International Journal of Science and Research (IJSR)
ISSN: 2319-7064
Impact Factor 2025: 7.089

Managing Growth Under Resource Constraints: A Qualitative Study of Growth Narratives in Indian Consumer Startups

Samarth Arora

Independent Researcher
Email: *arorasamarth2026[at]gmail.com*

Abstract: ***In a hurried market, consumer startups in India work in a market that's fast-growing yet fickle in funding and puts undue pressure on them to scale [1]. Growth narratives are generally cast in terms of capital influx and market gain, but for many startups, the ability to expand is tied tightly to resource constraints. These include financial resource restraints, operational resource restraints, and capability resource restraints [2]. The following paper will explore the manner in which the founders of Indian consumer startups construct and mobilise growth narratives in negotiation with constraints. Taking a qualitative case narrative approach, the study is guided by the online availability of in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted with founders and senior executives juxtaposed against archival data from media transcripts, investor correspondence, and company reports. The results show that growth under conditions of constraint is more than just a strategic reaction, but can be interpreted as an identity-related and interpretative process. Entrepreneurs describe constraints as discipline devices, justifying the apparatus of legitimacy and sparks for innovation. Two separate internal and external growth stories are told, revealing tensions around sustainable scaling versus investor demands. These are the narratives that inform strategic adjustments, resource distribution and organisational identity. In addition to it, the research adds to entrepreneurship theory by framing growth as narrated growth - a product of resource constraints - rather than just economic outcomes. From a practical perspective, the results provide implications for founders and investors who are focused on sustainable growth routes in emerging market environments.***

Keywords: Indian consumer startups, resource constraints, growth narratives, qualitative narrative analysis, emerging markets

1. Introduction

A. The Indian Consumer Startup Context

Consumer-focused startups have seen an explosion in India over the last decade across the D2C space, fintech, edtech, food-tech, health-tech and digital retail, among others. Fueled by the swift adoption of smartphones, inexpensive internet access, digital payments infrastructure, as well as a consumption-happy millennial population, these firms have turned upside down the way Indian consumers browse, evaluate and buy goods from brick-and-mortar shops [1][3]. D2C brands have taken on incumbent FMCG giants via digital marketing and community-led positioning [4], Fintech startups have reinvented credit, payments and wealth management [5], Edtech and food-tech companies have improved everyday consumption experiences [6] [7]. The ecosystem has evolved from experimentation to scale, placing the Indian consumer startups at the cusp of global investor attention.

This growth, however, has not been linear. The market environment has seen sharp boom–correction cycles - like those that led to the global financial crisis. Entrepreneurs raised and burned a record amount of venture capital between 2018 and 2021, fueling customer acquisition land grabs and valuation-based growth narratives [8]. Startups were urged to "blitzscale" and focus on market share and aggressively ramp up across new geographies [9]. But the subsequent deceleration of funding revealed a series of structural weaknesses: high burn rates, weak unit economics and too much spending. With capital becoming more discriminating, founders had no choice but to adjust their growth strategies towards profitability, efficiency and operational discipline [9].

Amid a rapidly evolving environment, the desire to scale quickly is still rampant. Moreover, the competitive environment, first-mover effects, and investors' expectations all foster an environment in which legitimacy is strongly associated with growth [1]. For many founders, scale is not only an operational goal but a symbolic one too. Revenue targets, rounds of funding, user numbers and press coverage start to define value [10]. As a result, even startups that are resource-starved find themselves in an environment that glamorises rapid expansion and thus a complicated and sometimes conflicting growth imperative occurs [1].

B. The Tension

At the core of that ecosystem is a fundamental tension: resource constraint and ambitious growth predictions. Although VC-backed companies might occasionally live in a capital-rich world, many consumer startups continue to live under perpetual constraints on financial, human and product resources [11]. However, shoestring marketing budgets, lack of management depth, supply chain inefficiencies and the presence of institutional voids stand in the way [12]. Even well-financed companies face capability constraints, gaps in execution expertise, operational systems or market knowledge, that limit their ability to scale effectively over time [13].

At the same time, investors, media stories and competitive dynamics drive expectations for rapid scale [1][10]. Founders are incentivised to chase geographic expansion, hire fast, diversify products and aggressively acquire customers [10]. The outcome is an existential conundrum:

whether to prioritise survival and incremental growth or pursue hyper-growth to secure market dominance. This conflict is further exacerbated by the difference between profit and valuation. During capital-abundant epochs, valuation metrics tend to dominate unit economics - propagation at the expense of short-term rational economic behaviour [9]. In funding-led corrections, the lean on profitability and prudent capital deployment begins abruptly.

For entrepreneurs, these competing demands create both strategic confusion and data interpretation problems. With hiring, marketing spend, product development and fundraising decisions, they are often part of broader narratives about what responsible, visionary or resilient entrepreneurship looks like [14]. Growth options become inseparable from identity: how founders see themselves and how they want to be seen by stakeholders [10]. For this reason, growing under constraint is not only a technical or financial problem; it is also a cognitive and narrative process where founders reconcile ambition with limitation.

C. Research Gap

Research on firm growth has generally focused on quantitative indications, lifecycle models and scaling processes. Research commonly seeks to explain growth outcomes by focusing on the evolution of revenues, funding rounds, market expansion, and performance outcomes. Although these methods highlight the structural factors influencing expansion, they have a proclivity toward treating growth as an empirically given rather than as a socially constructed and interpreted process.

Parallel lines of development on resource constraints in the entrepreneurship literature include concepts like bricolage, effectuation and bootstrapping. These views remind us that entrepreneurs distinctively combine scarce resources in new ways and take advantage of contingencies to create ventures under conditions of scarcity. Yet many of these studies focus on behavioural strategies and resource mobilisation tactics, with relatively less consideration for how founders make sense, narrate and justify their growth decisions over time.

Due to this, there is little knowledge about how founders in an emerging market context make sense of environments with slow growth. We have quite a limited understanding of how discourses about growth are anchored in organisations, how founders handle contradicting stakeholder expectations or even how identity affects scaling paths. This gap assumes particular significance in the domain of consumer startups in India, where volatility, institutional complexity and funding cycles combine to create challenges. The qualitative, narrative approach sheds light on the nature of how growth is felt, articulated and strategically deployed under constraint.

D. Research Questions

To address this gap, this study asks: How do Indian entrepreneur-founders in consumer startups develop and deploy narratives of growth while operating under resource constraints? This overarching question is addressed through three related sub-questions: 1) How do resource constraints influence strategic decision-making in consumer startups? How does the growth narrative change inside a company (such as within team communication) and outside of it (to investors, media, customers)? How does the founder's identity affect the framing and pursuit of growth options? Through focusing on how the narratives were built and made sense, we aim to reimagine growth as not only an economic achievement but a continuing interpretative process sensitive to constraints, context and identity.

2. Literature Review

Theoretically, this study connects four related streams of research: the dynamic nature of firm growth, entrepreneurship under conditions of resource constraints, narrative and sensemaking approaches, and institutional features of emerging economies. Rather than seeing these literatures as separate domains, the study views them as complementary perspectives that all shed light on how growth is performed, understood and strategically mobilized in times of scarcity.

A. Growth as Process, Not Outcome

According to classical explanations in the theory of the growth of firms, growth is seen as something other than a mere increase in size, rather as an internally generated process which depends on the capabilities possessed not necessarily by the organisation itself but by those who take part in it. Penrose's (1959) influential work views growth as limited and facilitated by managerial assets. Firms grow when management has surplus capacity to put underutilised resources to work [15]. Crucially, Penrose characterises growth as endogenously determined and path dependent: it takes on the form that reflects the history, knowledge base and coordination abilities of the firm. Growth in this perspective is not mechanistic, but depends on the development of managerial cognitions and organisational learning over time [16].

Based on this processual understanding, Greiner's model of growth in organisations suggests that the firm moves through different stages with alternating periods of evolution and crisis. Every cycle of growth creates a new set of managerial and structural tensions, all demanding that leadership styles, coordination mechanisms, and control systems be adjusted accordingly. Growth, therefore, brings about qualitative changes of organisational form, and not a linear growth vector [17].

Recent narratives, notably in the venture capital space, have popularised the idea of “blitzscaling” - a strategy that values speed while sacrificing efficiency to grab the market share under uncertain conditions. Although blitzscaling has been valorised in technology-driven contexts, it has been critiqued for normalising high burn rates and fragile unit economics as well as an unsustainable gestalt of growth [18]. Critics maintain that these logics mask the structural vulnerabilities faced by firms in capital-scarce settings and underestimate the risks of over-reaching. In the developing economies characterised by greater institutional volatility and infrastructural bottlenecks, rapid scaling up can increase operational fragility rather than benefit from competitive advantages [19].

Taken together, these views imply that growth should be considered as a time-based process mediated through capabilities, which is modulated by internal and external

Paper ID: SR26308230828 DOI: https://dx.doi.org/10.21275/SR26308230828

limitations. But far too much of the literature is still assessing growth in terms of these measurable results - revenue, valuation, market share [17] - when it should be studying how founders understand and rationalise paths to growth. A processual approach encourages investigation of managerial sensemaking and strategic framing, especially when growth is pursued in conditions of scarcity.

B. Resource Constraints in Entrepreneurship

Resource constraints have long been recognised in the entrepreneurship literature as a vital issue for venture formation and growth [2] [20]. Firms are bundles of heterogeneous resources, according to the resource-based view (RBV) and sustained competitive advantage is developed when resources that are valuable, rare, inimitable and non-substitutable come together. Although RBV emphasises internal capabilities, it tacitly implies that firms are able to develop and apply resources in a strategic way over time. Resource constraints are, however, a defining condition of early-stage ventures rather than a temporary one [21].

In response to these realities, scholars have developed counter-narratives. Bricolage theory also highlights how entrepreneurs “make do” by recombining existing resources in response to new problems. Instead of striving for the most efficient resource configuration, entrepreneurs improvise a solution to a problem by exploiting available means/resources creatively. As the lens of bricolage recasts constraint as generative rather than merely restricting, it illustrates the ability of resource-scarce firms to be adaptive [22].

Effectuation theory, in a similar manner, disputes predictive planning models, as it has an emphasis on means-driven action. Entrepreneurs start with who they are, what they know, and whom they know to iteratively craft opportunities through stakeholder commitments. When you have no data, a cheap loss is more important than expected gain and flexibility matters more than complex planning [23]. This view highlights how risk is managed through ‘constrained action’ and co-generation of opportunities with partners.

These viewpoints are supported by bootstrapping research, which reports mechanisms founders can use to reduce reliance on external funds. Customer advances, financing strategies, slender staffing and strategic alliances are the tactics ventures use to stay in control while manoeuvring through liquidity troubles. Bootstrapping and financial discipline are also terms frequently associated with disciplined scaling. Bootstrapping is generally linked to fiscal responsibility and operating with discipline [24] [25].

Although they clarify how entrepreneurs act in response to scarcity, these frameworks do not give adequate emphasis to the interpretive aspect of constraint. How the founders perceive, frame, and express resource constraints may drive strategic choices as much as do the constraints themselves. Resource deprivation is both a material reality and a socially constructed story which shapes the expectations of stakeholders as well as the culture of organisations.

C. Narratives in Entrepreneurship

Narrative and sensemaking frameworks provide a useful complement to interpretations of entrepreneurial action. The theory of sensemaking formulated by Weick views organisations as systems where actors make sense of events in a retrospective manner, to create plausible interpretations for action [26]. In the messy, uncertain business environments, narratives bring cognitive order - helping decision-makers make sense of which choices to make and how to get people on board. Decisions about growth, especially when the decision is constrained, probably occur as part of such interpretive processes.

Entrepreneurial identity formation extends this logic even more subtly. Founders don’t just allocate resources; they enact identities - visionary disrupter, disciplined executor, resilient survivor - that affect strategic orientation [27]. The identity considerations are important in relation to risk appetite, opportunity framing and stakeholder engagement [28]. Because as entrepreneurs categorise themselves and their ventures, they simultaneously define acceptable growth trajectories.

Storytelling is especially relevant in the realm of fundraising and stakeholder communication. Investor pitches, media interviews, and even internal town halls become stages to cast growth as inevitable, disciplined, mission-driven or transformative. Strategic framing helps founders to bring together diverse audiences behind a common narrative for how well the company is doing and where it’s headed [29]. For example, a leisurely expansion can be spun as “capital efficiency,” whereas going bigger faster can be the result of “market leadership.” These are not merely rhetorical stories; they help to form expectations, resource flows, and organisational morale.

Notwithstanding increased acknowledgement of narrative dynamics in entrepreneurship, empirical work tends to focus on opportunity recognition or venture legitimacy rather than constraint-bound growth. There is still relatively little understanding of how growth narratives change over funding cycles, market shocks or capacity constraints. Especially in dense systems, narrative making may be strategic in itself.

D. The Emerging Market Context

Meanwhile, the infrastructure in emerging markets complicates proceedings even further. Institutional voids such as deficiencies in the rule of law, intermediaries, infrastructure, and enforcement capacity render the startups’ operations uncertain [17] [12]. Even if the demand is there, supply chain disruption and inconsistent availability of skilled workers can limit expansion. These structural conditions determine the possibility and risk level of growth models [13].

Capital cycles further intensify volatility. Booms in venture capital funding spur experimentation and growth, while downturns precipitate retrenchment and a return to the focus on profitability [9]. Start-up entrepreneurs must surf the wave of investor sentiment, constantly adjusting the stories they tell to match new beliefs [10]. Private and fast-growing companies can fall in and out of favour, as growth strategies are embraced during funding booms, then criticised during downturns [9].

Paper ID: SR26308230828 DOI: https://dx.doi.org/10.21275/SR26308230828

Lack of trust barriers for consumers are equally important in emerging markets. Scepticism of new digital models could slow adoption in areas like fintech, edtech, and health-tech [3] [5] [6] [9]. Fostering trust involves continued interaction, trustworthy signals and reputation management - all of which take time and resources. As a result, scaling paths may look very different from those in better-institutionalised settings [1] [30].

These contextual dynamics imply that growth constrained in emerging markets is not a "scaled-down" analogue of developed market expansion. It also means navigating institutional ambiguity, variable availability of capital and changing consumer expectations. However, most of the conventional growth literature is grounded in Western, capital-prosperous environments, making it less relevant to its context.

E. Research Gap

While these lines have provided useful perspectives into growth processes, resource limitations, and entrepreneurial stories, these strands of the literature are not yet fully brought together. Growth studies have focused on performance as a measurable outcome, and the structural models, constraint-oriented research has brought forward adaptation strategising, and narrative scholarship has explored sensemaking and legitimacy-creation. Missing are more qualitative, narrative-based engagements with the manner in which growth under constraint is lived, interpreted and strategically crafted by entrepreneurs situated within emerging market environments.

In particular, we know little about how founders reconcile survival imperatives with hyper-growth demands, the divergence between growth narratives internal to firms and those imposed from the outside, or the extent to which identity mediates strategic actors' choices under conditions of scarcity. This is particularly pertinent in the case of Indian consumer startups, where there are layers of institutions and their accompanying capital flows. By taking a narrative qualitative approach, we aim to connect these literatures and reveal growth to be constructed socially as constrained by context and identity.

3. Methodology

A. Research Design

The study employs a qualitative multiple case narrative design to explore how the notions of growth under resource constraints are constructed and "mobilised" in Indian consumer start-ups. The aim is not to 'measure' growth outcomes, but to ascertain how the entrepreneurs make sense of constraint; frame expansion and reconcile strategic choices with emerging identity claims. For that reason, the study is located in an interpretive epistemology in which growth is not seen as a quantifiable variable but rather as social and narratively mediated.

The study chooses a case-based design as it allows contextual depth and temporal tracing of trajectories of growth across funding rounds. Narrative inquiry is the lens used for analysis: it permits the study to consider how founders narrate episodes that are crucial in their venture's evolution, as well as are able to embed these episodes into compelling stories of growth (early bootstrap, transition towards a fundraising strategy, operational crisis, decisions about scaling). The design is imbued with theory-building character, looking to advance a current comprehension of bricolage and growth with the help of identity and narrative framing.

B. Case Selection and Empirical Strategy

The study integrates two analytically theorised case stories, Mamaearth and Lenskart, which are complemented by insights from other Indian consumer startups to achieve cross-case comparison. The study chooses to focus on these two cases because they epitomise disparate yet instructive trajectories of growth in the same ecosystem. Both are consumer-facing businesses that have moved through funding rounds and outline very different approaches to growth, so they make for a good research base.

Mamaearth, the digitally native D2C brand that had moved from bootstrap to institutional capital and IPO provides a window into how growth narratives pivot across stages of capital [31]. In comparison, Lenskart follows a hybrid online–offline model in an inventory-led category and can shed light on how logistics constraints influence disciplined scaling narratives [32]. Collectively, these cases provide the opportunity to investigate how constraints combine with sectoral attributes, capital structure and founder identity.

C. Data Collection

Data was exclusively gathered from publicly available secondary qualitative sources, predominantly in-depth online interviews with founders and senior leaders. These interviews, which were sourced from business media sites, podcasts, conference talks as well as through investor forums and long-form video conversations, contained deep, story-based manifestations of the companies' growth histories. Instead of being concentrated on financial KPIs, these publicly recorded conversations often touched on key moments such as early capital constraints, fundraising struggles, scaling choices, operational bottlenecks, hiring trade-offs and strategic shifts. The study focuses in particular on how founders narrated these decisions across different contexts, talking to investors, customers or a wider entrepreneurial audience, and found differences between more internally reflective discourses and the externally projected narratives of growth.

The case narratives were constructed around the archival material. For Mamaearth and Lenskart, such open sources as media interviews, IPO filings, investor presentations, press releases and conference call transcripts were sifted to map growth framing across temporal stages. These narratives allowed for the longitudinal recollection of how founders made constraint-legible in their initial bootstrapped phase, as well as during periods of rapid growth, and transition to focus on profitability and disciplined scale. Through exploring 'growth' as it was enacted across diverse instances and platforms, this research captures the calculated use of narrative to influence stakeholder views.

D. Data Analysis

Analysis proceeded in three interconnected stages aligned with the structure of the subsequent sections.

First, within-case narratives were constructed. The data were arranged in a temporal order for each focal case to follow the development of growth framing over different stages. Special attention was given to inflexion points. These include capital inflows, market shocks, IPO transitions, and how founders reframed constraints at each step of the way. This latter phase led to the dense narratives within the study.

Second, cross-case comparison was carried out according to the constant comparison method. We were looking for patterned similarities and discrepancies regarding the effect of constraint on strategic choices. For instance, constraint-prompted frugality and staged scaling in some contexts, but catalysed creative approaches to distribution or integration in others. These trends informed the thematic framework and the theoretical model constructed within this study.

Reflexivity was observed throughout the analytical process. Interpretations were continuously checked against raw transcripts and archived data in order to prevent an over-attribution of intentionality or coherence to retrospective accounts.

4. Empirical Context: The Indian Consumer Startup Ecosystem

The evolution of Indian consumer startups over the past decade provides crucial context on how growth is determined under constraint. India witnessed a massive surge in Venture Capital inflows between 2015 and 2021, led by global liquidity, rapid digital adoption and optimism in the country's large consumer base. This time period experienced the largest ever funding rounds in fintech, edtech, food-tech and direct-to-consumer (D2C) brands, too [1] [9] [3] [6] [5]. Founders were advised to stress speed, market capture and category leadership. The press was lauding unicorn valuations, aggressive customer acquisition and geographic expansion. Growth at this stage was often manifested in a race to grow toward a scale, with access to capital standing, serving as both fuel and validation [33].

In that larger funding explosion, D2C brands were an especially vibrant category. Through social media marketing, influencer collaborations and platform-centric distribution, digitally native brands disrupted established FMCG incumbents [4]. These companies positioned themselves as nimble, consumer-focused and data-driven by cutting out the traditional retailers in between. The D2C playbook lowered the initial barriers to entry for founders who wanted to test their product and build communities with little overhead [34]. But beyond early traction, scaling always seemed to depend on sinking significant venture capital into customer acquisition, logistics and brand building - bringing capital intensity back into supposedly lean models [35].

Global capital became more and more scarce, and investor sentiments became less optimistic in 2022, leading to a profound shift in the ecosystem. Funding dried up, valuation multiples contracted, and the microscope on unit economics came in closer. Venture-backed high-growth companies, that once focused on hyper growth at all costs, were now under pressure to slow down burn rates, elongate runway and show operational efficiency. Public discussion had shifted, away from cheerleading growth-at-any-cost toward priorities of sustainability, governance and profitability. In particular, IPO-bound and listed companies faced increased scrutiny of their financial performance [9] [36].

That shift represented what many observers called a "profitability turn." Founders more and more began to express beliefs in disciplined scaling, cost rationalisation, and positive contribution margins. Growth plans were reset. Hiring slowed. Marketing spending was adjusted, and operational integration became a strategic imperative [36] [37]. It is worth noting that the story on growth also shifted in parallel. Instead of thinking of growth only as it relates to valuations and user numbers, leaders started championing capital efficiency, long-term value creation, and sustainable business models [38].

At the root of these changes are changing realities in venture capital. VC investing is by nature cyclical, based on hope and expectations. Aggressive scaling is typically rewarded in times of boom, which serves to reinforce aspirational growth narratives. In recessions, the same firms might be forced to pivot toward prudence and profit. This back and forth results in narrative tension: founders are always pushing to make their growth stories a good fit for institutional investor sentiment, while making sure everything holds together internally and for their team [9] [39].

It is in this risky, yet opportunity-laden environment that cases analysed by this study find themselves. The funding boom, correction, D2C model surge and profitability turn collectively constitute the structural background against which founders construct and reconstruct growth narratives-in-restraint.

5. Qualitative Case Study Analysis

This section covers two in-depth case stories that are based on publicly available founder interviews, investor reports, media analysis and company statements. Instead of drawing out single themes, the analysis follows the framing, justification and recalibration of growth over time. Every case shows that resource constraints were more than just the operational situation, but also a narrative: an identity formation, strategic guidance and stakeholder alignment.

A. Case Study 1: Mamaearth

1) Origins: Building Against Giants:

Formed in 2016 by Varun and Ghazal Alagh, Mamaearth ventured into the hyper-competitive personal care market of India - an industry that has been controlled for decades now by multi-national FMCG incumbents with deep distribution networks and substantial advertising budgets. When it was founded, the venture did not have the structural incentives of incumbents. It was a digital native brand, bootstrapped at first, with little marketing budget and no legacy retail footprints [31].

Paper ID: SR26308230828 DOI: https://dx.doi.org/10.21275/SR26308230828

In interviews to the public, the founders of Mamaearth regularly frame the company's origin around a personal problem narrative: safe and toxin-free products for Indian parents. This origin narrative was not just anecdotal positioning; it was the brand's fundamental identity tether [40]. Looking back, the founders are fond of calling constraint a formative, not constraining, factor in the early days. Lack of funds prevented mass promotion or traditional distribution channels. Instead, growth was constructed via influencer partnerships, social media narrative creation and community-based trust. This digital-first approach enabled the company to circumvent costly retail middlemen and test potential-product-market fit directly with consumers [31].

2) Growth Under Constraint: Discipline as Identity:

In first conversations, growth is always narrated not in forms of aggressive scale, but responsible expansion. The founders focus on customer trust, repeat purchases, and product authenticity. Instead of celebrating valuation landmarks, the story is about impact - "made for Indian parents," "safe," and "transparent." In this sense, constraint becomes an ethical discipline. Tight budgets required judicious deployment of marketing spend, and product development had to be done incrementally. High-stakes mass campaigns gave way to digital marketing experiments.

What is exceedingly relevant here is that both profitability and capital efficiency are drawn upon in the company's discourse when it first goes public. Even in fundraising announcements, founder statements often emphasise sustainable scaling and not growth-at-all-costs. This framing is what sets Mamaearth apart from the blitzscaling narratives of India's funding boom years. Constraint here is narratively mobilised as wisdom and foresight [31] [40].

3) Funding Acceleration and Narrative Shift:

When venture capital money poured into the Indian startup ecosystem from 2018 to 2021, Mamaearth raised several rounds of funding. With capital from institutions came new demands: Category expansion, retail footprint and brand portfolio diversification. The company also expanded into offline retail channels and introduced more brands under the Honasa family [31] [40].

At this point, the rhetoric of growth tilts ever so subtly. Market leadership, revenue milestones and growth velocity are described with increasing regularity in media interviews. The mission-based story of identity is still there, but the scale becomes larger. Funding announcements herald growth rates, valuation milestones and expansion goals. Rethinking conflicting priorities, no longer financial limitations but operational complexity, controlling supply lines, ensuring quality extension to product range and authenticity of brand as the rapid pace of growth.

4) IPO and Public Accountability:

The company's move to the public markets is another pulsating point in its growth story. Public statements prioritise financing benchmarks, models of profitability and governance criteria. The rhetoric of disciplined growth grows more strident, but it is now linked with public accountability rather than bootstrapped survival. The mission-oriented identity remains, but it is overlain by investor-facing speech that underscores the importance of unit economics and margin expansion.

Over these phases, the Mamaearth story shows how constraint develops. In the beginning, scarcity creates identity - discipline, authenticity and bonds of trust within a community. As you scale funding, the constraint moves to managing complexity. For a publicly traded company, the constraint becomes public pressure and performance. Growth is always presented as purposeful, but "purpose" adapts according to ecosystem constraints [41] [42].

This progression illustrates how limitation can become an identity-making function in the early stages and evolve towards a control practice as the firm grows.

B. Case Study 2: Lenskart

1) Foundational Constraints in a Capital-Intensive Category:

Founded in 2010 by Peyush Bansal, Lenskart is a player in the eyewear space, an industry that structurally differs from digital-native personal care. Because it's not just a pure online marketplace, eyewear demands inventory management and supply chain coordination, optical precision, and often a physical retail presence. The business, from the beginning, dealt with capital intensity as an inbuilt challenge. Public interviews with the founder explicitly note these limitations. In the beginning, the goodwill inventory holding costs were too high, along with a fragmented network of suppliers, and a lack of standardised pricing in India consumer eyewear market. Unlike asset-light D2C models, this wasn't a business that could scale without brick-and-mortar infrastructure [32].

2) Strategic Response: Integration and Control:

Instead of portraying these constraints as restrictions, Lenskart's story is all about power and fusion. Founder comments are all about ramping up in-house manufacturing to wean dependence from outside suppliers. Vertical integration then becomes both a strategic position and a story - the statement of an operational discipline and concern for quality [43]. The hybrid online-offline model is also explained here, not in terms of mere expansion outwards, but as a necessity to increase the trust and experience that customers have. Physical locations come to be seen as additional nodes of digital efficiency, not monuments to scale [42]. Interviews consistently stress testing new Shoppe formats, curated site selection and moderated rollouts.

3) Growth Narrative: "Unit Economics First"

Throughout funding rounds, which have seen huge venture capital investment, Lenskart's public message has continuously remained "unit economics first" and "profitable scaling." Whereas high-burn startups speak during booms, most often take the founder talking about growth as disciplined and fine-tuned. Capital deployment is served up as methodical, informed by margins and operating metrics [44] [45]. This story holds true even during times of aggressive store growth. Growth is backed up by data and efficiency, not market domination talk. The focus on disciplined growth is indicative of a culture with roots in operational discipline, rather than disruptive euphoria.

4) Constraint as Strategic Discipline:

In contrast to Mamaearth's entry constraint, based on inadequate capital early on, Lenskart's entry constraints are structural - inventory, supply chain and physical infrastructure. The narrative response is correspondingly operational. Vertical integration and technology investment are portrayed as solutions that turn necessity into virtue. The narrative of growth is the story of engineering discipline, scale through systems and profitability through control [43] [32] [44].

C. Cross-Case Findings and Theoretical Integration

Though Mamaearth and Lenskart play to different consumer segments, their stories emerge with patterned similarities and instructive contrasts.

First, in both instances, constraint serves more as a productive rather than a restrictive force. Financial scarcity in the early days of Mamaearth led to a digital-first, community-centric identity. In the case of Lenskart, the capital intensity of the structure led to its vertical integration and operational discipline. It's not that constraint here is rejected. Rather, it is reconceived as underpinning competitive logic [44] [43].

Second, both companies exhibit narrative transformation over time as they raise capital. In a time of plenty of capital, the expansion story gets amplified, but every founder continues to anchor around earlier claims on identity: mission-based authenticity in Mamaearth's case and disciplined unit economics in Lenskart's. This narrative is a case of being tuned in enough to shareholder desires without losing sight of who you are.

Third, the cases reveal dual levels of narrative. Investor-facing messaging tends to focus on scale and addressable market size, as well as financial metrics [32] [45]. At the same time, more general public interviews centre on purpose, discipline and long-term value creation. Growth is therefore articulable differently to different audiences, and this makes narrative elasticity a strategic capacity.

Fourth, identity shapes strategic pathways. The parent-focused genesis story of Mamaearth validates influencer-fueled growth and product expansion. The technology-and-efficiency-driven approach of Lenskart also justifies vertical integration and data-driven store expansion. In either case, identity offers coherence to the decisions of development [41].

Finally, both cases demonstrate how the growth narratives nail down the push and pull of ecosystem shifts. India's startup ecosystem experiences a turnaround profitability as rhetoric around capital efficiency and disciplined scaling gets louder. For a host of reasons, founders tune their language to sync up with the mainstream capital market sentiment, underpinned by the fact that growth narratives are co-constructed in an institutional context [1][33].

In sum, these cases suggest growth less as a unidimensional economic journey and more as a dynamic story formed by constraint, identity, and ecosystem pressures. Scale comes first, mediated by narrative and conditioned by constraint; strategy is the last step. Through this, they empirically ground an interpretive understanding of growth in a resource-constrained setting as being interpretive and strategically constructed as opposed to merely a financial result.

6. Discussion

This study contributes to entrepreneurship theory in three primary ways.

First, it broadens the definition of bricolage by associating resource recombination with identity construction. Existing research focuses on how entrepreneurs "make do" with available resources. The current results support that bricolage is both material and narrative. Founders don't just repackage resources; they redefine constraint as a fundamental aspect of who they are as entities. Restriction becomes identity, which then influences further decision-making [21] [22].

Second, the analysis casts doubt on purely "strategic" explanations of growth [38]. The models usually assume growth to result from resource accumulation, market position and competitive advantage. The examples here indicate that segment growth occurs as a narratively constructed process before it is actually implemented. Founders define what responsible growth, legitimate growth or sustainable growth is. These frames affect the speed of hiring, the timing of expansion, how capital is allocated and risk tolerance.

Third, the study provides implications from emerging markets. A lot of growth reading material tends to focus on developed-markets with capital ecosystems that are quite stable. In markets like India, which is considered to be an emerging market, we have cyclical funding and fluid institutional environments [1]. Entrepreneurs have to find their way around the jolting shakes of going from capital abundance to capital scarcity. Narrative becomes a survival skill. The growth rhetoric needs to evolve and maintain identity consistency.

The conceptual model that emerges is sequential yet recursive: Resource Constraint → Narrative Framing → Strategic Choice → Growth Pathway

Resource constraints trigger interpretive framing. Founders create stories that explain what growth looks like in the face of those circumstances. These stories influence which strategies are chosen, adding up to create the direction that a company goes. With the progress of the path, new restrictions arise, leading to recontextualising. Growth is thus co-produced through material conditions and meaning-making as a dynamic [46].

7. Implications

The outcomes of the study provide implications on several levels - entrepreneurial practice, venture capital governance, and ecosystem design - by aptly representing that growth is the result not simply of resources but strategic storytelling.

The lesson for founders is that narrative clarity is a strategic advantage. Internal interpretation and articulation of constraint play into organisational culture, its rhythms for decision-making, and tolerance of risk. When founders reframe constraint as discipline, not deprivation, that legitimises scrappiness, operational rigour and long-termism, it drives hiring velocity, spend on capital deployment, customer acquisition patterns and new market sequencing [10]. Furthermore, the narrative cohesion is crucial in times of funding transition. The growth story, as companies transition from the bootstrapping stage [2] to venture backing or from private to public markets, needs to change without losing that identity consistency [25]. Entrepreneurs who deliberately orchestrate such a narrative consistency are more likely to maintain legitimacy among stakeholders. In such times, storytelling is not a cosmetic; it is governance.

For investors, the research hints that founder stories should be thought of not just as persuasion but also more broadly as clues to strategic philosophy. How a founder surfaces growth under constraint reflects the company's stand on capital efficiency, governance discipline, and scalability logic. Investors working in emerging markets, where the macroeconomic environment can change suddenly, might find it useful to consider narrative alignment as well as financial ratios. Even the narrative ecosystems are shaped by venture capital firms themselves. Growth-at-all-costs rhetoric flourishes during boom cycles, and profitability narratives prevail during downturns. Understanding the iterated amplification can be helpful to promote more responsible capital signalling and counteract excessive strategic pivots that disrupt companies [36].

For policymakers and ecosystem builders, the results reinforce that successful entrepreneurial ecosystems are not built on capital alone. When growth strictly equals valuation acceleration, companies can end up with overleveraged operational commitments. Institutional enablers like standards of governance, norms for transparent reporting, digital infrastructure and supply chain facilitation have the potential to strengthen disciplined growth storylines. Especially in emerging markets, enabling and economic policies that allow freedom of operation and market access will make it possible for startups scale sustainably and not just as a symbol. Promoting ecologies that reward resilience, not just rapid scale, could yield more sustainable entrepreneurial effects [47].

Together, these implications serve to underscore that growth governance in emerging markets needs to contemplate narrative awareness and financial tactics. The framing of constraint - by founders, investors and institutions - impacts perception but also strategic action.

8. Limitations and Future Research

Although this paper provides a narrative account of growth in constraint, its size and the nature of the design place significant limits on what is known - which serves to point towards potential productive lines of future enquiry.

In the first place, the empirical setting is India-centric. The Indian Consumer Startup Landscape is unique in ways like quick digital adoption, volatile VC cycles, infrastructural lopsidedness and a hybrid institutional market were global money chases local market reality. These conditions both exacerbate resource constraints and symbolic pressures for scale. The story dynamics here might not represent a complete generalisation to mature markets with more depth of capital and settled regulatory conditions [1]. Meanwhile, other emerging markets, for instance, that of Southeast Asia, Latin America or Africa, may face similar tensions between aspirational growth and a leaner life. Comparative cross-country research would eventually have to analyse whether narrative mechanisms like these also account for growth under constraint in other institutional environments, or whether other cultural contexts and financial circumstances create different frames of growth.

Second, the analysis is based on publicly available founder interviews, media, and corporate disclosures. Such material is inherently performative. Founders are addressing different constituencies. These include investors, customers, regulators or employees. However, they later may be forced to retrofit narratives that explain strategic decisions as deliberate choices rather than improvised calls made under uncertainty. Triangulation across several sources reduces some of the bias, but it is not possible to completely separate strategic intent from impression management. Future studies could also work in internal firm documents, strategic board-level conversations or ethnographic sessions to contrast public storylines with what is going on backstage. These kinds of designs could further elucidate how narrative framing works within multiple organisational fields.

Third, this analysis is retrospective and not a real-time longitudinal one. The cases read narrative development across scales of funding, but they reassemble discontinuities in retrospect. This reduces the potential of seeing incoherencies, ambiguities or conflicts as they are produced. Longitudinal qualitative work, such as tracking startups through funding rounds, crises and strategic pivots over time, would enable scholars to observe how growth narratives are negotiated, resisted or reconfigured in the field. Process-oriented research might investigate whether narrative change precedes or follows strategic change.

Lastly, it would be interesting for future research to explore the influence of narrative framing on task performance. What is the cause-and-effect relationship between the framing of constraint as discipline and capital efficiency influencing survival? Or is it simply that the ability to compile a coherent narrative is just a proxy for good management? Mixed-methodologies that combine qualitative analysis with performance data might more robustly test these relationships. In doing so, future research can develop a nuanced theory of growth which includes material deprivation, institutional contexts and the interpretive work of entrepreneurs in one formal model.

9. Conclusion

The present study sought to challenge an implicit assumption within entrepreneurship research: growth is predominantly an economic consequence through access to capital, market opportunity and strategic placement. A historical trajectory analysis of publicly articulated founder narratives in the Indian consumer startup ecosystem illustrates that growth is not only enacted, but also explained and socially produced under conditions of constraint. Growth may be visible on a balance sheet, market cap or skyline, but the process by which it happens is defined by how founders make sense of what they lack.

Resource scarcity was not some tangential set of circumstances to be solved by access to funding in these cases. It was from where the strategic meaning derived. Founders were not simply responding to capital scarcity, infrastructural absence or operational mess; founders were framing those as formative limitations. Constraint became discipline. Discipline became identity. Identity guided strategic choice. In this way, growth was narratively framed: by what was told as responsible expansion, legitimate ambition or sustainable scale. Decisions on marketing intensity, hiring pace, vertical integration, retail expansion and profitability targets were not just economically computed. Rather, they were narratively justified.

The results also argue that growth narratives are contingent upon the cycles of the ecosystem as well. In periods of funding froth, expansionary talk evolves - the focus rests on size, leadership and opportunity. In periods of contraction, these narratives are redrawn around efficiency, governance and resilience. Those firms that survive, however, do so by appropriating constraint while still maintaining the coherence of their identity. Hence, growth is recursive and dynamic: new constraints lead to new framings, which result in new strategic pathways. It's not linear, but it is a process.

These dynamics hold even more in emerging markets. Institutional volatility, uneven infrastructures, and cyclical capital flows increase the imperative for narrative flex. The interpretations in this type of environment may require even more translation. However, theories of growth derived from fairly stable developed-market environments may underestimate the effort involved. Emerging-market entrepreneurs' function within a dual world that exists in scarcity and aspiration. It is the one where global capital expectations meet local structural limitations. This implies that a theory of growth, which is put into perspective, has to take material conditions of resources together with the symbolic and communicative processes.

By elevating narrative framing as the link between constraint and strategic action, the conceptualisation offered herein adds to a more comprehensive comprehension of entrepreneurial scaling. Growth is not just economic enlargement; it represents a negotiated process of meaning creation which enrols stakeholders, legitimises choices and shapes organisational futures.

The acknowledgement of this story dimension broadens the ways scholars think of growth and the way practitioners engage it - from 'how fast to grow' to 'how growth is understood, justified and sustained' for constraint.

References

[1] Masłoń-Oracz, "Startup ecosystem in emerging economies: the case of India".

[2] H. Srivastava and M. Mishra, "Finance Related Challenges for Startups in India and How to Overcome Them," *Journal of Advanced Scientific Research and Analysis (JASRAE),* vol. 22, no. 1, pp. 443-452, January 2025.

[3] Indian Brand Equity Foundation, "E-commerce Industry in India," [Online]. Available: https://www.ibef.org/industry/ecommerce. [Accessed 14 February 2026].

[4] Ukey, "The Rise of D2C Brands Transforming India's Consumer Market through Strategic Business Models and Navigating Legal Challenges," *Cuestiones de Fisioterapia,* vol. 54, no. 4, pp. 5605-5612, 20 February 2025.

[5] J. Kagan, "Understanding Fintech: Enhancing Financial Services and Everyday Life," 29 August 2025. [Online]. Available: https://www.investopedia.com/terms/f/fintech.asp. [Accessed 14 February 2026].

[6] Indian Brand Equity Foundation, "Growth and Expansion of India's Edtech Industry," IBEF.org, February 2023. [Online]. Available: https://www.ibef.org/research/case-study/growth-and-expansion-of-india-s-edtech-industry. [Accessed 14 February 2026].

[7] K. Askew, "“Traditional path to purchase is completely disrupted': How tech is revolutionising food consumption”," William Reed Business Media Ltd., 29 August 2018. [Online]. Available: https://www.foodnavigator-asia.com/Article/2018/08/29/How-tech-is-revolutionising-food-consumption/. [Accessed 14 February 2026].

[8] G. Teare, "Global Venture Funding And Unicorn Creation In 2021 Shattered All Records," 5 January 2022. [Online]. Available: https://news.crunchbase.com/business/global-vc-funding-unicorns-2021-monthly-recap/. [Accessed 14 February 2026].

[9] W. H. Janeway, R. Nanda and M. Rhodes-Kropf, "Venture Capital Booms and Start-Up Financing," *Annual Review of Financial Economics,* vol. 13, p. 111–127, 2021.

[10] V. Lancker, M. Knockaert, V. Collewaert and N. Breugst, "Preparing for scaling: A study on founder role evolution," *Journal of Business Venturing,* vol. 38, 1 July 2023.

[11] P. O'Brien, "Why Venture Capital Avoids your Startup Ecosystem," 14 July 2025. [Online]. Available: https://seobrien.com/why-venture-capital-avoids-your-startup-ecosystem. [Accessed 15 February 2026].

[12] K. Saha, C. Malesios, S. Chowdhury and P. Dey, "Impact of institutional voids on the performance of Small and Medium-sized Enterprises," *Journal of Strategy and Management,* vol. 16, 31 January 2022.

[13] Rehman, M. Jajja, R. Khalid and S. Seuring, "The impact of institutional voids on risk and performance in base-of-the-pyramid supply chains," *The International Journal of Logistics Management,* vol. 31, no. 4, pp. 829-863, 2020.

[14] Fisher, D. F. Kuratko, J. M. Bloodgood and J. S. Hornsby, "Legitimate to whom? The challenge of audience diversity and new venture legitimacy," *Journal of Business Venturing,* vol. 32, no. 1, pp. 52-71, 15 November 2016.

[15] T. Penrose, The Theory of the Growth of the Firm, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.

[16] N. Foss, "Edith Penrose and the Penrosians – or, why there is still so much to learn from The Theory of the Growth of the Firm," *Department of Industrial Economics and Strategy, Copenhagen Business School, IVS/CBS Working Papers,* vol. 29, 1999.

[17] L. E. Greiner, "Evolution and Revolution as Organizations Grow," in *Readings in Strategic Management*, D. Asch and C. Bowman, Eds., London, Palgrave, 1989.

[18] R. Hoffman and C. Yeh, Blitzscaling: The Lightning-Fast Path to Building Massively Valuable Businesses, First Edition ed., New York: Currency: Crown Publishing Group (Penguin Random House LLC), 2018.

[19] U. Ikwue, N. Eyo-Udo, O. Onunka, A. Ekwezia, E. Nwankwo and C. Daraojimba, "Entrepreneurship: Scalability Strategies in Entrepreneurial Ventures: A Comprehensive Literature Review," *Agriculture Extension in Developing Countries,* vol. 1, pp. 78 - 88, 26 May 2023.

[20] W. R. Kerr and R. Nanda, "Financing Constraints and Entrepreneurship," in *Handbook of Research on Innovation and Entrepreneurship*, Cheltenham, Edward Elgar Publishing (Elgar), 2011, pp. 88 - 103.

[21] S. A. Zahra, "The Resource-Based View, Resourcefulness, and Resource Management in Startup Firms: A Proposed Research Agenda," *Journal of Management,* vol. 47, no. 7, p. 1841–1860, 2 June 2021.

[22] Aaouid, A. Elboussadi, O. Boubker and Z. Nejjari, "Entrepreneurial bricolage: A systematic literature network analysis and TCCM approach," *Scientific African,* vol. 26, 12 November 2024.

[23] M. Matalamäki, "Effectuation, an Emerging Theory of Entrepreneurship – Towards a Mature Stage of the Development," *Journal of Small Business and Enterprise Development,* vol. 24, 31 July 2017.

[24] J. Ebben and A. Johnson, "Bootstrapping in small firms: An empirical analysis of change over time," *Journal of Business Venturing,* vol. 21, no. 6, p. 851–865, 18 November 2005.

[25] J. Winborg and H. Landström, "Financial bootstrapping in small businesses: Examining small business managers' resource acquisition behaviors," *Journal of Business Venturing,* vol. 16, no. 3, p. 235–254, 2001.

[26] K. E. Weick, Sensemaking in Organizations, vol. 3, Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications, 1995.

[27] Fauchart and M. Gruber, "Darwinians, Communitarians, and Missionaries: The Role of Founder Identity in Entrepreneurship," *Academy of Management Journal,* vol. 54, no. 5, 1 October 2011.

[28] Navis and M. A. Glynn, "Legitimate Distinctiveness and the Entrepreneurial Identity: Influence on Investor Judgments of New Venture Plausibility," *Academy of Management Review,* vol. 36, no. 3, p. 479–499, 2011.

[29] T. M. Key and T. N. Duening, "Strategic Entrepreneurial Storytelling: An Applied Framework for Better Pitches," *Contemporary Management Research,* vol. 16, no. 4, p. 279–300, 2020.

[30] M. van Lunenburg, "How does the institutional environment influence the scaling process of social initiatives? An empirical exploration in the Dutch public sector," *International Journal of Public Sector Management,* vol. 37, no. 1, p. 77–90, 2024.

[31] KTPL Editor, "How Mamaearth Became a ₹1000Cr D2C Brand – Case Study for Digital Marketers," KTPL, 17 August 2025. [Online]. Available: https://blog.kirnanitechnologies.com/mamaearth-case-study-d2c-brand-growth/. [Accessed 16 February 2026].

[32] IEM Blog, "Lenskart – The Innovative Hybrid Business Model of Online and Offline Selling," IEM.edu.in, 23 March 2022. [Online]. Available: https://iem.edu.in/iem-blog/2022/03/23/lenskart-the-innovative-hybrid-business-model-of-online-and-offline-selling/. [Accessed 16 February 2026].

[33] PIB Delhi, "India witnesses emergence of many unicorn start-ups that are reshaping our economy and markets: Union Minister Hardeep S Puri," Press and Information Bureau of India, 11 October 2023. [Online]. Available: https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1966673&reg=3&lang=2#. [Accessed 17 February 2026].

[34] R. Sanghi, "When Content Meets Commerce: India's Direct-To-Consumer Moment," tigerfeathers.in, 15 October 2020. [Online]. Available: https://www.tigerfeathers.in/p/when-content-meets-commerce-indias. [Accessed 17 February 2026].

[35] Cumming and S. Johan, "The Problems with and Promise of Entrepreneurial Finance," *Strategic Entrepreneurship Journal,* vol. 11, no. 3, p. 357–370, 17 August 2017.

[36] W. Gornall and I. Strebulaev, "Squaring Venture Capital Valuations with Reality," *Journal of Financial Economics,* vol. 135, 01 June 2019.

[37] Markman and W. Gartner, "Is Extraordinary Growth Profitable? A Study of Inc. 500 High-Growth Companies," *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice,* vol. 27, p. 65–75, 14 March 2003.

[38] B. Sarkhedi, "The Shift from Revenue To Profit: Why Startups Are Prioritising Profitability Over Growth," Inc42.com, 15 June 2024. [Online]. Available: https://inc42.com/resources/the-shift-from-revenue-to-profit-why-startups-are-prioritising-profitability-over-growth/. [Accessed 17 February 2026].

[39] R. Nanda and M. Rhodes-Kropf, "Investment Cycles and Startup Innovation," *Journal of Financial Economics,* vol. 110, 10 December 2012.

[40] S. Mitter, "Inside Mamaearth: How husband-wife duo Varun and Ghazal Alagh built a profitable Rs 700-Cr D2C sensation," 06 September 2011. [Online]. Available: https://yourstory.com/2021/09/mamaearth-ghazal-alagh-profitable-d2c-brand-personal-care. [Accessed 17 February 2026].

[41] S. Albert and D. A. Whetten, "Organizational identity," *Research in Organizational Behavior,* vol. 7, pp. 263-295, 1985.

[42] J. Battilana and S. Dorado, "Building sustainable hybrid organizations: The case of commercial microfinance organizations," *The Academy of*

Management Journal, vol. 53, no. 6, pp. 1419-1440, 2010.

[43] "How Lenskart Performance Marketing and Technology Helped Scale Up Its Business," [Online]. Available: https://shyamfuture.com/how-lenskart-performance-marketing-and-technology-helped-scale-up-its-business/. [Accessed 18 February 2026].

[44] P. Aiyappa, "Lenskart: India's Most Polished Retail Story, and the Fragility Behind the Frames," 20 November 2025. [Online]. Available: https://medium.com/@prathishtaiyappa/lenskart-indias-most-polished-retail-story-and-the-fragility-behind-the-frames-36a0cafb3cbd. [Accessed 17 February 2026].

[45] s. bhowmick, "Lenskart: Complete Business Model Analysis," 12 October 2025. [Online]. Available: https://www.thefinthusiastic.com/post/lenskart-com-complete-business-model-analysis. [Accessed 17 February 2026].

[46] S. Chen and T. Shen, "Resource constraints and firm innovation: When less is more?," *Chinese Journal of Population, Resources and Environment,* vol. 21, no. 3, p. 172–180, 17 October 2023.

[47] Autio and H. Rannikko, "Retaining winners: Can policy boost high-growth entrepreneurship?," *Research Policy,* vol. 45, no. 1, p. 42–55, 22 October 2015.