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PURPOSE OVER PRESSURE: RETHINKING ENTREPRENEURIAL SUCCESS AND MENTAL HEALTH THROUGH IKIGAI

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Abstract:

Entrepreneurial discourse has traditionally been dominated by performance-driven metrics such as profit, growth, and scalability, often at the expense of entrepreneurs' psychological health and sense of purpose. While research on entrepreneurial well-being has gained traction, there remains a lack of integrative frameworks that explicitly connect personal fulfilment with sustainable entrepreneurial success. This conceptual paper addresses this gap by proposing the Japanese philosophy of Ikigai as a theoretical lens for rethinking entrepreneurial motivation and outcomes. Drawing on positive psychology, Eastern philosophy, and entrepreneurship studies, the paper advances a model that situates entrepreneurial success at the intersection of passion, competence, social contribution, and financial viability. By reframing success through Ikigai, the paper contributes to the discourse on entrepreneurial resilience and well-being, offering a holistic pathway toward sustainable and human-centred entrepreneurship.

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Keyword:

Entrepreneur's Mental Health, Entrepreneurial Success, Ikigai,
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Introduction

Entrepreneurship is widely lauded for its contributions to economic development, innovation, and personal freedom. However, it is also associated with high levels of stress, burnout, and mental health challenges (Ovharhe & Chukwuemeka, 2023). According to Yu, Sun, Foo, Zhang and Li (2025), entrepreneurs often operate in high-pressure environments characterized by financial uncertainty, long working hours, and social isolation. These factors contribute to elevated levels of stress, anxiety, and depression among entrepreneurs. A study by Stephen (2018) highlights that the unique challenges faced by entrepreneurs can harm their mental health and well-being. The dichotomy raises the question: Can success be redefined to include well-being, purpose, and personal fulfilment? The constant hustle culture and the stigma associated with discussing mental health issues further exacerbate these problems. Recent studies highlight alarming trends in mental health among entrepreneurs, with disproportionately high rates of anxiety, depression, and burnout. This paper explores the intersection of mental health and entrepreneurial success through the lens of Ikigai, a Japanese concept referring to one's reason for being.

Literature Review

Entrepreneurial Success and Mental Health

Previous studies showed that nearly 49% of entrepreneurs report having a mental health condition, with depression and anxiety being the most common (Cubbon et al, 2021). The entrepreneurial journey, filled with ups and downs, rejections, and failures, often demands emotional resilience and psychological strength. However, the current entrepreneurial ecosystem rarely provides sufficient mental health resources or coping mechanisms. A study by Mohamad et. al (2024), found that self-efficacy and alertness were significant to the success of women entrepreneurs in Malaysia. Self-efficacy is the belief in one's capabilities to organize and execute actions required to manage prospective situations which plays a crucial role in maintaining psychological resilience and mental well-being (Bandura, 1997). Self-efficacy is also a significant predictor of success for entrepreneurs.

Psychological research suggests that individuals with a strong sense of purpose are also more resilient to stress, exhibit better coping strategies, and report higher life satisfaction. Addressing the mental health needs of entrepreneurs is therefore crucial for their well-being and the

sustainability of their ventures. Mental health support should be integrated into entrepreneurial ecosystems to prevent long-term psychological distress. Successful entrepreneurs, in turn, can inspire others by identifying the key elements and aspects related to their success, including the balance between achievement and mental well-being. Bahsri, Yazid, Makhbul and Omar, (2023) conclude that supporting entrepreneurs' mental health through work-life integration, stress management, and value-driven practices is essential for long-term business performance. It underscores the need to embed well-being and mental health strategies into Malaysia's entrepreneurial ecosystem to prevent burnout and enhance productivity.

Ikigai as a Conceptual Framework in Entrepreneurial Success

Origins and Philosophy

Ikigai translates loosely to "reason for being." Rooted in Japanese culture, it emphasizes harmony, meaning, and balance in life. Unlike Western goal-oriented models, Ikigai encourages continuous self-reflection and integration of multiple life dimensions. This concept encourages individuals to pursue activities that align with their passions, skills, societal contributions, and financial viability. Unlike Western notions of success that often prioritize external achievements, Ikigai focuses on internal fulfilment and balance. Historically, Ikigai has been linked with longevity and happiness in Japanese culture.

Ikigai in Entrepreneurial Success

Sartore, Buisine, Ocnareescu and Joly (2023) propose an integrated cognitive-motivational model of Ikigai, emphasizing its relevance in professional contexts and its potential to enhance well-being and performance. The Ikigai framework provides a multidimensional understanding of purpose, combining personal satisfaction with social contribution and economic relevance. It offers a holistic perspective that counters the narrow, profit-centric approach common in traditional entrepreneurship.

Studies on the Okinawan population among the longest-living people globally which attribute part of their longevity to a strong sense of Ikigai. In this context, Ikigai serves as both a philosophical guide and a practical tool for entrepreneurs seeking purpose-driven success. Mahad, Ab Razak and Aziz (2024) reveal that individuals with a clear sense of Ikigai are more motivated, self-efficacious, and persistent in pursuing entrepreneurial goals. The alignment between personal values, skills, and perceived opportunities enhances their ability to recognize and act upon viable ventures.

Fury (2024) emphasizes that practicing Ikigai fosters self-awareness, emotional balance, and resilience, helping individuals manage stress and maintain a sustainable sense of purpose in both personal and professional contexts. While the work is not limited to entrepreneurship, its principles offer valuable insights into achieving intrinsic motivation and holistic success in entrepreneurial life.



Figure 1: Ikigai Venn Diagram

Source: Venn Diagram: Ikigai

The Four Dimensions of Ikigai

- ***What you love (Passion)***

This dimension represents the activities and pursuits that evoke joy, enthusiasm, and intrinsic motivation. When entrepreneurs engage in ventures aligned with what they love, they experience higher engagement, creativity, and resilience. Passion sustains entrepreneurs through uncertainty and challenges, transforming work into a fulfilling endeavour rather than a source of burnout.

- ***What are you good at (Profession)***

This element emphasizes competence and mastery application of one's skills and strengths to create value. For entrepreneurs, identifying their professional strengths enhances confidence and credibility, contributing to both personal fulfilment and business success. When entrepreneurs work within their areas of expertise, they are more likely to experience flow a psychological state of deep focus and satisfaction.

- ***What the world needs (Mission)***

This dimension reflects a sense of purpose and contribution to others. Entrepreneurs motivated by societal needs rather than solely profit often report greater psychological well-being and life satisfaction. This mission-oriented perspective connects personal values with community impact, fostering both ethical and emotional fulfilment.

- ***What can you be paid for (Vocation)***

The final dimension emphasizes economic sustainability that transforms purpose and skill into a viable livelihood. For entrepreneurs, this means ensuring that their venture not only aligns with their passions but also meets market demand. Financial stability reinforces mental well-being, allowing founders to sustain their mission without chronic stress or burnout.

The intersection of these four elements produces a sense of purpose that is both personally satisfying and socially valuable. Raessi (2021) concludes that applying Ikigai principles enables entrepreneurs to remain purpose-driven and mentally resilient, fostering both personal well-being and long-term business success.

Integrating Ikigai into Entrepreneurial Practice

Rethinking Motivation

Entrepreneurs often start businesses driven by passion or market opportunity but may lose touch with personal meaning over time. An Ikigai-informed approach encourages continuous alignment between individual values and business objectives, fostering intrinsic motivation and purpose-driven entrepreneurship (Mahad, Ab Razak & Aziz, 2024). This sense of purpose has been shown to enhance entrepreneurial intention and perseverance, which are vital for sustainable business success in the Malaysian context.

Sustainable Work-Life Integration

Instead of striving for a strict work-life balance, which implies separation, Ikigai promotes holistic integration between personal meaning and professional goals. Entrepreneurs who live their Ikigai are more likely to experience flow, intrinsic motivation, and resilience, thereby reducing susceptibility to burnout (Bahsri, Yazid, Makhbul & Omar, 2023). Research on Malaysian SMEs also highlights that mental well-being and a sense of fulfilment are key determinants of entrepreneurial sustainability and long-term productivity.

Decision-Making and Strategy

Ikigai can serve as a compass in strategic decision-making, helping entrepreneurs evaluate opportunities not only for-profit potential but also for alignment with personal values and long-term satisfaction. When entrepreneurs find meaning in their work, they demonstrate improved psychological well-being, clearer strategic focus, and better resilience during uncertainty (Baldacchino & Sassetti, 2025). This integration of personal purpose and strategic vision contributes to both mental health stability and business growth.

Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy acts as a psychological buffer for those who believe they can control outcomes are less likely to experience depression, anxiety, or entrepreneurial fatigue. When combined with a sense of Ikigai (purpose), self-efficacy reinforces personal meaning and life satisfaction, promoting holistic well-being. Within the Purpose Over Pressure framework, self-efficacy can mediate the relationship between Ikigai (sense of purpose) and mental health outcomes. When entrepreneurs align their passion, profession, mission, and vocation, they naturally build self-confidence in pursuing meaningful goals, boosting self-efficacy and reducing psychological distress (Neck, Neck & Murray, 2023).

Family Support

Family support typically refers to the emotional, instrumental (practical help), informational, and sometimes financial assistance provided by family members (parents, spouse/partner,

siblings) to an individual (whether in career, business, or life contexts). For entrepreneurs, family support can include encouragement, belief in the venture, direct task-help, financial backing, or simply providing a stable home environment. For example, one study defines family support in an entrepreneurial context as „the availability of familial resources (emotional/instrumental) and perceptions of trustworthy support from family members (Welsh, Botero, Kaciak & Kopaničová , 2021).

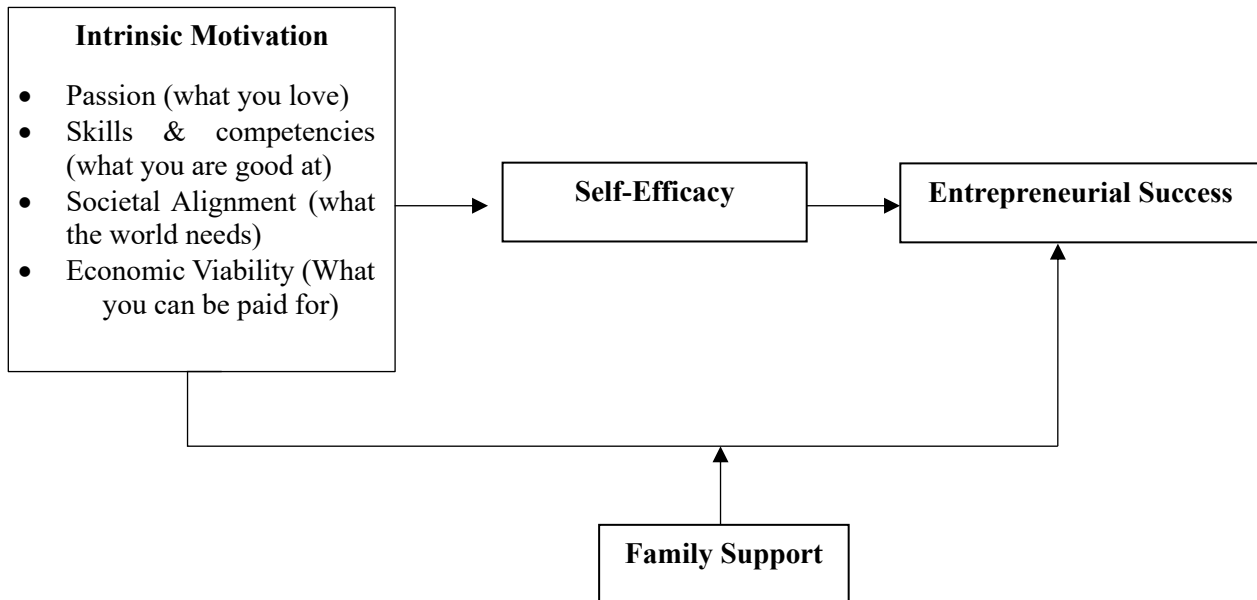


Figure 2: Proposed framework of Purpose Over Pressure: Rethinking Entrepreneurial Success and Mental Health Through Ikigai

Methodology

This paper adopts a conceptual research methodology to synthesize existing literature on entrepreneurship, mental health, and Ikigai. The approach involves a systematic review of scholarly sources of relevant theoretical perspectives such as Ikigai and well-being frameworks, and the integration of these insights into a conceptual framework aimed at redefining entrepreneurial success. In social science research, conceptual studies play an important role in developing theoretical understanding by integrating and critically evaluating existing knowledge (Saunders & Darabi, 2024). Accordingly, this study does not involve primary empirical data collection but proposes a conceptual model to guide future empirical investigations on Ikigai and the relationship with entrepreneurship. Future research may apply qualitative and quantitative methods, including interviews, surveys, and case studies, to empirically examine and refine the proposed framework across diverse entrepreneurial contexts.

Implications

Entrepreneurs aligned with their Ikigai report higher levels of life satisfaction, emotional stability, and psychological well-being. This alignment acts as a buffer against the volatility and uncertainty inherent in entrepreneurial ventures, which enhances psychological resilience. Besides that, by legitimizing mental health and personal fulfilment as components of

entrepreneurial success, the Ikigai model helps destigmatise vulnerability and encourages a more compassionate culture within entrepreneurial ecosystems in other words, it reduces stigma and broadens success metrics. This paper proposes a shift from linear, growth-centric success models to circular, meaning-driven models informed by Ikigai. The new model acknowledges mental health as a key performance indicator, purpose as a driver of long-term sustainability and the entrepreneur as a whole person, not just an economic agent.

Conclusion

Entrepreneurship should embrace a more human-centred approach where education includes self-reflection, values, and mental wellness, guided by the Ikigai concept for meaningful innovation. Incubators and accelerators can integrate Ikigai-based mentoring and broaden success metrics to cover personal growth, purpose, and well-being, not just financial milestones. Likewise, governments and institutions can support this shift by funding mental health initiatives and recognizing holistic measures of success in entrepreneurial policies, awards, and grants.

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