFC). The state of economic equity in Detroit. 2021 [cited 2026 May 29]; Available from: https://detroitfuturecity.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/The-State-of-Economic-Equity-in-Detroit.pdf
7. Rencher M. Crossing the valley of death: a multi-sited, multi-level ethnographic study of growth startups and entrepreneurial communities in post-industrial Detroit [dissertation]. Detroit (MI): Wayne State University; 2012. p. 3547158.
8. Spigel B. The relational organization of entrepreneurial ecosystems. Entrep Theory Pract. 2017;41(1):48-72. doi:10.1111/etap.12167
9. Stake RE. Multiple case study analysis. New York (NY): Guildford Press; 2005.
10. Roundy PT. Start-up community narrative: the discursive construction of entrepreneurial ecosystems. J Entrep. 2016;25(2):232-48. doi:10.1177/0971355716650373
11. Roundy PT. Rust belt or revitalization: competing narratives in entrepreneurial ecosystems. Manag Res Rev. 2019;42(1):102-21. doi:10.1108/MRR-01-2018-0019

12. Bruton GD, Pillai J, Sheng N. Transitional entrepreneurship: establishing the parameters of the field. J Dev Entrep. 2021;26(3):1-18. doi:10.1142/S1084946721500151
13. Rae D. Entrepreneurial learning: a narrative-based conceptual model. J Small Bus Enterp Dev. 2005;12(3):323-35. doi:10.1108/14626000510612259
14. Vanevenhoven J, Winkel D, Malewicki D, Dougan WL, Bronson J. Varieties of bricolage and the process of entrepreneurship. New Engl J Entrep. 2011;14(2):53-66. Available from: http://digitalcommons.sacredheart.edu/neje/vol14/iss2/1
15. Smith A. Identilock inventor hopes to please NRA and Obama on guns. CNN Business. 2016 [cited 2026 May 29]; Available from: https://money.cnn.com/2016/01/05/technology/identilock-gun-safety/index.html
16. Cwiek S. Meet the people behind a community-based effort to monitor Detroit's air. Michigan Radio. 2022 [cited 2026 May 29]; Available from: https://www.michiganradio.org/environment-climate-change/2022-10-13/meet-the-people-behind-a-community-based-effort-to-monitor-detroits-air
17. Hundera MB, Duysters G, Naude W, Dijkhuizen J. How do role conflict intensity and coping strategies affect the success of women entrepreneurs in Africa? Evidence from Ethiopia. J Small Bus Manag. 2021;59(6):1180-210. doi:10.1080/00472778.2020.1756121
18. Fisher M, Lewin PA. Profitable entrepreneurship or marginal self-employment? The bimodality of Latina self-employment in the United States. J Small Bus Manag. 2021;59(6):1127-51. doi:10.1111/jsbm.12532
19. Tanas JK, Audretsch DB. Entrepreneurship in a transitional economy. Int Entrep Manag J. 2011;7(4):431-42. doi:10.1007/s11365-011-0189-9
20. Tao Y, Essers C, Pijpers R. Family and identity: intersectionality in the lived experiences of second-generation entrepreneurs of Chinese origin in The Netherlands. J Small Bus Manag. 2021;59(6):1152-79. doi:10.1080/00472778.2019.1710014
21. Amoako IO, Akwei C, Damoah I. 'We know their house, family, and workplace': trust in entrepreneurs' trade credit relationships in weak institutions. J Small Bus Manag. 2021;59(6):1097-126. doi:10.1111/jsbm.12488
22. Khosravi M, Amiri M, Faghih N. Ideology and ethics of transitional entrepreneurs: legitimacy, soft law, and overcoming a distressed economy. New Engl J Entrep. 2023;46(2). doi:10.1108/NEJE-10-2022-0095
23. Newman AB, Christensen LJ. Doing it right, but getting it wrong: best practices for refugee focused incubators. J Dev Entrep. 2021;26(3):1-34. doi:10.1142/S1084946721500199
24. Manocha P, Hunt RA, Townsend DM, Stallkamp M. When rising tides lift some boats more than others: gender-based differences in the external enablement of entrepreneurship. J Dev Entrep. 2021;26(3):1-29. doi:10.1142/S1084946721500175
25. Alvedalen J, Boschma R. A critical review of entrepreneurial ecosystems research: toward a future research agenda. Eur Plan Stud. 2017;25(6):887-903. doi:10.1080/09654313.2017.1299694
26. Audretsch D, Belitski M. Entrepreneurial ecosystems in cities: establishing the framework conditions. J Technol Transf. 2017;42(5):1030-51. doi:10.1007/s10961-016-9473-8
27. Donaldson C. Culture in the entrepreneurial ecosystem: a conceptual framing. Int Entrep Manag J. 2021;17:289-319. doi:10.1007/s11365-020-00692-9
28. Theodoraki C, Messeghem K. Exploring the entrepreneurial ecosystem in the field of entrepreneurial support: a multi-level approach. Int J Entrep Small Bus. 2017;31(1):47-66. doi:10.1504/IJESB.2017.083847
29. Bergman BJ, McMullen JS. Helping entrepreneurs help themselves: a review and relational research agenda on entrepreneurial support organizations. Entrep Theory Pract. 2022;46(3):688-728. doi:10.1177/10422587211028730
30. Gabriel Y. Storytelling in organizations: facts, fictions, and fantasies. New York (NY): Oxford University Press; 2000. doi:10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198290957.003.0002
31. Mumby DK, editor. Narrative and social control. Thousand Oaks (CA): SAGE Publications; 1993.
32. Abolafia MY. Narrative construction as sensemaking: how a central bank thinks. Organ Stud. 2010;31(3):349-67. doi:10.1177/0170840609357380
33. Gill R, Larson GS. Making the ideal (local) entrepreneur: place and the regional development of high-tech entrepreneurial identity. Hum Relat. 2014;67(5):519-42. doi:10.1177/0018726713496829
34. Sands D. These Metro Detroit resources can help black entrepreneurs gain better access to capital. ModelD. 2022 [cited 2022 Aug 11]; Available from: https://modeldmedia.com/features/block-by-block-Metro-Detroit-black-business-access-to-capital.aspx
35. Welter F, Baker T, Audretsch DB, Gartner WB. Everyday entrepreneurship – a call for entrepreneurship research to embrace entrepreneurial diversity. Entrep Theory Pract. 2017;41(3):311-21. doi:10.1111/etap.12258
36. Lindgren M, Packendorff J. Social constructionism and entrepreneurship. Int J Entrep Behav Res. 2009;15(1):25-47. doi:10.1108/13552550910934440

37. Stake RE. Qualitative case studies. In: Denzin NK, Lincoln YS, editors. Strategies of qualitative inquiry. 3rd ed. Thousand Oaks (CA): SAGE Publications; 2008. p. 119-49.
38. Stake RE. The case study method in social inquiry. Educ Res. 1978;7(2):5-8. doi:10.3102/0013189X007002005
39. Yin RK. Case study research: design and methods. 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks (CA): SAGE Publications; 1994.
40. Wanyoike CN, Maseno M. Exploring the motivation of social entrepreneurs in creating successful social enterprises in East Africa. New Engl J Entrep. 2021;24(2):79-104. doi:10.1108/NEJE-07-2020-0028
41. Lechner C, Schmidt T. Entrepreneurial strategies in transitional industries from a resource perspective: a case study analysis of the business models of German soccer clubs. New Engl J Entrep. 2002;5(1):15-26. Available from: http://digitalcommons.sacredheart.edu/neje/vol5/iss1/2
42. Braun V, Clarke V. Using thematic analysis in psychology. Qual Res Psychol. 2006;3(2):77-101. doi:10.1191/1478088706qp063oa
43. Creswell JW, Poth CN. Qualitative inquiry and research design: choosing among five approaches. 4th ed. Thousand Oaks (CA): SAGE Publications; 2018.
44. Saldaña J. The coding manual for qualitative researchers. 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks (CA): SAGE Publications; 2013.
45. CityESO. Entrepreneurship and economic opportunity in Detroit: perceptions and possibilities. 2020 [cited 2026 May 29]; Available from: https://detroitfuturecity.com/data_reports/entrepreneurship-and-economic-opportunity-in-detroit/
46. RegionalESO. RegionalESO 2020 annual report. 2021 [cited 2026 May 29].
47. Kuckertz A, Scheu M, Davidson P. Chasing mythical creatures—a (not-so-sympathetic) critique of entrepreneurship's obsession with unicorn startups. J Bus Ventur Insights. 2023;19:e00365. doi:10.1016/j.jbvi.2022.e00365
48. TechESO. Detroit: entrepreneurial ecosystem report. 2021 [cited 2026 May 29]. (Report released by EntryPoint, June 2021)
49. Haimerl A. The fastest-growing group of entrepreneurs in America. Fortune. 2015 [cited 2026 May 29]; Available from: https://fortune.com/2015/06/29/black-women-entrepreneurs/
50. VencapESO. VencapESO 2021 annual research report. 2021 [cited 2026 May 29].