

Beyond Profit Maximization: How Beekeeping Entrepreneurs Navigate Multiple Success Logics in Ecosystem-Dependent Ventures

The quest for sustainability requires rethinking how entrepreneurs define and pursue success. Traditional entrepreneurship theory assumes profit maximization drives entrepreneurial behavior (Shane & Venkataraman, 2000), yet an entire category of entrepreneurs—beekeepers—challenges this foundational assumption. Beekeeping represents one of the oldest forms of entrepreneurship and operates at the critical intersection of ecological sustainability, artisan craft, and social impact. Despite providing ecosystem services worth over \$200 billion annually (Calderone, 2012) and facing colony loss rates exceeding 55% (Aurell et al., 2024), beekeepers persist in ventures that often generate minimal financial returns. Remarkably, beekeeping entrepreneurship remains entirely absent from top-tier management journals, revealing a profound empirical void despite its relevance to sustainable entrepreneurship, artisan enterprise, and mission-driven innovation.

We identified this gap through a systematic review of ABS 4*/4-star and FT50 journals (2015-2025), finding zero studies on beekeeping entrepreneurship. This absence is particularly striking given beekeeping's alignment with sustainable entrepreneurship principles (Shepherd & Patzelt, 2011), artisan entrepreneurship characteristics (Solomon & Mathias, 2020), and the recent renaissance in craft entrepreneurship research (Ganzin et al., 2024). More fundamentally, beekeeping challenges core entrepreneurship assumptions in three ways. First, beekeepers cannot control their primary means of production—honeybees are wild animals (insects) whose survival depends on healthy ecosystems, not business optimization. Second, beekeepers operate under multiple institutional logics simultaneously—as artisan craftspeople preserving traditional ecological knowledge, as sustainable agriculture practitioners stewarding pollinator populations,

as social entrepreneurs educating communities, and as business owners seeking economic viability. Third, financial success alone threatens long-term survival—prioritizing honey extraction over colony health leads to operational failure.

We propose Self-Determination Theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 2000) as an explanatory framework for understanding how entrepreneurs persist in ventures where profit maximization conflicts with operational sustainability. SDT distinguishes autonomous motivation (intrinsic interest, personal values) from controlled motivation (external rewards, social pressure). When basic psychological needs (autonomy, competence, relatedness) are satisfied, autonomous motivation emerges, leading to persistence and well-being even absent external rewards (Gagné & Deci, 2005). We theorize that autonomously motivated entrepreneurs define success through non-financial metrics aligned with their values, while controlled motivated entrepreneurs prioritize financial returns. This creates a testable prediction: motivational profiles should predict which success dimensions entrepreneurs prioritize.

We tested these predictions through a cross-sectional survey of N=383 active beekeepers recruited through beekeeping associations, publications, and social media across multiple countries (primarily USA, with ongoing data collection in the Balkans including Serbia, Croatia, Bosnia & Herzegovina, and Montenegro—regions with strong beekeeping traditions highly relevant to this conference location). By conference presentation, we will have expanded our sample to over 300 beekeepers from the Balkan region, enabling comparative analysis between established beekeeping markets (USA) and emerging European contexts. Respondents completed validated scales measuring work motivation (MWMS; Gagné et al., 2015), basic psychological needs (W-BNS; Van den Broeck et al., 2010), and success priorities across financial, environmental, civic, and personal dimensions.

The results provide compelling evidence that beekeepers operate under fundamentally different motivational and success frameworks than traditional profit-seeking entrepreneurs. First, autonomous motivation ($M=5.94$, $SD=0.89$) vastly exceeds controlled motivation ($M=2.84$, $SD=1.22$), $t(343)=40.50$, $p<.001$, $d=2.29$ —among the largest effect sizes reported in entrepreneurship research. This indicates beekeepers are overwhelmingly driven by intrinsic interest and values alignment rather than external rewards. Critically, this pattern holds even among commercial beekeepers (autonomous $M=6.15$ vs. controlled $M=3.83$), challenging assumptions that commercial ventures entail profit-seeking orientation.

Second, beekeepers prioritize environmental stewardship ($M=6.11$, $SD=1.02$) and personal fulfillment ($M=5.96$, $SD=0.99$) far more than financial success ($M=2.73$, $SD=1.48$), with effect sizes ($d=1.48-1.59$) substantially larger than typical entrepreneurship findings. Even commercial beekeepers prioritize environmental success ($M=6.28$) over financial success ($M=5.04$), $t(51)=6.24$, $p<.001$, demonstrating that environmental stewardship operates as a dominant institutional logic transcending economic necessity.

Third, hierarchical regression revealed a perfect discriminant pattern validating SDT's predictions: Autonomous motivation strongly predicted environmental ($\beta=.491$, $p<.001$, $\Delta R^2=.226$) and personal success priorities ($\beta=.461$, $p<.001$, $\Delta R^2=.317$) but not financial priorities ($\beta=.041$, ns). Controlled motivation predicted financial priorities ($\beta=.299$, $p<.001$) but not environmental priorities ($\beta=-.053$, ns). This rare evidence of discriminant validity demonstrates SDT's applicability beyond traditional employment contexts to entrepreneurship settings where multiple institutional logics compete.

Finally, beekeeping satisfaction ($M=5.97/7$) correlated with autonomous motivation ($r=.336$, $p<.001$) and basic need satisfaction (competence $r=.393$, relatedness $r=.311$) but not with

controlled motivation ($r=.018$, ns) or financial success priorities, demonstrating that well-being derives from intrinsic engagement rather than external rewards.

Our findings extend entrepreneurship theory in three ways. First, we demonstrate that profit-maximization assumptions fail to explain behavior in sustainable ventures. Beekeepers persist despite financial losses because they optimize for environmental and personal outcomes, not profit. Second, we validate Self-Determination Theory as an explanatory framework for entrepreneurial persistence beyond financial returns. The extraordinarily large effect sizes and perfect discriminant pattern demonstrate that SDT offers theoretical leverage for understanding sustainable entrepreneurship. Third, we establish beekeeping as a critical case for understanding ecosystem-dependent entrepreneurship, where competitive advantage comes from relationships with nature rather than market positioning.

For practitioners and policymakers—particularly relevant in the Balkans where beekeeping represents both cultural heritage and economic opportunity—our findings suggest that support systems emphasizing financial projections and profit optimization misalign with these entrepreneurs' motivational profiles. Support should instead foster basic need satisfaction through community building, skill development, and autonomy support while developing success metrics incorporating environmental and social outcomes alongside financial sustainability.