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Managing through a crisis: emotional leadership strategies of high-growth entrepreneurs during the COVID-19 pandemic

Kautsar Ramli ^a, Ben Spigel ^b, Nick Williams^c, Suzanne Mawson ^d and Sarah Jack ^e

^aSchool of Management, University of Bristol, Bristol, UK; ^bUniversity of Edinburgh Business School; ^cLeeds University Business School, UK; ^dUniversity of Strathclyde, Hunter School for Entrepreneurship, UK; ^eUniversity of Lancaster Management School, UK & Stockholm School of Economics, Sweden

ABSTRACT

This study explores how high-growth entrepreneurs use well-being and emotional labour as tools to respond to crises. Drawing on 173 longitudinal interviews with 57 high-growth entrepreneurs during the Covid-19 crisis, we explore internal crisis response strategies. The data show that entrepreneurs employ a variety of emotional labour practices which produce organizational resilience. However, these practices are in tension with the strategic practices required for economic resilience. We show how the emotional of entrepreneurs serves as part of their crisis leadership strategy. This adds a new perspective to the literature on entrepreneurial crisis and resilience by showing the complexity of internal reactions to sudden and prolonged shocks.

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Resilience; crisis management; well-being; emotions; COVID-19

1. Introduction

Understanding the multi-faceted impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic has become an important focus of social science research (Brown and Cowling 2021). This is especially true for entrepreneurship research, as firm founders are both uniquely exposed to the shocks of the pandemic and are key to the global economic and social recovery in its wake. In particular, there is a focus on how entrepreneurial ventures can be resilient in the face of an unprecedented shock. Resilience is the ability of a person or organization to return to either a pre-crisis equilibrium after a shock, or to find another stable post-shock state, where there is a continuous threat (Muñoz et al. 2019; Mittermaier, Shepherd, and Patzelt 2021). Thus, the nature of resilience is a key question for understanding not only how entrepreneurs can survive protracted crises like the Covid-19 pandemic, but also thrive amidst the uncertainty it brought.

Despite the explosion of research on the impact of the pandemic on entrepreneurs, there is little work centring on how entrepreneurs' emotional experiences and burdens during the pandemic influenced organizational resilience. One of the consequences of this gap is that work on entrepreneurs' emotions and studies of crisis management and resilience are not linked. There is a lack of understanding about the dynamics of how entrepreneurs address emotional challenges which unfold during a crisis and how these impact the resilience of entrepreneurial firms (Herbane 2019). As a result, we know neither how entrepreneurs deal with the psychological and emotional effects of a major prolonged shock, nor the role that emotion plays in the broader resilience of the organization to crises. Similarly, there has been little work on how entrepreneurs engage with their employees during a crisis to ensure that employees themselves are resilient in the face of uncertainty. That is, there has been surprisingly little research on the emotional labour entrepreneurs perform to support their workers

CONTACT Ben Spigel  Ben.spigel@ed.ac.uk  University of Edinburgh Business School

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during times of crisis. These gaps make it difficult for current research to effectively contribute to policies focused on building and maintaining firm resilience during a major, ongoing crisis.

We address these gaps through an exploratory longitudinal qualitative study that examines how entrepreneurs employed emotional labour strategies within their organization to build resilience during the Covid-19 pandemic. The study advances our understanding of entrepreneurial well-being from the perspective of high-growth entrepreneurs. Not only are there misconceptions when it comes to these highly innovative firms and their long-term survival and growth strategies (Brown, Mawson, and Mason 2017), high-growth enterprises are also recognized to play a particularly important role in creating jobs and supporting entrepreneurial dynamism as economies seek to recover from the shocks of the pandemic (Benedetti Fasil et al. 2021). This study tracks the changes pertaining to entrepreneurial strategies on organizational well-being, and how these evolve during the crisis. In doing so, we answer the following interlinked research questions: (1) *How have entrepreneurs' emotions affected their response to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic*; and (2) *Does the nature of an entrepreneur's emotional labour within their organization change during a crisis*? We address these interlinked research questions through an analysis of 173 longitudinal interviews conducted with 57 high-growth British entrepreneurs over the course of the first 12 months of the pandemic.

This study makes three key contributions to the literature on entrepreneurship, emotion, and resilience. First, we extend research on existing theories on entrepreneurial well-being and emotion by demonstrating how emotional connections and interactions between founders and their workers influence resilience in entrepreneurial firms (Ryff 2017, 2019). This responds to Bundy et al. (2017)'s call for more integrative, interdisciplinary approaches in entrepreneurship research. Specifically, we identify the concepts of emotional labour and crisis leadership as critical to understanding how entrepreneurs reacted to a protracted crisis. This provides a new theoretical lens to understand how fast-growing businesses respond to crisis. It emphasizes that founders do not necessarily implement strategic business responses to crisis, but instead shows how entrepreneurs must balance the often competing need to provide emotional support to employees with the strategic choices required to preserve the company during a period of turbulence and uncertainty. Second, most entrepreneurship studies examine well-being at a single point in time. We extend this by exploring how well-being and well-being responses change over a prolonged crisis. By taking this approach, we are able to contribute to the entrepreneurship literature by demonstrating both the immediate impact of a crisis and how a macroeconomic shock can affect high-growth entrepreneurs and their well-being over time. Finally, we contribute to organizational and well-being research by focusing on how a crisis influences entrepreneurs and those around them, particularly the entrepreneurs' motivation in making decisions on resources and provisions for their employees and themselves in times of crisis and uncertainty (Deci and Ryan 2008). These contributions provide useful tools for entrepreneurs and policymakers, while also moving forward both theoretical and empirical aspects of the extant literature in entrepreneurship research.

2. Literature review

2.1. Entrepreneurial resilience in a crisis

Research on crisis management and resilience has examined the impact of various types of crises on entrepreneurs' performance and firm survival as well as other shocks such as natural disasters (e.g. Williams and Shepherd 2018), economic crises (Williams and Vorley 2015; Bishop 2019) and conflict (Bullough, Renko, and Myatt 2014). Crisis management explores how actors minimize the impact of a crisis and bring a weakened system back into alignment (Spillan and Hough 2003). Crisis is defined here as an extreme, unexpected, or unpredictable event that requires an urgent response from organizations (Doern, Williams, and Vorley 2019). The Covid-19 pandemic created multiple overlapping economic, social, and health crises, all of which create ambiguity about how firms will

emerge from the pandemic (Simón-Moya, Revuelto-Taboada, and Guerrero 2014). This 'impending doom' creates a need for firms to become more resilient in order to recover from the impacts the crisis brings (Bendell, Sullivan, and Ornstein 2020, 3).

Resilient organizations and employees can respond to adversity and recover following a crisis, often by developing new ways of doing business to bounce back (Linnenluecke 2017). Research in this area typically concentrates on the period before a crisis and the capabilities or resources possessed by entrepreneurs and organizations to withstand events and revert back to their pre-crisis state or adjust to a new equilibrium. Resilience then provides a mechanism to evaluate the vulnerability of organizations to exogenous shocks, disturbances, and stresses in addition to their capacity to creatively and flexibly respond (Schölin, Ohlsson, and Broomé 2017). It therefore represents the mental and economic flexibility to not just survive a sudden crisis or shock, but to fundamentally re-think how business processes and value creation activities are performed in order to adjust to a new, post-crisis reality (Coombs and Laufer 2018; Muñoz et al. 2020).

Studies related to the impact of crisis on resilience have proliferated since the start of the Covid-19 crisis (Korsgaard et al. 2020). This work has largely focused on the economic resilience of firms: their ability to maintain their financial stability in the face of rapid market and supply chain disruption. However, there has been less work on how organizations themselves remain resilient by balancing the demands and needs of founders and employees. This involves aspects such as how entrepreneurs and employees maintain their mental well-being and creativity in the face of profound uncertainty. A crisis may require new forms of support that transcend standard job performance aid and incorporate the wider mental health and wellbeing of staff (Thompson, Verduijn, and Gartner 2020).

Despite rising interest in the resilience of entrepreneurial firms, few have linked this with research on entrepreneurs' personal resilience and well-being. While prior work has explored different dimensions of founders' mental health and well-being (Nikolova 2019; Stephan 2018), this has mostly focussed on the relationships between well-being and traditional outcomes of success such as business performance rather than how firms themselves recover from a shock. Interestingly, work on entrepreneurship and mental health has largely focused on smaller-scale entrepreneurs (Doern 2016; Grube and Storr 2018), while more ambitious entrepreneurs running larger or fast-growing organizations are assumed to be economically rational actors whose choices during a crisis are not affected by personal feelings or emotions (Thorgren and Williams 2020). Thus, there is a lack of understanding of how declines in well-being are dealt with during a crisis, particularly how founders of fast-growing firms manage emotions such as fear, uncertainty, and anxiety in both themselves and their employees. This is certainly the case in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, as lockdowns and uncertainty impacted on entrepreneurial mental health. In this respect, tracking the practical entrepreneurial strategies entrepreneurs adopt to overcome these challenges is important since they happen in real time.

2.2 Emotional labour and leadership in a crisis

As noted above, most work on the intersection of entrepreneurship and emotion has focused on entrepreneurs' own personal emotions and emotional experiences. Indeed, this has been a subject of interest to better understand the emotive element of venture creation, as well as venture closure (Cardon et al. 2005), particularly given the substantial risks and failure events associated with entrepreneurial action (Byrne and Shepherd 2015; Muhr et al. 2019). However, there has been little consideration of how entrepreneurs' emotions are fundamentally embedded within (and affected by) their relationships within the firm (Scheff 1997) and how emotions influence various aspects of entrepreneurial venturing during the (often long) period between start-up and closure (Carter, Gartner, and Reynolds 1996; Cardon et al. 2012). As a result of this limited evidence base, we also understand very little about how entrepreneurs' emotions shift and evolve over time, particularly regarding both challenging events as well as more major crises (Batchelor, Humphrey, and Burch 2018).

It is important to understand the dynamics and changes in entrepreneurs' emotions. One way to consider the impact of entrepreneurs' emotions is through their use of emotional labour. The concept of emotional labour, stemming from Hochschild's (1979, 1983) seminal work, has been vaguely defined and under-utilized within the entrepreneurship field, in contrast to other disciplines where the concept has received significant attention, such as organizational studies and sociology (Batchelor, Humphrey, and Burch 2018). Hochschild (1979) identifies emotional labour as the ability of individuals to actively work on – or manage – emotions and feelings in the creation of a socially desirable (labour) process; these principles are reflected by others in the entrepreneurship field who have considered emotional labour to be 'the efforts taken to achieve organizationally desired emotional expressions' (Cardon et al. 2012, 4) and the 'act of displaying the appropriate emotion' (Burch, Batchelor, and Humphrey 2013, 332). Emotional labour can be classified as the frequency, intensity, variety and duration of emotional displays (Morris and Feldman 1997), whereby individuals can engage in surface acting, presenting or 'faking' the appropriate emotion, or deep acting where they attempt to feel as well as present the appropriate emotion (Hochschild 1979; Grandey 2003).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the intensity and duration of emotional labour is significant in terms of the emotional load carried by entrepreneurs as well as their ability to continue engaging in effective and appropriate emotional displays. There has been divergence between emotional labour and wider notions of 'emotion work', particularly within the field of organizational analysis, where scholars have sought to differentiate emotional displays from the process of emergence of those displays based on different contexts and 'feeling rules' which shape emotional responses (e.g. Bolton 2005). This divergence has important implications for the conceptualization and further theoretical development of the emotional labour construct in entrepreneurship, identifying the need for a more nuanced and contextualized understanding of emotional labour. As such, whilst this study draws on the emotional labour construct in the context of entrepreneurship, we look to the organizational analysis field to augment and further develop this concept, given the extant lack of empirical evidence of how emotional labour shapes the entrepreneurial process (Cardon et al. 2012).

Critically for the entrepreneurial process, within the organization analysis literature Bolton and Boyd (2003) identify the increasing complexity of emotional considerations in an organizational context, noting that emotion work is fundamentally affected by changing emotional demands over time. This is relevant for understanding entrepreneurial emotions in the context of crisis, where internal and socially situated emotions are likely to be constantly evolving aligned to changing expectations in terms of entrepreneurs' emotional responses. In this context, the actions taken by entrepreneurs have been associated with the existing social contracts in which they are involved (Donaldson and Dunfee 1994), as an implicit understanding exists within organizations that actions should bring more benefits to all parties involved than disadvantages (Bucar, Glas, and Hisrich 2003). The extent to which the authenticity and the meaning of these actions and norms impact entrepreneurial practice, however, still remains a gap to explore (Mudrack and Mason 2013).

Most work on emotional labour has examined lower-level service workers (Batchelor, Humphrey, and Burch 2018) who are required to perform emotional labour as part of or in addition to their nominal duties (Warhurst and Nickson 2007). However, a small stream of research has begun to engage with how higher-level managers and leaders engage in emotional labour in order to motivate teams, encourage their subordinates or followers (Humphrey et al. 2008) and ensure high levels of productivity (Samra-Fredericks 2012). Despite critical interventions by Burch et al. (2013) and Batchelor, Humphrey, and Burch (2018), work on the emotional labour of senior workers has to date concentrated on corporate managers and leaders rather than entrepreneurs. While on the surface managers and entrepreneurs may have similar job roles in directing employees, it is essential to differentiate between the two. Not only is entrepreneurial activity recognized to be a high-emotion context (Ingram et al. 2019) compared to corporate environments, entrepreneurs are also differentiated from managers or leaders more generally by their ownership stake in the business and their greater autonomy in decision making (Burch, Batchelor, and Humphrey 2013), leading them to face additional stresses pertaining to venture performance. Thus, entrepreneurs are

expected to have much stronger emotional connections to their employees than managers more generally, due to their personal stake in the business, involvement in recruitment, likely smaller organizational scale and therefore closer and more personal interactions with individual employees (Batchelor, Humphrey, and Burch 2018). This is evidenced in part by the fact that entrepreneurs are less likely to lay off workers in a crisis than managers at larger corporations, instead preferring to look for alternatives that keep everyone employed such as cutting hours (Lai et al. 2016).

For entrepreneurs, emotional labour is less about mollifying angry customers or displaying accepted organizational norms (Bolton and Boyd 2003) but rather about engendering positive emotions within the organization that help increase employee commitment, drive and ultimately firm performance (Grandey and Gabriel 2015). Entrepreneurs seek to create a sense of passion, drive, and grit in their employees in order to help employees embrace the unique aspects of working at an entrepreneurial venture, such as porous job roles, lack of job security and the need to embrace uncertainty (Neff, Wissinger, and Zukin 2005). This can be emotionally draining for entrepreneurs (Trogakos et al. 2008). As such, emotional labour in an entrepreneurship context has been seen by some as an important behavioural element within the concept of leadership, whereby entrepreneurs must perform appropriate emotional displays to keep employees and stakeholders motivated and engaged whilst also helping to control negative emotions in others that would endanger firm productivity and performance. Indeed, as Iszatt-White (2012, 33) argues: 'The accomplishment of day-to-day leadership work relies on the exercise of emotional labour'.

Based on the preceding discussion, there is a disconnect between research on entrepreneurial resilience, crisis management, and emotional labour. Resilience research is focused on crisis management strategies, with little investigation into the impacts of a crisis on the well-being of entrepreneurs and their employees. Entrepreneurial emotion research, in turn, focuses singularly on the founder, with little attention to the wider organization or how the entrepreneur manages well-being in others. Neither literature has yet drawn on the substantial body of research on emotional labour, which itself has largely ignored the nature and role of emotional labour by entrepreneurs, particularly how this changes and evolves within the context of crisis. Addressing these gaps will provide new frameworks for understanding the role of emotion and entrepreneurial well-being for organizational resilience during a crisis.

3. Methods

Following calls for more innovative qualitative approaches in entrepreneurship research (Van Burg et al. 2020), we have undertaken a real-time methodology (Brundin 2007) comprising in-depth, qualitative longitudinal interviews with high-growth entrepreneurs throughout the UK. This approach allows us to capture nuanced and complex dynamics within firms which would otherwise be difficult to record through cross-sectional or quantitative approaches. Such methods are appropriate for situations like the Covid-19 pandemic where contexts are unstable and it is unclear how actors respond to a complex and changing environment (Calman, Brunton, and Molassiotis 2013). This approach also allows for a longitudinal perspective on the impact of the crisis that facilitates the emergence of novel findings not found in traditional cross-sectional analysis (Saldaña 2003).

Interviews were conducted with founders of high-growth firms in the digital, advanced manufacturing, green industries, and business service sectors located in eight regions in the UK (London, Leeds, Lancaster, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Cardiff, the Scottish Borders and Belfast). The focus on high-growth firms is due to their strong role in employment growth in the UK economy, which is important for economic recovery from the pandemic (Brown, Mawson, and Mason 2017) as well as for their role in supporting environmental entrepreneurial dynamism (Benedetti Fasil et al. 2021). High-growth firms were identified through business intelligence directories such as Dealroom.co and Beauhurst platforms. Beginning in June 2020, entrepreneurs were contacted via email and invited to participate in an initial interview that included questions on (a) the immediate impacts they experienced at the onset of the pandemic, such as loss of customers, funding, and quickly

transitioning to remote working along with the tactics they used to address these; (b) the strategies they were implementing or planning to implement for larger shifts in firm operations, business models, or markets; and (c) the reactions of both entrepreneurs and their employees to different consequences of the pandemic, such as increased uncertainty or the physical lockdown of their mobility. These interviews took between 45 minutes to an hour. At the end of the interviews, we asked if we could contact them again for follow-up interviews every two to three months. Follow-up interviews were shorter (15 to 30 minutes) and focused on entrepreneurs' experiences since the last interview and the impacts of new developments in the crisis, such as the second wave of infections in the winter of 2020. For this study, we only include data from entrepreneurs who participated in at least one follow-up interview by April 2021. This dataset constitutes 173 interviews: 57 initial interviews and 116 follow-ups. [Table 1](#) summarizes the population demographics. Individual data on respondents is available in Appendix A

Each interview was recorded and transcribed. Transcripts were analysed thematically in our search for common and divergent experiences and responses. A constant comparative approach to data analysis (Alvesson and Sköldbberg 2000) and an iterative reviewing of the data against emerging concepts and categories led to the identification of three overarching themes: internal well-being of the entrepreneur, emotional labour, and the balance between self-interest and collective interest. These themes were tracked across the early, middle, and late stages of the pandemic using Saldaña's (2003) longitudinal qualitative analysis methodology. We analysed our findings according to three timescales: early-term (March to August 2020), mid-term (September to December 2020) and late-term (after January 2021). These timescales reference the course of the pandemic in the UK (e.g. initial and subsequent lockdowns), allowing us to track changes in entrepreneurs' crisis response strategies and their outlooks towards recovery and growth over

Table 1. Population demographics.

Interview Counts	
Number of firms interviewed	57
Number of follow-up interviews	116
Total interviews	173
Average number of interviews per firm	3.04
Firm and Founder Demographics	
Average entrepreneur age (standard deviation)	43.7 years (11.01 years)
Gender (female = 1)	.38
Average firm age (standard deviation)	5.65 years (6.39 years)
Average number of employees (standard deviation)	18.88 (18.58)
Average revenues (standard deviation)	£2.73 million (£4.81 million)
Firm Sectors	
Digital	30
Advanced Manufacturing	7
Green industries	10
Business services	10
Firm Locations	
Belfast	5
Cardiff	6
Edinburgh	12
Glasgow	6
Lancaster	3
Leeds	7
London	13
Scottish Borders	5

time. This approach also meant we were able to link the changes we identified with internal and external causes.

To support our data analysis, we used the collaborative qualitative analysis platform Atlas.ti. Our qualitative interview material was analysed on three levels. First, from the initial interviews, we identified the immediate impacts entrepreneurs experienced in the shift from an individual level perspective to a collective interest for employees in our respondent firms. This allowed us to make sense of 1) respondents' views and how their personal well-being has changed during the crisis and 2) analyse the logic underlying the practices they employed to ensure their firm's survival and growth during the pandemic. Second, through follow-up interviews, we developed insight into how challenges and responses evolved with time. Here, we looked for ways in which entrepreneurs are able to build resilience into their firms through the actions that were taken to address the emergent well-being issues in their organizations. Third, we tracked the feasibility of entrepreneurs' strategies and the new planned actions being deployed in their efforts to alleviate firm well-being issues. We used our theoretical framework to direct our analysis by making linkages between entrepreneurial decisions, the process of how these change over time, and the role of emotional labour in crisis management. This approach meant we were able to identify patterns in the data that were emerging and initial themes. It also meant that we could move to identify key themes which we could then consider more conceptually (Wolcott 2002). This allowed us to code the data to form more meaningful analytical categories (Jack 2005; Geertz 2008; Jennings et al. 2015). Interpretation, therefore, was in real-time and meant we were in the fortunate position to be able to capture entrepreneurial responses in managing a crisis as it was evolving (Brundin 2007). Follow-up interviews allowed us to probe the effects of contemporaneous events (e.g. new government policies, increases in case rates) as well as explore emergent themes in the data. For the purpose of answering our research questions, we adopted the analytical method described by McKeever, Jack, and Anderson (2015) to shape our analysis, which was informed by Bansal and Corley (2012) in producing and presenting our findings.

4. Findings

Our findings are organized around the major themes of entrepreneurs' responses to new organizational pressures caused by the Covid-19 pandemic and how these responses changed their relationships and interactions with their employees and their own self-identity as entrepreneurs. Following McKeever, Jack, and Anderson (2015), we present selected representative 'power quotes' in the form of a table to present our rich findings. We use and highlight direct quotations based on the exact phrases and terms our respondents used to tell the actual stories which indicate their lived entrepreneurial experience. Table 2 shows how respondents reacted to the Covid-19 crisis and how it affected their approach to personal well-being and the well-being of their workers and other stakeholders.

4.1 Increased performance of emotional labour

The interviews revealed the large amount of emotional labour entrepreneurs engaged in during the crisis, both at the beginning of the pandemic as well as throughout the subsequent year and a half of our study period. The crisis required entrepreneurs to engage in significantly more and diversified emotional labour to support their employees. In this context, emotional labour refers to the actions founders took to proactively manage the emotions of their employees in order to reduce anxiety and uncertainty, as well as the work they did to preserve their own emotional equilibrium in the face of external forces. For example, some entrepreneurs reported violating the UK's strict lockdown laws to have face-to-face meetings with employees who they felt were on the verge of having breakdowns from the isolation and stress caused by the pandemic. Beyond arranging frequent conversations to monitor employees' wellbeing and attempt to boost their mood, founders also had to model the



Table 2. Descriptive categories to analytical categories.

Descriptive categories	Analytical categories
Emergent theme:	The consequence is:
Performance of emotional labour	Changes in priorities in making organizational decisions around well-being issues leads to more emotion work
Examples from the raw data are:	This tells us that during the crisis:
<p>'So we build things alongside which are helpful to people in the moments that are happening. We don't assume that all the goals are going to stay the same always and that there aren't any external forces that are going to impact on staff. So we have this dual role, which is [for] some people who are already struggling, we're going to keep providing a Coronavirus money app and we'll just update those with this new guidance and help triage people to find the help they need'. (I081); "So my priority as an employer has now gone from getting clients and making sure we're legally compliant to make sure there's money in the business to also becoming massively aware of mental health needs. So I'm doing research on, 'Okay, should we have an app for exercise and how do we boost morale and trying [sic] to find strategies and ways to come together as a team because we're scattered at a really crucial time in our growth?' (I151)</p>	<p>Entrepreneurs are more aware of the emergent well-being issues within their firms</p> <p>Emergent leadership practices related to emotional labour for (or brought about through) crisis management</p>
<p>'We're always being quite open about communication and sharing information with our team. Having one-to-ones and striving to deliver strong feedback and that development'. (I023); "We'd moved to a situation where we said to the staff, 'You don't have to go to the office, we're not forcing anybody back into the office, but if you want to, it's safe and we put extra cleaning and, you know, sanitary protection in place and, you know, everything's there if you want to use it. We reduce the number of staff that could be in the office at any one time. And we had like a booking system on a team calendar if you want to go in'. (I153)</p>	<p>In response to the Covid pandemic, entrepreneurs are:</p> <p>Shifting their role from mainly prioritizing monetary gains to also being empathetic to employee well-being</p> <p>Increasing internal communication to convey a sense of care and security to employees</p>

(Continued)



Table 2. (Continued).

Descriptive categories	Analytical categories			
Emergent theme:	Examples from the raw data are:	In response to the Covid pandemic, entrepreneurs are:	This in turn produces:	The consequence is:
	<p>We've been doing them more so every couple of weeks in terms of like a group get-together. But then, others are sort of more informal chats in between'. (I010); So we're just kind of rallying around to support him. Well, we know he's home alone so I'd have a drink with him on Sunday evening. And the whole team, we're getting in touch with him just to make sure he's okay and to arrange to have chats with him." (I118); 'We've now put together a weekly, a virtual or in-person management lunch. I think there's a few things like that that we still need to kind of ensure that people are communicating via whatever processes those may be'. (I101)</p>	<p>Putting in more effort and personal touches to gain trust and to increase their connection with staff</p>	<p>This in turn produces:</p>	<p>The consequence is:</p>
	<p>'So maybe for younger people, they don't need that component of their working life. [...] And in terms of things like skill development, particularly for junior staff, they would be really struggling at the moment and it depends on circumstances here. [...] But if you're in your 20s, you've got a student loan. You're living on your own and you're quite sociable, then working from home and isolation doesn't give you a lot of the mental sustenance that you need to get, really'. (I037); 'We've had some of the junior guys who had a pretty rough time. Most people that have further on in their career progression have a house or a flat, they've two-layers with their families. [...] Some of the younger guys, they share flats. They're working in their bedrooms and trying to avoid their flatmates. I can imagine that gets really horrific, actually, at times'. (I063)</p>	<p>Actively helping younger staff to cope with issues around isolation and other well-being-related issues</p>		

(Continued)



Table 2. (Continued).

Descriptive categories	Analytical categories				
Emergent theme:	Examples from the raw data are:	In response to the Covid pandemic, entrepreneurs are:	This tells us that during the crisis:	This in turn produces:	The consequence is:
Emotional labour and identity	<p>“I don’t think that this traditional leadership management style, when you tell the employee, you are the strong one, you are standing there saying, “Everything will be okay and just calm down!” is working. Actually, I don’t think it’s working. I think you share your own anxieties and you jointly come up with the ways to cope. I found this more successful with my team that just say, “Look, I’m afraid like you. I don’t know what’s going to happen”, but that is good indication’. (I066); ‘But then, coming back from furlough, it’s been quite full-on. So much so that actually, the three directors, the co-founders, we’re very much aware of burnout and how we need to take care of ourselves, but also in terms of our team. Because I think people are definitely feeling the pressures and the stressors. And also that doesn’t help that everyone’s working from home and don’t have that social interaction that much’. (I099)</p>	<p>Increasingly acknowledging challenges employees face in managing their mental health</p>	<p>Redefining the employer-employee social contract as entrepreneurs feel responsible for both mental and economic employee well-being</p>	<p>Emotional connections between entrepreneurs and employees because of the emotion work</p>	<p>Entrepreneurs adopt new role as carer for their employees thus influencing their identity</p>
	<p>‘So we’ll spend the first 15 minutes checking in on everyone. See, but we have a lot of self-cast-off built into our workflows that we take a lot of time around – that we spend a lot of time looking at where we’re winning on things and then doubling down on that, because that makes people feel good about some of the more challenging stuff’. (I146); I think by acknowledging that things are different and difficult for everybody. We’re working with the different challenges they’ve got, whether it be childcare, whether it be looking after an elderly relative; or just not having that contact with other people on day-to-day basis.” (I080)</p>	<p>Normalizing other personal issues employees dealing with including caring responsibilities</p>			

(Continued)



Table 2. (Continued).

Descriptive categories	Analytical categories				
Emergent theme:	Examples from the raw data are:	This tells us that during the crisis:	This in turn produces:	The consequence is:	
Tension between self-interest and collective interest	<p>'Well, terrible, I mean, it's been difficult for everybody. I mean, from a work perspective, you know, we're all busy and we're all working on well. You know, we're very grateful for that, but [award name] is just a really welcome boost for everybody. It is a recognition of a business that they're working for is a good one and strong and be contributed towards winning it. So it's been a really positive thing from that perspective'. (I118); I've just started thinking about more people's psychological welfare. Not because I didn't think about it before, but I wonder, and this is more hypothesis than anything, whether the longevity of lockdown and the lack of interaction in the office that we had in London might be an impact a couple of the team members.' (I070)</p> <p>'So I think, the real difference is that people don't really have a life. You know, it's not the same as closing your laptop and putting something on Netflix as it is going to the pub with your friend or going away for the weekend. And so, I think that feeling – it's coming from lack of life rather than from too much work. But at the end of the day, the negative impact of that is the same, regardless of what's the cause. So that's something we need to work on'. (I152); 'So, if you want to work at 6 o'clock in the morning, then you can. If you want to finish at 11 o'clock at night, you can. How you balance your time, what you do with your time is up to you'. (I037)</p> <p>'We have to go through a whole series of processes and do all that kind of thing. And the office won't take everybody. Some people are quite happy to work from home, anyway. So we're trying to work in a balance'. (I073); 'I've never got a break. But you're alone because you bear the responsibility of everyone's life. You bear it no matter how many people you employ. (I046); So what we did was we furloughed them, but certainly most of the team, myself, and other senior guys, we all took a pay cut in solidarity. And the people at the bottom-end of the pay scale, we topped them up so they didn't lose any money'. (I059)</p>	<p>In response to the Covid pandemic, entrepreneurs are:</p> <p>Feeling responsible to constantly finding ways in boosting work motivation in firms</p> <p>Increasingly putting emphasis on assurance and the importance of work-life balance and work flexibility</p>	<p>Entrepreneurial goals were not clear and need reframing to embrace well-being</p> <p>Forced to choose and offer a balance between what is best for them as firm owners and what is best for internal stakeholders in the firm</p>	<p>Challenges in developing strategies to address dynamics in employee emotional state</p>	<p>Entrepreneurs must hold opposing goals in tension during a crisis</p>

(Continued)

Table 2. (Continued).

Descriptive categories	Analytical categories
Emergent theme:	The consequence is:
<p>Examples from the raw data are:</p> <p>'So, yeah, I think it was time-offs and then how people are managing it to be talking to each other. I think a couple of people took up like counselling; like talking therapy and also coaching, which I guess is not necessarily mental health, but I think it helped in some respects'. (I154); 'But just in terms of a reality of how we have approached this is that we have had some conversations and our team calls where we just sort of talk honestly about some of the challenges that we're going through as individuals and about this being just sort of a difficult time. And I think that there is some value to team solidarity from having honest conversations about the emotional and mental health challenges that we're all facing while trying to grapple with these challenging times. And so in that sense, I think it's possible that we are forming sort of stronger bonds than we otherwise might not'. (I122)</p>	<p>In response to the Covid pandemic, entrepreneurs are:</p> <p>Having a greater sense of unity and solidarity to address needs by having specific provision of mental health support</p>
<p>'So, I think, just being flexible for people if they need to take some extra time to go in, like with the family, or they want to work on a particular project for a different or – something like that. We'll be trying to be flexible, really flexible where we can use – Just little things like being in lockdown. We do a bit of – to pick a gift like £60, £70 or something just as a bit of a care package. Yeah, I think it's like the thought that counts on a bunch of that stuff'. (I019); 'One of the things I've done is that every month, everybody, I've got a delivery of something, whether it is a [food company] voucher or a packet of brownies or something, I mean, it's just small things. But I suppose that I'm trying to do those things on a regular basis and just give us the notice. It's a bit of something'. (I117)</p>	<p>This tells us that during the crisis:</p> <p>Reframing leadership practices to having greater recognition of work flexibility to better adapt to organizational situations</p>

(Continued)

Table 2. (Continued).

Descriptive categories	Analytical categories		
Emergent theme:	In response to the Covid pandemic, entrepreneurs are:	This tells us that during the crisis:	This in turn produces:
<p>Examples from the raw data are:</p> <p>‘I’ve had two staff members having to take time off work for burnout and mental health difficulties. I think, from my own perspective, I saw that coming in my own life and made a huge decision to uproot our entire family and move in with people to help with mental health and isolation and lockdown and being in the city. So I am emotionally aware enough to do that. Many people aren’t. So I think one of the biggest threats to businesses right now is the mental well-being of staff and a very difficult, difficult Winter. It probably affects everybody. (1095); ‘But I think, with a couple of staff as well, that they’re starting to start to get to people individually. They’re struggling a little bit mentally with a – well, health and welfare and so on, because I think, sadly, that’s just the way it is, really. People aren’t getting the normal social connections, et cetera’. (1145)</p>	<p>Learning the importance of understanding employee emotional state</p>		

behaviour required to prevent worker burnout. In some cases, this meant that founders had to proactively take time off in order to encourage workers to do so, even when they felt that they were overwhelmed and could not step away from their work. Others developed ways to encourage employees working from home to engage in wellbeing activities, for example arranging outdoor activities to maintain their physical and mental health.

However, the most common emotional labour practice observed was engaging in frequent non-work conversations with workers to monitor their moods, provide emotional support, and otherwise help address the negative consequences from both home working and the economic, health and social uncertainty facing employees. This often went beyond simple virtual chats to being more in-depth and involved conversations. As one tech entrepreneur explained: *'Maybe [we] have a cup of tea together and have a little chat. But just to see how they're doing in themselves, not necessarily related to the work that they're completing'* (I116). Entrepreneurs sought to improve their capacity to support their teams and engaged in more frequent communications with their individual staff members to provide a sense of security, particularly in dealing with emergent well-being issues such as isolation and depression, through the use of platforms like Slack. This approach was not just performed to provide reassurance to employees but also showed employees that their business leaders were willing to listen to their concerns and provide them with an outlet to express their emotions. For example, a Leeds-based digital entrepreneur told us, *'I ask all of my members of staff, how are they doing? And I'm not talking workload-how-are-you-doing, I'm talking about headspace-how-are-you-doing because that has to be very different now'* (I027). Others mentioned that they realized their accountability to their employees at the start of the crisis has meant *'a level of responsibility that [they] don't normally have'* (I078) in dealing with these types of issues. This led to the realization that as a leader they had to *'try to be empathetic as well'* (I151) and to *'communicate some good news, which [they] know our people will feel good about'* (I076).

Such practices required significant time, effort, and emotional energy on the part of the founders during a period that already overburdened them with new responsibilities. A medical entrepreneur told us that *'the whole COVID period itself has just absorbed so ... much of our time'* (I056). Many entrepreneurs felt that this new emotional labour was a substantial burden that they had to actively manage in order to avoid overwhelming themselves, as one founder explained, *'the three directors, the co-founders [and me], we're very much aware of burnout and how we need to take care of ourselves ... Because I think people are definitely feeling the pressures and the stressors'* (I099). Indeed, a Greentech entrepreneur discussed the impact of managing employee wellbeing and the difficulties they encountered in doing so: *'I'm in denial, okay? So it's very difficult to deal with. Not in your own feelings, but other people's feelings about that, other people's stresses'* (I066).

Two factors drove entrepreneurs' emotional labour. The first was genuine human concern for their workers and the wider community. In almost every case, entrepreneurs reported feeling an increased sense of responsibility to their workers. Many entrepreneurs expressed a similar view to what an advanced manufacturing entrepreneur told us: *'We have now a workforce of about 25 people. Just for me, it's like knowing that 25 people depend on me to provide the money for their children. And it's an amazing thing, but also a lot of responsibilities'* (I064). The need to survive and thrive in the crisis has contributed to entrepreneurs shifting their priorities when it comes to making organizational decisions. But these actions are often expensive, reduce productivity, and take up a substantial amount of a founder's time, which led to concerns about the long-term feasibility for the founder to continue operating at this level, both financially and emotionally.

The second factor for entrepreneurs to engage in emotional labour was the strategic realization that poor employee well-being would lead to lower morale and productivity, thus harming the firm's ability to survive the crisis. At the beginning of the crisis, entrepreneurs saw the challenges employees faced with the transition to remote working and caring responsibilities. By late 2020 and early 2021 many were concerned about the impact of the increased isolation and inactivity during this period and realized how these issues were affecting the ability of employees to perform their work tasks. These reasons are not mutually exclusive: many interviewees couched their emotional labour

in terms of both preserving productivity and of fulfilling their duty of care to their employees. For example, a Glasgow-based biotechnology entrepreneur saw his responsibility as covering both the need to ensure that his employees were able to work effectively at home but also out of a human concern for the challenges his younger, less experienced employees were facing: *'It's not maybe ideal working from home, but some of the younger staff, they're in a flat of six and they are the only one that has a job . . . So, on one hand, they know they're quite lucky but on the other hand, I know they're sitting on their seats, which are fine for dinner, but not sitting for eight hours'* (I056). Given the new ways of working, entrepreneurs found they needed to constantly be working to keep employees engaged. For example, a digital entrepreneur said: *'They are absent really from the office environment. So, we do a daily activity that we refer to as a well-being activity. This really is about trying to bridge some of that, you know, remoteness, getting people involved. So, we've become a lot more proactive in trying to get people involved'* (I100).

However, not all interviewees reported engaging in emotional labour in response to the Covid-19 crisis. Those that did not report engaging in more did not specifically disclaim the performance of emotional labour, but rather did not think that these actions were as important as other things they could focus on, such as driving forward product innovation or sales. This was often because the entrepreneurs felt that they had an obligation to the firm itself and its stakeholders (e.g. investors) to ensure the firm's survival during a period of intense disruption, rather than a direct personal responsibility to their employees. For example, a business services provider in Edinburgh told us that he is: *' . . . rewriting our business plan for the next three to five years. And because, the last one – because with Covid, everything is changing so I'm having to satisfy my board by rewriting the plan'* (I133). However, in discussing their planning, some interviewees mentioned that they *'can't promise [employees] that it's going to go back to normal'* (I001) and that the difficult situation has now been *'fully normalised'* (I057) where people should be *'just getting on with it'* (I076).

4.2 Emotional labour and identity

This increase in emotional labour was predicated on entrepreneurs developing a new identity as a carer, in addition to their previous roles of manager and employer. This identity emphasized the importance of protecting employees' physical health, mental well-being, and personal economic prosperity. Most entrepreneurs became more sympathetic and responsive to their employees' needs. For example, several interviewees reported that their attention is now more focussed on younger staff and those who have caring responsibilities. A London digital entrepreneur spoke of how *'Everyone under the age of 40 who is now trying to get their life goals'* (I026) was at risk due to the impact of the pandemic, while the founder of a Lancaster green-tech firm reported that *' . . . particularly for junior staff, they would be really struggling at the moment'* (I037). Primarily, many entrepreneurs now felt that the pandemic created a new *'duty of care'* (I056) to their employees and that they *'had a responsibility to the whole company [. . .] to our shareholders, but more importantly to our team members to do this right'* (I006).

What we see in our data is that entrepreneurs increasingly acknowledged mental health issues as one of the challenges their employees were facing through the crisis. The communication gaps that might have existed before were bridged with more emotional connections that have come about through their efforts in supporting their employees. For example, a female entrepreneur in Edinburgh mentioned that her employees were *'happy to be back in the action in the office'* and that *'they were feeling very isolated and uncertain about their future. And now that they have work to do, they feel more empowered. That's what I'm sensing, you know'* (I25). Thus, adopting the carer role saw entrepreneurs increase the amount of emotional labour that they performed within their organizations. For example, some entrepreneurs reported having face-to-face meetings during lockdown with employees who they felt were suffering from the isolation and stress. During the interview, we were told that some entrepreneurs learned from their previous crises experience and this were done as *'there's a rule book that you learn to follow'* (I083) to help them in coping with the

stress. Others' methods include daily set-ups or weekly virtual check-ins with all their employees so they could discuss workers' feelings and the non-work challenges they were facing. A green-tech entrepreneur told us that she *'do[es] a lot of like a mental health check-in at the beginning of our meetings to see how people are doing'* (I099). These extra efforts proved a challenge for many entrepreneurs: one interviewee described that by the end of the year 2020 he had *'got to a stage where [I am] physically tired, mentally exhausted'* (I163). Other respondents used phrases like *'complicated'* (I037), *'tougher than anything else'* (I139) and being *'fairly exasperated'* (I32) to describe these efforts. This tells us that well-being and emotional labour practices developed in response to the crisis conditions were therefore not without economic and emotional costs for the entrepreneurs enacting them.

While this new identity began to emerge at the start of the pandemic in early 2020, for many entrepreneurs the situation intensified over the course of the Autumn and Winter of 2020. This was the period when Covid cases reached their peak in the UK. The emphasis on their work flexibility and responsibilities was seen to be redefining their employer-employee social contract. However, respondents provided different views when it comes to describing the impact of the pandemic on their workforce. Indeed, many entrepreneurs reported that at the early stage of the pandemic the novelty of working from home provided some measure of emotional balance for workers, but that by the fall of 2020 *'... this lockdown has gone on longer and the novelty wore off a long, long time ago'* (I197). This meant that by the winter of 2021 entrepreneurs had to substantially increase the amount of emotional labour they performed to support employees. The intensification of these well-being efforts reflected the changing conditions of both the pandemic along with the change in employees' emotional state as the winter made it harder for them to engage in leisure activities during lockdown. For example, one entrepreneur noted that as the winter progressed, and cases increased: *'I've had two staff members having to take time off work for burnout and mental health difficulties. [...] So I think one of the biggest threats to businesses right now is the mental well-being of staff and a very difficult winter'* (I095). What we see here in our data is that entrepreneurs feel they have had to take up their new role as carer for their employees in order to survive the crisis.

4.3. (Re)framing entrepreneurial goals in a collective environment

The Covid-19 crisis clearly created a new tension for entrepreneurs: the balance between their own self-interest and the collective interests of the firm's stakeholders and wider community. Here, self-interest refers to the ways in which an entrepreneur can maximize the profitability and growth of their firm or their own work/life balance. Collective interests refer to the ways in which they could make changes to the operational practices of the firm and their own work routines to support the well-being of others, including employees, customers, and other stakeholders. The most common example of this tension was in how entrepreneurs navigated the challenges of remote working and the decision about when and how to return to the office. Remote working was a legal requirement for many periods in 2020 and 2021, but entrepreneurs could choose how they accommodated home working and if they facilitated it when it was not a requirement. Often, shifting to remote working contributed to reduced productivity as employees struggled to complete their work without face-to-face contact and encountered challenges due to caring responsibilities or poor conditions for home working. One entrepreneur described the situation well: *'You have to come to work because your work is better. And I can demonstrate [this with] data, demonstrate that people are more productive in the office'* (I124). Many interviewees perceived home working as an expense which affected their survival, along with the additional costs of creating bio-secure offices or the sunk costs of unused workspace.

At the same time, it was not straightforward to mandate that employees return to the office as soon as possible. Founders and employees were concerned about the health risks of commuting, working in a central office space and the mental health problems stemming from the social isolation of home working. This made the decision about if and how to return to the office at different points throughout the pandemic a fraught one, with no clear answer. This tension led to a period of

reframing in which entrepreneurs sought to re-evaluate the role of well-being in their organization and also their approach to how they could balance this against their own goals and needs. An entrepreneur told us that it is *'a tricky balance between by overpromising and because we don't want like a reputational risk of basically taking on loads of clients and then basically being spread too thin and not doing any of them very well. And so, it is a really, really tricky balance, but we're just going to have to try and work through it over the next few months'* (I233). The decisions entrepreneurs have had to make frequently involved embedding financial decisions (such as if and how to fire people) in emotional terms. For example, entrepreneurs who were required to use the available government pandemic-related assistance decided to do so given the current economic climate, such as the UK furlough scheme. These implemented steps were perceived by their employees to have provided a *'value of team solidarity'* (I059) and unity. Others contextualized the decisions to allow or require workers to return to working in a shared office in terms of their mental well-being. This attitude was frequently observed in the London-based founders, who saw the extra challenges faced by younger workers with smaller and more precarious shared-housing situations. In the words of a London-based FinTech entrepreneur: *'But everyone's coming in [to the office] because I think just being stuck at home is bad for mental health'* (I106).

Entrepreneurs' decisions consequently influenced their entire organizations and brought changes to how they approached important strategic choices; entrepreneurs needed to make sure that their strategic decisions were also beneficial to their employees. As a business service provider in Leeds told us, *'keeping people happy is more important than reaching for the stars right now'* (I148). A comparable scenario was observed when it came to the types of entrepreneurs' strategic choices, including their plans around firm growth and innovations. A female entrepreneur in Belfast told us that their expansion plans had been impacted by the pandemic and that the change of workforce for their firm *'has accelerated [. . .] People have their appetite for risk, their ability to move quickly, agile and has increased hugely. [. . .] It has undoubtedly changed people's appetite for risk and ability to do work globally, I think'* (I033). Similarly, we observed that entrepreneurs need to play their role in a collective environment *'around the strategic direction for each individual member of staff. So how that strategy feeds down into each individual is not necessarily my decision, what the strategy is and how that feeds down, but how that is communicated, how we incentivise, how we motivate, how we bring everyone together'* (I199). We also found that some of the entrepreneurs struggled to understand their employees' feelings and emotional state: *'I mean, you know, it's someone with a very sort of dry kind of understated presence in any case'* (I175). In striking a balance between prioritizing employees and effective strategic practices, it then makes it challenging for managers and creates additional tension for them. For example, a digital entrepreneur in Cardiff told us, *'I think probably the other big one for us is the alignment between teams. [. . .] so different senior management and the level and similar levels of pressure, but with different priorities based on their job goals. So, trying to get alignment strategically between management teams proved to be quite difficult'* (I135). Another firm owner in London shared with us that they *'had one member of our team who is experiencing some depression that is in no doubt related to the challenges of the era and balancing work and childcare and what not. [. . .] so, it's another one where it's just sort of affecting our operations to help people out'* (I200). Our findings have shown that there is a real challenge in adopting normal strategic practices where there exist scenarios that need them dealing with emotional labour. Given these dynamics in emotional states, entrepreneurs had to be keenly aware of how the pandemic had affected the emotional state of their employees, in conjunction with changing personal preferences and motivators amongst employees.

5. Discussion: the emotional labour of entrepreneurship

The data demonstrate that nearly every entrepreneur interviewed, regardless of gender, geography, industry, or background, increased their performance of emotional labour in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. This emotional labour was used to help employees navigate the economic and health uncertainty of the crisis by eliciting feelings of security and stability through direct interactions,

conversations, and company-wide messaging. This emotional labour can be seen as a component of broader crisis leadership strategies designed to ensure the resilience of the firm in the face of a large exogenous shock. The goal of any leadership strategy is to orient stakeholders to a common vision and facilitate their work towards that goal (Leitch and Volery 2017). As part of this, leaders must purposefully manage their own emotional displays to elicit or support particular feelings in their workers and to ensure continual motivation (Griffith et al. 2015). Failure to do this can lead to reduced worker wellbeing and productivity and the creation of a negative culture within the organization (Inceoglu et al. 2021). Leadership skills are particularly critical during a crisis, in which a firm, its routines and its culture must change rapidly to deal with the loss of markets or other major shocks. Effective leadership means that organizations can adapt to sudden changes in their environment and reorient towards the new opportunities created by a crisis (Hadjielias, Christofi, and Tarba 2022).

However, existing work on leadership in a crisis has tended to focus on the more stereotypical 'masculine' leadership traits that are seen as important during a crisis, such as charisma and risk tolerance. Less has been said about how leaders use emotional labour in crisis situations (Wu, Shie, and Gordon 2017), yet emotional labour is arguably a critical crisis management strategy for entrepreneurs. Founders are closer to their employees than managers at larger firms and often form closer social bonds due to the increased informality of smaller firms and the lack of more official organizational processes (Gibb 2009). This means that they are more exposed to their workers' emotions than senior leaders at larger corporates and that their own emotions are more easily observable (and thus carry greater importance) within the firm. Being able to manage their own emotional displays during a crisis, and elicit particular emotions in their employees, helps entrepreneurs to create a common organizational vision about how to react to the crisis (Batchelor, Humphrey, and Burch 2018).

The interview data shows that there were two types of approaches to the use of emotional labour as part of crisis leadership strategies. The first approach, which we term '*humanistic*', refers to founders who prioritized supporting the mental and physical well-being of their employees and other stakeholders through the crisis. This approach was characterized by engaging in intensive emotional labour to elicit feelings of solidarity and security in their employees. Such actions were performed both out of a sense of responsibility towards workers during a difficult time, as well as out of a desire to preserve productivity during periods of remote working. Regardless of the rationale, this approach maximized organizational resilience – the ability of workers to respond to sudden changes brought on by a crisis – by ensuring that they avoided burnout and maintained their mental well-being.

The second approach, termed '*strategic*', refers to entrepreneurs who prioritized ensuring that the company remained financially secure by cutting costs and ensuring positive cash flow through prioritization of growth and innovation. This approach supported the firm's economic resilience by ensuring that it had the financial resources to respond both to a loss of customers due to the shock of Covid-19, as well as to pursue new opportunities created by the pandemic. In pursuit of these goals, entrepreneurs expended less energy on emotional labour, though some reported engaging in limited practices such as more one-on-one communication with workers. They instead turned their attention to reducing costs, meeting with customers and investors, and pursuing new growth opportunities.

Entrepreneurs frequently shifted between these approaches based on the changing nature of the crisis, the needs of the employees and the firm, as well as their own emotional state. Emotional labour is therefore a dynamic aspect of crisis leadership. It changes with both the internal needs of workers and the founders' own emotional state, as well as with external contexts such as the nature of the crisis (e.g. increases in caseloads, emergence of new variants and changing lockdown restrictions) and the firm's growth trajectory. For example, as noted above, many entrepreneurs reported increasing the amount of emotional labour they performed during the winter of 2021 due to the rapid increase in cases, renewed lockdown, and overall malaise of the winter. Interviewees also reported that they were able to reduce the amount of emotional labour during the summer months of the pandemic when cases were low and employees were able to return to the office or otherwise

get out of their homes. How entrepreneurs balanced humanistic and strategic approaches depended on their perceptions of the new tension between the founder's own self-interest in ensuring the greatest growth for the firm without burning themselves out due to the crisis and amount of emotional labour they had to perform to support the collective needs of their workers.

Regardless of whether the emotional labour performed was due to genuine human concern for employees' wellbeing or as part of a strategy to ensure the continued productivity of workers, entrepreneurs saw this labour as an important mechanism for increasing their firm's resilience in the face of a profound external crisis. This suggests that resilience is not just a matter of firm strategies like diversifying product lines or reducing expenses to preserve cash flow. Rather, resilience for entrepreneurs is an emergent phenomenon based on how the founder perceives and reacts to the paradoxes of crisis; their ability to lead firm stakeholders such as employees and investors towards a common goal – surviving the pandemic and even prospering amidst the disruption. Such leadership strategies are as much grounded in entrepreneur-employee emotional ties as they are in firms' strategic analysis, where emotional labour is often as if not more important than managerial actions. For profound crises like Covid-19, there are few, if any, clear guides on how entrepreneurs should react as managers, leaders or even as fellow human beings. Entrepreneurs had to devise novel ways to address the changing nature of the crisis, which in turn depended on their own ability and willingness to navigate the tension between deploying emotional labour to help employees and sustaining their firm growth strategies through customer and investor engagement. Arguably, both approaches, no matter how opposed they may seem at times, are ultimately necessary for innovative growth-oriented firms who need to respond to new opportunities and challenges created by the pandemic, while at the same time sustaining revenue generation, profitability and cash reserves.

Our study identifies the concepts of emotional labour and crisis leadership as critical to understanding how entrepreneurs react to a protracted crisis. This provides a new theoretical lens for understanding how fast-growing businesses respond to crisis, showing that founders do not necessarily implement strategic business responses to crisis. Instead, entrepreneurs must balance emotional support for employees with the strategic choices required to preserve the company during periods of crisis. This extends theory which has not previously considered the role of emotional labour in the entrepreneurship process, particularly amongst those firms which are already experiencing significant change as they grow and scale. This also has implications for entrepreneurial firms who are not facing a crisis. As firms grow over time, the balance between strategic choices and emotional support will become more important, particularly as firms encounter points of major change such as growth 'triggers' (Brown, Mawson, and Henry 2013; Sternad and Mödritscher 2022) which cause disequilibrium. Our study thus has implications for those firms who are growing and recruiting new staff to support the scaling of organizational activity, but also for those entrepreneurial ventures that are looking to sustain current activity by supporting and retaining their employees.

6. Conclusion

Existing research on entrepreneurial resilience has largely focused on the economic strategies entrepreneurs use to maintain their economic stability during a sudden shock, including the tactics entrepreneurs use to preserve cash flow and reduce their losses from either a sudden shock such as a natural disaster, or a more protracted crisis such as a conflict or financial downturn. With few exceptions, entrepreneurial resilience and crisis research has largely ignored the emotional aspects of a shock from both the perspective of the entrepreneur as well as their wider organization. This leaves a large gap in our understanding of how entrepreneurs experience a crisis, as well as how they respond to one. This gap is problematic, particularly given that the frequency and severity of shocks and crises are likely to increase in the future. From these findings, our paper makes three contributions to the study of entrepreneurial resilience during a crisis and to humanistic perspectives of entrepreneurship in general.

First, we identified the centrality of emotional labour in the entrepreneurship process. While existing work has focused on the entrepreneurs' own emotions, we show that emotions within the entire organization matter for how entrepreneurial firms respond to crises. Feelings of uncertainty and fear amongst workers led to entrepreneurs both engaging in emotional labour and taking on new identities as 'carers' linked to employee well-being, which in turn shaped their crisis response strategies. This changing identity reflected the feelings of responsibility that most entrepreneurs felt for the welfare of their employees.

Second, we identified entrepreneurs' emotional labour as a salient resilience leadership strategy that helped preserve the mental and physical wellbeing of their workers. This work constituted a substantial emotional burden on entrepreneurs at a time when they themselves faced significant disruption, uncertainty and personal emotional turbulence which affected their own wellbeing. The lens of emotional labour helps to provide a broader perspective of the entrepreneur's role within their organization: they do not just direct their employees, but also actively work to manage workers' emotions, suppressing feelings of fear and isolation while cultivating feelings of comradeship and passion for the firm. Surprisingly, such actions are rarely noted in the entrepreneurship literature, yet in this study they emerged as a key attribute of resilience. Integrating notions of emotional labour into our understanding of entrepreneurial resilience and leadership provides a new dimension to how entrepreneurs react to crisis. In addition to economic practices such as cutting costs or entering new markets, we also need to be aware of how entrepreneurs' emotional ties within the organization enable some resilience strategies, such as personal interventions, to ensure employee productivity, while constraining others such as mass layoffs.

Third, our findings have demonstrated that entrepreneurs are becoming more aware of their choices when tackling challenges involving emotional well-being. This extends beyond a pandemic or crisis to how an entrepreneur's self-identity affects their emotional labour within their organization. The intrinsic risk-taking nature of the entrepreneurs we studied has, in some ways, been tempered by their experiences of managing their activities throughout the pandemic. Given their efforts to support employees and their experiences of employing emotional labour during the pandemic, the entrepreneurs studied are now largely showing more empathy and understanding towards employee-related issues in their firms, including performance or conflict management. This has meant they are more able to adjust their practices and strategies accordingly. Developing their understanding of the employer-employee relationship dynamics and social contract, for instance, has ultimately allowed these entrepreneurs to better manage future organizational difficulties which has implications for future crises and periods of change.

Nevertheless, these contributions should be considered in the light of the paper's limitations. We do not measure firm outcomes, so we cannot determine if such humanistic approaches to resilience are superior to strategic approaches in terms of financial firm performance. Nor did we compare entrepreneurs to corporate managers to see if the former felt stronger social bonds to their employees. Rather, through an exploratory qualitative investigation, we highlight the crucial importance of emotion and emotional labour in the construction of organizational resilience in the face of a profound societal crisis. Further research is necessary to examine the long-term impacts of emotional labour on entrepreneurs and their firms, specifically whether significant emotional labour on the part of entrepreneurs is associated with better business outcomes or if it contributes to entrepreneurial burnout after the crisis is resolved. Future work might also look at gender or age-based distinctions to understand how entrepreneurs use emotional labour and if this helps or hinders growth during and outside of crisis situations.

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ORCID

Kautsar Ramli  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5831-1440>
 Ben Spigel  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2634-6021>
 Suzanne Mawson  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1983-514X>
 Sarah Jack  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9459-6455>

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Appendix A: Individual respondent demographics

Respondent	Interview Codes ¹	Age	Region	Firm Sector	Firm Age	Number of Employees ²	Annual Revenue (£ million) ³
Founder 1	001, 041	29	Edinburgh	Digital	5	4	0.25
Founder 2	002, 049, 110, 152, 207	45	Edinburgh	Digital	4	13	1.2
Founder 3	003, 137	44	London	Green	6	19	0.13
Founder 4	005, 091, 156	32	London	Green	4	2	0.05
Founder 5	006, 055, 129, 172, 208	38	London	Digital	4	78	25
Founder 6	007, 089	37	London	Green	5	30	4.2
Founder 7	008, 052, 106, 155, 195	40	London	Digital	3	9	1.5
Founder 8	009, 050, 092, 138, 174, 194, 209	78	Cardiff	Digital	5	23	2.2
Founder 9	010, 071	39	Edinburgh	Digital	8	8	0.87
Founder 10	011, 139	55	London	Green	5	50	3.3
Founder 11	015, 061, 171	55	London	Digital	12	25	9.0
Founder 12	017, 056, 169	53	Glasgow	Digital	8	10	0.3
Founder 13	019, 102	29	Leeds	Business Services	6	9	0.67
Founder 14	020, 099, 154	34	London	Green	9	10	1.1
Founder 15	022, 088, 202	57	London	Green	4	14	Pre-revenue
Founder 16	023, 118, 173	41	Leeds	Business Services	8	55	4.8
Founder 17	024, 057, 093, 143, 168, 196	30	Cardiff	Digital	5	6	0.71
Founder 18	025, 058, 116, 147, 179, 199	30s	Cardiff	Digital	6	6	1.7
Founder 19	026, 081, 146	42	London	Digital	5	2	0.7
Founder 20	027, 100	49	Leeds	Digital	7	23	1.0
Founder 21	028, 076, 163	62	Glasgow	Green	12	62	11.0
Founder 22	029, 086, 150, 192	26	Belfast	Digital	1	4	0.3
Founder 23	030, 068, 104, 144, 176, 201	33	Cardiff	Digital	6	14	1.3
Founder 24	033, 095, 151	36	Belfast	Digital	2	3	0.35
Founder 25	037, 073, 145	50s	Lancaster	Digital	5	20	0.6
Founder 26	038, 065, 108	50s	Lancaster	Digital	8	27	4.3
Founder 27	039, 067	40s	Lancaster	Digital	8	14	N/A
Founder 28	042, 128	20s	Borders	Advanced Manufacturing	1	2	Pre-revenue
Founder 29	043, 126	40s	Borders	Advanced Manufacturing	5	1	0.1
Founder 30	045, 134	30s	Borders	Advanced Manufacturing	4	1	0.05
Founder 31	046, 136	30s	Borders	Green	3	12	Pre-revenue
Founder 32	048, 121	50s	Borders	Green	11	12	1.2
Founder 33	053, 101, 149	49	Edinburgh	Digital	3	14	0.5
Founder 34	054, 109, 160	56	Belfast	Digital	6	30	2.6
Founder 35	059, 119, 167, 205	56	Belfast	Digital	3	8	0.38
Founder 36	060, 113, 159	52	Edinburgh	Digital	9	5	0.5
Founder 37	062, 122, 200	31	London	Digital	4	8	1.7
Founder 38	063, 120, 178	41	Edinburgh	Digital	10	46	4.1
Founder 39	064, 124, 177, 206	39	London	Advanced Manufacturing	6	11	2.3
Founder 40	066, 125	41	Edinburgh	Green	4	4	0.47
Founder 41	069, 123, 158, 198	44	Edinburgh	Business Services	10	15	2.0

(Continued)

(Continued).

Respondent	Interview Codes ¹	Age	Region	Firm Sector	Firm Age	Number of Employees ²	Annual Revenue (£ million) ³
Founder 42	072, 131, 180	37	London	Digital	2	22	2.3
Founder 43	077, 133	47	Edinburgh	Business Services	2	13	0.5
Founder 44	078, 132, 181	59	Belfast	Digital	6	22	5.0
Founder 45	079, 127, 175	58	Edinburgh	Advanced Manufacturing	8	8	7.2
Founder 46	080, 130	40	Edinburgh	Digital	4	24	10.5
Founder 47	083, 140	45	Leeds	Advanced Manufacturing	4	65	23.4
Founder 48	084, 148	42	Leeds	Business Services	5	3	0.09
Founder 49	085, 164	43	Glasgow	Business Services	16	62	5.2
Founder 50	094, 161	48	Leeds	Business Services	3	1	Pre-revenue
Founder 51	096, 135, 165, 193, 203	30	Cardiff	Digital	5	55	2.8
Founder 52	097, 153, 197	48	Cardiff	Advanced Manufacturing	4	16	0.9
Founder 53	107, 170	48	Glasgow	Business Services	8	32	3.5
Founder 54	111, 162	35	Leeds	Business Services	1	3	Pre-revenue
Founder 55	114, 157	46	Glasgow	Digital	3	30	2
Founder 56	117, 166, 204	33	Glasgow	Business Services	7	5	Information refused
Founder 57	141, 142, 182	30s	Edinburgh	Digital	4	6	Pre-revenue

1. Interview numbers refer to the full dataset

2. Number of employees are based on self-reported data by respondents during the interview or the latest updates on firms' LinkedIn page

3. Firm revenue estimates are collated through either self-reported data or usage of online databases such as Crunchbase, Dealroom.co, and Apollo.io; whichever is latest.