

Entrepreneurial Burnout as a Process: A Systematic Review of Demands, Resources, Mechanisms and Consequences

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Article Info	Abstract
Keywords: entrepreneurial burnout; emotional exhaustion; job demands-resources; conservation of resources; entrepreneurial well-being; systematic literature review JEL classification: L26; J28; I31	Entrepreneurial burnout research has expanded rapidly, but cumulative knowledge remains fragmented by inconsistent conceptualizations, measures, and analytical roles assigned to demands, resources, and mechanisms. This systematic literature review clarifies the burnout–emotional exhaustion boundary, maps demand- and resource-side determinants, identifies mechanisms explicitly tested or qualitatively traced, and assesses which downstream consequences receive direct empirical support. Following PRISMA 2020 and SPAR-4-SLR guidance, 72 peer-reviewed empirical studies published between 2016 and 4 August 2026 were identified in Scopus and Web of Science and synthesized through hybrid deductive–inductive content analysis and theory-oriented narrative synthesis. The synthesis shows that emotional exhaustion dominates quantitative operationalization, resources perform different functions rather than acting uniformly, and evidence becomes thinner from determinants to mechanisms and downstream effects. Career continuation or withdrawal and venture outcomes have the strongest direct support. By separating demands, resources, proximal mechanisms, burnout, and consequences, the review develops an integrative process architecture without imposing a causal sequence. This architecture provides a basis for more precise measurement, stronger temporal designs, and interventions combining demand reduction, work redesign, and recovery.

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Introduction

Entrepreneurship is a major form of economic participation and value creation, but its scale also makes the health of entrepreneurs a management concern rather than a purely individual issue. The Global Entrepreneurship Monitor 2025/2026 report draws on more than 160,000 respondents across 53 economies and documents historically high early-stage entrepreneurial activity in many economies (Global Entrepreneurship Monitor [GEM], 2026). At the same time, recent peer-reviewed evidence highlights substantial strain among business leaders. In a 2026 study of 361 French business leaders, 47.8% reported high perceived stress and 67.3% poor sleep quality, with leaders of small and very small firms displaying less favorable health profiles than managers of larger organizations (Bourlois et al., 2026). Earlier longitudinal comparisons also showed that burnout risk among French entrepreneurs increased during the COVID-19 crisis and that

perceived bankruptcy threat was the dominant crisis-related predictor (Torrès et al., 2022). These figures do not establish a universal prevalence rate for entrepreneurial burnout, but they illustrate why the phenomenon deserves sustained attention in entrepreneurship and management research. Entrepreneurial work combines potentially salutogenic features - autonomy, meaning, task variety, and control - with conditions that can intensify resource expenditure, including uncertainty, personal financial exposure, role multiplicity, long hours, weak boundaries, and responsibility for venture continuity (Stephan, 2018; Torrès & Thurik, 2019). Meta-analytic evidence on entrepreneurial stress similarly indicates that entrepreneurship cannot be reduced to either a uniformly positive or uniformly harmful work context: stressors have meaningful implications for both well-being and performance, and their effects depend on how entrepreneurial demands are appraised and managed (Lerman et al., 2021). Within burnout research specifically, role stress, occupational loneliness, emotional demands, work-family conflict, technostress, and insufficient recovery have all been associated with exhaustion or burnout among entrepreneurs and owner-managers (Fernet et al., 2016; McDowell et al., 2019; Benzari et al., 2024; Le Moal et al., 2026). The 2016-2026 window is particularly informative for this purpose because it captures both the consolidation and the recent acceleration of the field. The expansion is not only quantitative. Recent research adds repeated-wave and longitudinal designs, interventions, qualitative process accounts, digital and technology-intensive settings, social and minority entrepreneurship, gendered institutional contexts, and more explicit analyses of coping, recovery, and resource ambivalence (Bennett et al., 2025; Yu et al., 2025; Long et al., 2024; Müller, 2026; Ziemiański, 2026). Against this background, the review addresses three questions: how entrepreneurial burnout has been conceptualized and empirically studied; through which demand-resource mechanisms it emerges and persists; and which downstream consequences are supported. Its contribution is to clarify the burnout-exhaustion boundary, distinguish demand-side and resource-side determinants from mechanisms, synthesize convergence and divergence, and integrate the evidence into a process framework without presenting that framework as a single causal model jointly tested across the corpus.

1. Literature review

1.1. Entrepreneurial burnout

Burnout is a work-related phenomenon that develops under chronic demands and insufficient recovery, but its conceptualization has evolved beyond a simple synonym for stress or fatigue. In the Maslach tradition, exhaustion, cynicism or depersonalization, and reduced professional efficacy/personal accomplishment are related but distinguishable dimensions (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). Contemporary JD-R theory likewise treats burnout as a health-impairment outcome emerging from sustained demands and depleted resources while emphasizing that exhaustion and cynicism capture different aspects of the experience (Bakker et al., 2023). This distinction is fundamental for entrepreneurship research because a study that measures energetic depletion alone does not necessarily capture the entrepreneur's psychological distancing from the venture or diminished sense of efficacy.

A major cumulative problem is measurement heterogeneity. Delladio and Caputo (2025) identify conceptual and measurement inconsistency as a central unresolved issue in entrepreneurial-burnout research, while Mäkinen et al. (2021) show that burnout has often been studied alongside broader occupational well-being constructs rather than as a consistently bounded syndrome. Primary studies illustrate this diversity: some retain multidimensional burnout (Manzano-García et al., 2021; Torrès et al., 2022), others focus on emotional exhaustion as the focal indicator (De Clercq et al., 2022a, 2022b; Tahar et al., 2023), and others use global or shorter burnout measures. Recent entrepreneur-specific mental-health measurement work also underscores the importance of distinguishing burnout from adjacent outcomes such as general well-being, psychological distress, sleep impairment, and occupational functioning (Freeman et al., 2026).

1.2. Demands, resources, and process mechanisms in entrepreneurial work

Job demands-resources theory provides the first organizing lens. Job demands are aspects of work that require sustained physical, cognitive, or emotional effort, whereas job resources help achieve goals, reduce the cost of demands, or support learning and motivation (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). More recent JD-R theory emphasizes person-by-situation interactions, proactive behavior, multilevel processes, and work-home resource dynamics rather than a static two-list model (Bakker et al., 2023). These developments are particularly relevant to entrepreneurs, whose work design is partly self-created and whose business and family domains often overlap. Workload, role ambiguity, emotional demands, financial exposure, technostress, and work-family conflict can therefore operate as demands, while autonomy, fit, support, psychological capital, and recovery opportunities can operate as resources (Fernet et al., 2016; De Clercq et al., 2022a, 2022b; Benzari et al., 2024; Lasrado et al., 2026).

Conservation of resources theory adds a temporal explanation of accumulation. COR proposes that people seek to obtain and protect valued resources and that resource loss is disproportionately salient, creating the possibility of loss spirals when demands consume capacities needed to address subsequent demands (Hobfoll, 1989; Hobfoll et al., 2018). This logic fits entrepreneurship because financial pressure can provoke additional work, founder dependence can make delegation difficult, family conflict can erode recovery resources, and exhaustion can reduce the capacity to solve the venture problems that generated the strain. COR therefore helps explain persistence and escalation rather than simply identifying whether a predictor is positively or negatively associated with burnout (Zhao, Li, et al., 2023; St-Jean et al., 2023).

1.3. Previous reviews on entrepreneurial burnout

Prior reviews provide an essential cumulative baseline. Omrane et al. (2018) framed entrepreneurial burnout around causes, consequences, and ways out; Mäkinen et al. (2021) synthesized 27 studies covering burnout, job satisfaction, and work engagement; Palmer et al. (2021) mapped 23 studies specifically concerned with entrepreneurial burnout; and Delladio and Caputo (2025) integrated 47 articles published from 1992 through 2023. At a broader level, the review by Stephan (2018) of 144 empirical studies on entrepreneurs' mental health and well-being argued that entrepreneurship research requires explanations that are dynamic, socialized, context-sensitive, and attentive to entrepreneurs' identity and life domains. Together, these reviews establish the field's theoretical legitimacy while also showing that simple catalogues of antecedents and outcomes are no longer sufficient. A review of entrepreneurial resilience also identifies unresolved questions about psychological resources (Hartmann et al., 2022).

Three cumulative issues remain. First, construct comparability is unresolved because entrepreneurial burnout, emotional exhaustion, and adjacent well-being outcomes are not always clearly separated (Mäkinen et al., 2021; Delladio & Caputo, 2025). Second, earlier syntheses document many antecedents and consequences but provide less integration of the proximal mechanisms through which demands become depletion or resources alter the trajectory (Palmer et al., 2021; Delladio & Caputo, 2025). Third, the consequence literature often moves rhetorically from entrepreneur health to family, employee, venture, and ecosystem effects faster than direct empirical evidence supports. A process-oriented review must therefore distinguish what is recurrently observed, what is conditional, and what remains theoretically plausible but under-tested. The recent expansion of the literature makes such reassessment possible. Studies published after the coverage of the major prior reviews increasingly examine technostress and digital competence (Benzari et al., 2024; Lasrado et al., 2026), recovery and daily restoration (Bennett et al., 2025; Le Moal et al., 2026), resource ambivalence (Shan et al., 2026), structural and gendered adversity (Long et al., 2024; Okan et al., 2026; Tlaiss & Khanin, 2026), and processual changes following burnout (Müller, 2026; Ziemiański, 2026).

2. Methodology

2.1. Review design, disciplinary scope, and search strategy

The study adopts a systematic literature review with theory-oriented narrative synthesis. Reporting follows PRISMA 2020 (Page et al., 2021), supported by evidence-based management and SPAR-4-SLR guidance (Tranfield et al., 2003; Snyder, 2019; Paul et al., 2021). The review is positioned in management and entrepreneurship and focuses on entrepreneurs and comparable owner-operators rather than the clinical burnout literature more broadly.

Scopus and the Web of Science Core Collection were searched on 4 August 2026. The Boolean strategy combined burnout terms (burnout, burn-out, emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, reduced personal accomplishment) with entrepreneur-related terms (entrepreneur*, founder*, business owner*, owner-manager*, self-employ*, small business owner*), adapted to each database. The review covers peer-reviewed empirical journal articles published from 2016 to the search date.

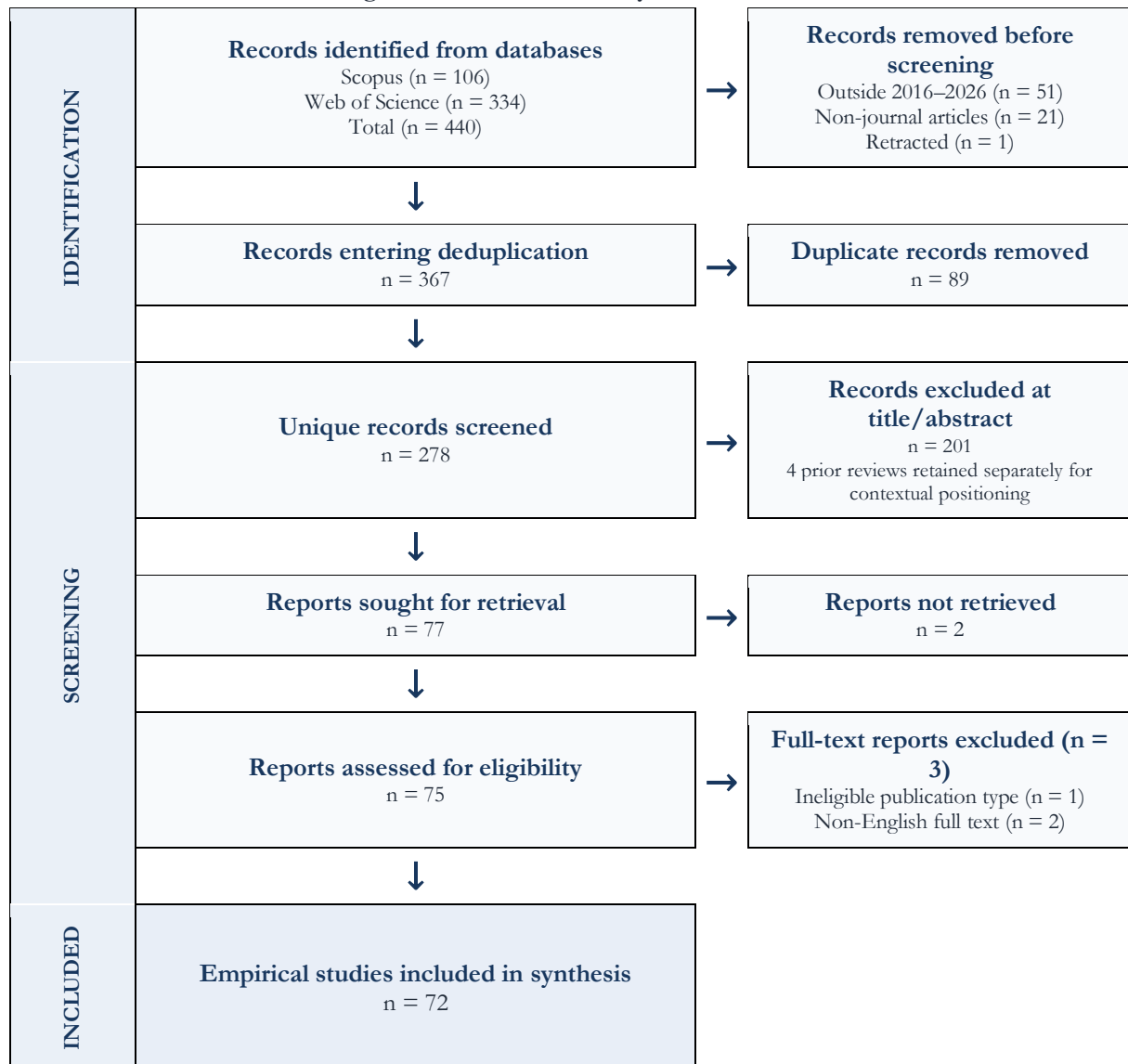
Table 1. Eligibility criteria

Criterion	Included	Excluded
Publication	Peer-reviewed empirical journal article	Review, conceptual article, thesis/dissertation, conference paper, book chapter, editorial
Period	2016–2026 and available by 4 August 2026	Before 2016 or after the search date
Language	English full text	Non-English full text
Population	Entrepreneurs, founders, business owners, owner-managers, self-employed owner-operators, or comparable entrepreneurial actors	Employee-only samples without a separable entrepreneurial population
Phenomenon	Burnout or a recognized core burnout dimension substantively examined	General stress, anxiety, depression, or well-being without substantive burnout/exhaustion analysis
Evidence	Empirical qualitative, quantitative, mixed-method, or intervention evidence	Pure commentary or theoretical proposition without empirical evidence

2.2. Screening and study selection

Title/abstract screening and full-text eligibility assessment followed the predefined criteria. Screening decisions were documented in a study-selection record; spreadsheet- and script-assisted routines supported deduplication and consistency checks, while eligibility decisions were based on article content. The complete study-selection process is summarized in Figure 1 following the PRISMA 2020 flow structure. The searches identified 440 records (Scopus $n = 106$; Web of Science $n = 334$). After removing 73 records outside the period, non-journal items, or one retracted article, 367 records entered deduplication; 89 duplicates were removed. Of 278 unique records screened, 201 were excluded. Full texts were sought for 77 papers, two could not be retrieved, and 75 were assessed. Three were excluded at full text (one ineligible publication type and two non-English reports), yielding 72 empirical studies for synthesis.

Figure 1. PRISMA 2020 study-selection flow



Source: Authors'

2.3. Data extraction and reproducible category development

A study-level extraction matrix captured bibliographic information, context, population, design, theory, burnout conceptualization and instrument, demand-side and resource-side determinants, mechanisms, outcomes, and core evidence.

Category development used a hybrid deductive–inductive content-analysis procedure (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). JD-R and COR informed higher-order interpretation, while first-order coding retained the constructs and analytical roles used in each primary study. Contradictory and conditional findings were retained, and study-level assignments were compared across the corpus before frequencies were derived.

Mechanisms were identified when a mediating, moderating, recovery, appraisal, fit, identity, or qualitatively traced process linked entrepreneurial conditions to burnout or linked burnout to a subsequent state. Consequences were identified when burnout or a burnout dimension was analytically upstream of the outcome; parallel correlates were not reclassified as consequences.

3. Results

3.1. Publication development and methodological profile

The final corpus contains 72 empirical studies and shows a clear acceleration in publication activity. Only eight included studies were published between 2016 and 2020, compared with 20 between 2021 and 2023 and 44 between 2024 and the search date in 2026. Twenty-three studies appeared in 2026 alone.

Table 2. Publication and design profile of the 72-study corpus

Dimension	Category	n	%
Period	2016–2020	8	11.1
	2021–2023	20	27.8
	2024–2026*	44	61.1
Design	Cross-sectional quantitative	44	61.1
	Longitudinal/repeated-wave quantitative	12	16.7
	Qualitative	13	18.1
	Intervention/experimental	2	2.8
	Mixed methods	1	1.4

Source: Authors'

3.2. Geographic, sectoral, and entrepreneurial contexts

Geographic coverage is broader than in the earlier entrepreneurial-burnout literature but remains uneven. France is the most frequent setting with 11 studies, followed by China with seven, Spain and the United States with five each, Finland with four, and Germany, India, and Pakistan with three each. Other studies extend the evidence to Africa, Latin America, the Middle East, Eastern Europe, and additional Asian settings. The value of this spread is substantive rather than merely descriptive: studies in Lebanon and Eastern Turkey, for example, make institutional and gendered constraints visible in ways that cannot be inferred from generic workload models (Okan et al., 2026; Tlaiss & Khanin, 2026), while rural and digital-intensive settings reveal distinct technology and resource configurations (Lasrado et al., 2026; Thurik et al., 2024). Studies of farmers, foodpreneurs, and disabled founders broaden this contextual variation (Kallioniemi et al., 2016; Janker et al., 2021; Yousfzai et al., 2026).

3.3. Conceptualization and measurement of entrepreneurial burnout

The first major result concerns construct operationalization. Of the 72 included studies, 59 operationalize burnout quantitatively and 13 provide qualitative or processual evidence. Within the quantitative group, 30 studies use an exhaustion-focused measure (50.8%), 17 use a global or unidimensional burnout score (28.8%), and only 12 retain two or more burnout dimensions (20.3%). Thus, more than half of the quantitative evidence commonly discussed under the label entrepreneurial burnout is empirically centered on exhaustion rather than on a multidimensional burnout syndrome. This pattern extends the measurement concern identified in prior reviews rather than resolving it (Mäkinen et al., 2021; Delladio & Caputo, 2025). Comparisons across work arrangements also expose differences between exhaustion and adjacent symptoms (Bergman et al., 2021; Yin & Xia, 2025).

Table 3. Burnout conceptualization and measurement in the corpus

Operationalization	Coding rule	n	Interpretive implication
Exhaustion-focused measure	Emotional/occupational exhaustion or an exhaustion subscale is the focal burnout indicator.	30	Captures the depletion core but not necessarily cynicism/disengagement or efficacy.
Global/unidimensional burnout score	A single overall burnout score or unitary burnout scale is analyzed.	17	Treats burnout as a unitary state and masks dimensional differences.
Multidimensional burnout measure	Two or more burnout dimensions are retained analytically.	12	Supports dimension-specific inference and preserves syndrome structure.
Qualitative/processual evidence	Burnout/exhaustion is traced through narratives, themes, trajectories, or cases rather than standardized scoring.	13	Reveals temporal, identity, contextual, and recovery dynamics not captured by scales.

Source: Authors' - *Note.* Quantitative measurement studies = 59; qualitative/processual studies = 13

3.4. Demand-side determinants

Demand-side determinants cluster into six non-mutually exclusive domains. Venture, economic, and external adversity is the most represented domain, with 16 studies (Komp-Leukkunen, 2023; Nguyen et al., 2026; Oduro Owusu et al., 2026; Othmani et al., 2026), closely followed by work-family and boundary demands (15) and work intensity, role, and emotional demands (13). Relational, social, and structural adversity appears in nine studies, self-generated striving and overinvestment in six, and digital or technology demands in four. The distribution shows that entrepreneurial burnout cannot be reduced to workload: depletion is embedded in venture conditions, family boundaries, social relations, structural constraints, and increasingly digital work environments.

Table 4. Demand-side determinant domains

Domain	Definition	Constructs/themes included	n
Venture, economic, and external adversity	Venture threats, shocks, and institutional pressure.	Failure risk; financial pressure; scarcity; crisis; founder dependence; mission-market tension.	16
Work-family and boundary demands	Competing work and non-work demands.	Work-family conflict; business prioritization; night work; boundary erosion.	15
Work intensity, role, and emotional demands	Effort-consuming work and role conditions.	Workload; time pressure; role strain; emotional demands; responsibility.	13
Relational, social, and structural adversity	Adverse social and institutional conditions.	Injustice; loneliness; stigma; patriarchy; discrimination; indebtedness.	9
Self-generated striving and overinvestment	Striving and attachment that prolong exposure.	Hustle; overcommitment; obsessive passion; addiction-like involvement.	6
Digital and technology demands	Technology-related cognitive and temporal load.	Techno-overload; technostress; digital work intensity.	4

Source: Authors'

The clearest convergence occurs around sustained work intensity and role strain. Workload, role ambiguity or conflict, emotional demands, and related job stressors repeatedly correspond to higher

exhaustion or burnout (Fernet et al., 2016; Tahar et al., 2023). Role-stressor analyses of entrepreneurs and SME directors extend this finding (Manchiraju et al., 2024; Parmentier et al., 2023). A second convergence concerns the permeability of the work-family boundary. Work-to-family and family-to-work conflict, weak stopping rules, and business prioritization repeatedly appear as pathways through which entrepreneurial work consumes resources outside the venture (McDowell et al., 2019; De Clercq et al., 2022a, 2022b). Boundary demands also recur among women and solo entrepreneurs (Carina et al., 2026; Jo & Ahn, 2026; Scafarto et al., 2026; Tahir, 2025). A third pattern extends beyond the work task itself: financial pressure, resource scarcity, crisis exposure, founder dependence, and institutional adversity can sustain demand despite attempts to regulate personal effort (Bagheri et al., 2024; Bernhard-Oettel et al., 2019).

3.5. Resource-side determinants and resource functions

Resource-side evidence is organized into four non-mutually exclusive domains. Personal psychological and self-regulatory resources are most frequent, appearing in 19 studies (Kibler et al., 2024; Kim et al., 2022; Krishnapriya & Ajithkumar, 2025; Malak & Qassim, 2025; Malak et al., 2025). Autonomy, fit, and meaning resources occur in 10 studies (Brieger et al., 2021; Hernández et al., 2026; Obschonka et al., 2023; Watson et al., 2024), relational, family, and social resources in 10, and recovery and restoration resources in eight. Importantly, the same type of resource enters empirical models in different analytical positions: as an upstream predictor, moderator, mediator, recovery mechanism, or intervention target. Resource frequency therefore indicates where the literature has concentrated, not a single uniform protective effect.

Table 5. Resource-side determinant domains

Domain	Definition	Constructs/themes included	n
Personal psychological and self-regulatory resources	Capacities for appraisal, coping, or regulation.	Resilience; psychological capital; efficacy; coping; mindfulness; adaptability; digital competence.	19
Autonomy, fit, and meaning resources	Control, congruence, and meaningful work.	Autonomy; person-work fit; social value; passion; identity.	10
Relational, family, and social resources	Supportive social relations.	Peer, partner, and family support; networks; mentoring; distributed leadership.	10
Recovery and restoration resources	Replenishment after exposure.	Detachment; relaxation; sleep; recovery; coaching; boundaries.	8

Source: Authors'

Across these domains, four recurring functions can be distinguished. Protective or enabling resources reduce exposure or weaken the association between a demand and burnout. Regulatory resources alter appraisal, self-efficacy, coping, or emotion regulation without necessarily removing the demand. Restorative resources replenish capacity after exposure through detachment, relaxation, sleep, recovery experiences, coaching, or boundary-setting (Bennett et al., 2025; Le Moal & Torrès, 2026). Intervention and daily-recovery research expands the restorative evidence (Busch et al., 2021; Mukerjee et al., 2026; Stier-Jarmer et al., 2020; Thurik et al., 2026). Finally, some qualitative studies show a sustaining function in which resilience or relational support helps entrepreneurs continue operating under persistent adversity even when the source of pressure remains present (Long et al., 2024).

3.6. Mechanisms linking entrepreneurial conditions to burnout

The mechanism evidence clarifies how demands and resources enter the burnout process rather than merely whether they correlate with burnout. Stress and strain appraisal translate career shocks, entrepreneurial hustle, and other demanding conditions into proximal psychological strain (St-Jean

et al., 2023; Shen, 2026). Rumination prolongs exposure after an adverse event or perception of injustice (Soenen et al., 2019). Work-family transmission carries demands and resource loss across domains (De Clercq et al., 2022a, 2022b; Memili & Kaciak, 2026). Fit, passion, identity, and commitment explain why intense involvement is experienced as meaningful and sustainable in some configurations but depleting in others (de Mol et al., 2018; Zhao, Li, et al., 2023; Zhao, Weng, et al., 2023). Recovery processes determine whether depleted capacity is restored between episodes of effort (Bennett et al., 2025; Le Moal & Torrès, 2026).

Table 6. Mechanisms explicitly modeled or qualitatively traced

Mechanism	Function in process	Evidence represented in the corpus	Representative studies
Stress/strain appraisal	Translates demand into strain.	Career shock or hustle → stress → exhaustion.	St-Jean et al. (2023); Shen (2026)
Rumination/cognitive persistence	Extends exposure after an event.	Injustice → rumination → exhaustion.	Soenen et al. (2019)
Work-family/boundary transmission	Carries demands across domains.	Conflict; family involvement; boundary erosion.	De Clercq et al. (2022a, 2022b); Memili and Kaciak (2026)
Fit, passion, identity, commitment	Shapes the meaning of involvement.	Fit; passion; commitment and overinvestment.	de Mol et al. (2018); Zhao, Li, et al. (2023); Zhao, Weng, et al. (2023); Supachaiwat et al. (2026)
Self-efficacy, indebtedness, coping	Explains divergent resource effects.	Connection → efficacy and indebtedness; coping.	Shan et al. (2026); Shen (2026); Lasrado et al. (2026)
Recovery impairment / restoration	Restores capacity.	Detachment; coaching; recovery; boundaries.	Bennett et al. (2025); Shahid and Kundi (2022); Le Moal and Torrès (2026)
Loss/gain spirals and redesign	Traces change after depletion.	Burnout, recovery, delegation, and redesign.	Müller (2026)

Source: Authors'

3.7. Downstream consequences

The consequences literature is substantially narrower than the determinants literature. Burnout or a burnout dimension is analytically upstream of career continuation or withdrawal outcomes in 10 studies and venture performance, development, or resilience outcomes in 11. Psychological or life well-being is modeled downstream in five studies, work attitudes or satisfaction in two, and direct family or work-life spillover in one. These categories overlap where the same study contains more than one downstream outcome, but the distribution clearly shows where the evidence is concentrated.

Table 7. Downstream consequence domains

Domain	Definition	Outcomes included	n
Career continuation and withdrawal	Continuation or exit.	Exit intention; actual exit; career commitment.	10
Venture performance, development, and resilience	Venture functioning and adaptation.	Performance; growth; orientation; redesign.	11
Psychological and life well-being	Individual downstream well-being.	Psychological well-being; life satisfaction.	5
Work attitudes and satisfaction	Evaluation of work/role.	Job or entrepreneur satisfaction.	2
Family/work-life spillover	Family effects after burnout.	Direct family or work-life outcomes.	1

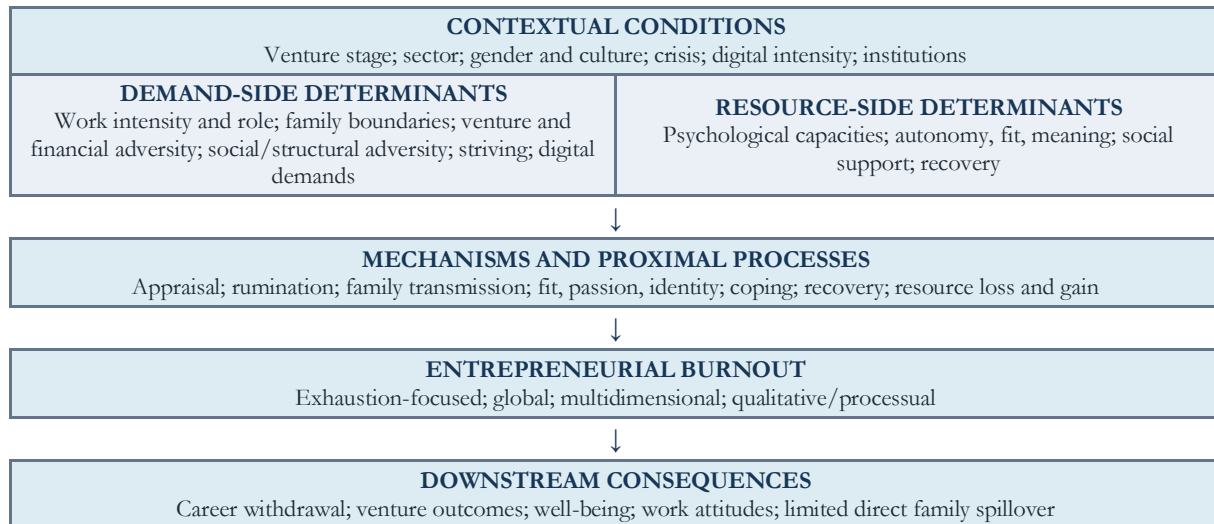
Source: Authors'

Career withdrawal represents the most consistent individual-to-career consequence. Several studies associate exhaustion or burnout with exit intentions, propensity to quit, or actual withdrawal (Sardeshmukh et al., 2021; Shahid & Kundi, 2022); related analyses examine quitting and exit intentions (Barrado & Osca, 2025; Shi & Yang, 2024), although non-significant or conditional relationships show that depletion does not automatically produce exit (Fatoki, 2019). Venture outcomes are similarly heterogeneous. Emotional exhaustion is linked in some studies to reduced performance, growth, or entrepreneurial orientation (Lanchimba et al., 2025; Malak & Qassim, 2026; Neneh, 2024; Ruiz-Adame & Martínez-Rodríguez, 2025), whereas qualitative evidence shows that a burnout episode can also become a trigger for delegation, boundary-setting, and organizational redesign (Müller, 2026). The consequence is therefore not always simple deterioration; the post-burnout trajectory depends on available alternatives, resources, identity, and the ability to change the organization of entrepreneurial work.

3.8. Integrated patterns of convergence and divergence

The cross-study comparison reveals that convergence occurs most clearly at the level of broad processes, while divergence is concentrated in how those processes are configured. High and sustained demands generally correspond to greater depletion, but the magnitude and downstream meaning of that depletion depend on resources, appraisal, recovery, fit, and context. Likewise, resources are generally valuable, but several studies show that their effects can be conditional or carry costs.

Figure 2 integrates the categories derived from the study-level coding into a process representation. Mechanisms occupy a separate proximal layer because they explain how these conditions are translated into depletion, regulation, or recovery. Entrepreneurial burnout is then positioned as the focal state, followed by only those consequence domains for which included studies place burnout or a burnout dimension analytically upstream. The figure is therefore a synthesis of relationships distributed across the corpus, not a claim that one study or one theory has tested the complete sequence.

Figure 2. Integrated process framework of entrepreneurial burnout

Source: Authors'

4. Discussion

4.1. From antecedent inventories to a process explanation

The main theoretical gain from the review is a shift from antecedent inventories toward a process explanation. Earlier syntheses were necessarily concerned with establishing the field, mapping causes and consequences, and identifying recurring predictors (Omrane et al., 2018; Palmer et al., 2021; Delladio & Caputo, 2025). The enlarged 72-study corpus shows that these predictors become more coherent when their analytical roles are separated.

4.2. Externally imposed versus self-generated demands

A second contribution concerns the origin of entrepreneurial demands. Most demand evidence still concerns pressures that are external to the entrepreneur's immediate volition: workload, role ambiguity, financial exposure, family interference, customer and employee responsibilities, institutional constraints, crisis shocks, and technology-related overload. However, six studies in the present corpus point to an additional, smaller stream in which demands are partly reproduced through patterns of entrepreneurial striving and attachment (Ayachit & Chitta, 2024; Ross et al., 2021). Because this stream represents a minority of the evidence, it is best interpreted as an emerging pattern rather than a defining property of entrepreneurial burnout.

4.3. Resources are functional, not uniformly beneficial

The resource evidence is strongest when resources are classified by what they do rather than by whether they are presumed to be positive. JD-R theory defines resources through their capacity to support goal attainment, reduce demand costs, or stimulate growth, while COR theory emphasizes their value in preventing and reversing loss (Bakker et al., 2023; Hobfoll et al., 2018). In the entrepreneurial literature, this functional logic produces at least four recurring roles: protective/enabling resources reduce exposure or weaken a demand-burnout link; regulatory resources alter appraisal, emotion regulation, or coping; restorative resources replenish depleted capacity; and sustaining resources allow functioning to continue under persistent adversity.

Autonomy illustrates why a nominal resource can have divergent effects. In emotional-demand research, autonomy can buffer the psychological cost of entrepreneurial work (Tahar et al., 2023). In internet-based freelancing, however, high discretion can coexist with night work, extended availability, and weakened temporal boundaries, producing an autonomy paradox (Shevchuk et al., 2019). The contradiction disappears once function and use are distinguished: autonomy can provide control, but control does not guarantee that entrepreneurs will use discretion to reduce exposure or protect recovery.

4.4. Entrepreneurial burnout or entrepreneurial exhaustion ?

The measurement profile requires the review to take an explicit construct position. Burnout and emotional exhaustion are related, but they are not interchangeable labels. Contemporary burnout theory treats exhaustion as a central manifestation of prolonged demand exposure while also recognizing psychological distancing/cynicism and efficacy-related dimensions (Maslach & Leiter, 2016; Bakker et al., 2023). Delladio and Caputo (2025) identify this lack of conceptual precision as a continuing weakness in entrepreneurship research. The present corpus confirms that the problem remains: 30 of 59 quantitative studies are exhaustion-focused, 17 use global or unidimensional scores, and only 12 retain two or more burnout dimensions.

4.5. What actually follows burnout?

The third research question reveals a pronounced asymmetry between what predicts burnout and what has been demonstrated after burnout. Career continuation/withdrawal and venture outcomes have the strongest downstream evidence, whereas psychological and life well-being, work attitudes, family outcomes, and broader stakeholder spillovers are much less frequently modeled with burnout clearly upstream.

Career withdrawal is the most coherent downstream stream, but it is not deterministic. Emotional exhaustion or burnout predicts exit intentions, intentions to abandon entrepreneurial activity, or actual exit in several studies (Sardeshmukh et al., 2021; Shahid & Kundi, 2022; Sánchez-Medina et al., 2026). Fatoki (2019), however, reports a weak and non-significant burnout-quit relationship. The divergence is theoretically meaningful: entrepreneurial identity, sunk financial and emotional investment, family obligations, limited labor-market alternatives, founder dependence, and perceived venture potential can all separate exhaustion from actual withdrawal. Exit should therefore be modeled as a decision process with constraints and alternatives, not as an automatic behavioral endpoint.

4.6. What has changed since previous reviews?

The contribution of the present review is clearest when the 2016-2026 evidence is read against earlier syntheses rather than treated as an isolated corpus. Omrane et al. (2018) helped establish entrepreneurial burnout as a distinct problem and called for stronger empirical evidence. Mäkinen et al. (2021) highlighted the limited and heterogeneous evidence on entrepreneur burnout and occupational well-being, while Palmer et al. (2021) mapped an emerging field still dominated by fragmented antecedent-outcome relationships. Delladio and Caputo (2025) then consolidated 47 articles through 2023 and identified construct clarity, measurement, entrepreneur-specific stressors/resources, prevention, context, and consequences as central areas for development.

4.7. Implications

Theoretical implications follow first from the process architecture. Entrepreneurship research should not treat burnout as a static dependent variable appended to a collection of stressors. Stephan (2018) argued that entrepreneurs' mental health requires dynamic, socially embedded, context-sensitive theorizing, and the present synthesis specifies one route for doing so. JD-R can organize demand-resource architecture, COR can explain resource loss and accumulation, and mechanism-specific perspectives on recovery, fit, identity, passion, coping, and family boundaries can specify where and how transitions occur (Bakker et al., 2023; Hobfoll et al., 2018).

For entrepreneurs and support organizations, the practical implication is that burnout prevention requires work-design as well as individual coping. Recovery evidence supports psychological detachment, relaxation, mastery, control, protected recovery time, and boundary management, while intervention studies indicate that structured stress-prevention and coaching approaches are feasible in owner-managed settings (Bennett et al., 2025; Le Moal et al., 2026; Le Moal & Torrès, 2026). However, resilience training alone may be insufficient where the source of strain is financial insecurity, founder dependence, family overload, or institutional exclusion.

4.8. Research agenda

Future research should first strengthen the temporal study of entrepreneurial burnout. Diary studies, experience-sampling designs, event-based panels, and multi-wave studies can test how demands accumulate, when resources are depleted, how recovery interrupts accumulation, and whether relapse occurs after apparent improvement. This priority follows both contemporary JD-R/COR developments and the small but informative set of repeated-wave entrepreneur studies already demonstrating temporal ordering (Bakker et al., 2023; Hobfoll et al., 2018; St-Jean et al., 2023; Bennett et al., 2025; Shen, 2026).

A second priority is construct comparability. Studies should distinguish explicitly among entrepreneurial emotional exhaustion, global burnout, and multidimensional burnout, justify the selected instrument, and test whether key demand-resource relationships replicate across operationalizations. Measurement invariance across entrepreneurial populations and cultures would help determine whether apparent contextual differences reflect substantive heterogeneity or measurement non-equivalence. This responds directly to the construct fragmentation identified both in earlier reviews and in the present corpus (Mäkinen et al., 2021; Delladio & Caputo, 2025).

4.9. Limitations

This review has several limitations that define the scope of its conclusions. First, the search was conducted in Scopus and the Web of Science Core Collection and restricted to English-language, peer-reviewed journal articles within a management and entrepreneurship frame. The corpus should therefore be interpreted as a systematic account of the indexed peer-reviewed literature captured by the stated protocol rather than as an exhaustive census of every study of entrepreneur mental health.

Second, the evidential strength of the included studies is uneven. Cross-sectional quantitative designs remain dominant, and the literature uses multiple burnout operationalizations, sample types, sectors, and national contexts. As a result, the review can identify recurring relationships, divergences, and process mechanisms, but it cannot assign the same causal confidence to every arrow in the integrated framework. Finally, because the search was conducted on 4 August 2026, the 2026 publication count is necessarily incomplete and the rapidly expanding literature will require future updating.

Conclusions

Entrepreneurial burnout has developed into a substantially larger and more diverse field of research, but the expansion of evidence has not by itself produced conceptual integration. This review synthesized 72 empirical studies published between 2016 and 4 August 2026 to examine how burnout is conceptualized, how entrepreneurial demands and resources are connected to its development, through which mechanisms those relationships operate, and which consequences are directly supported.

The first conclusion concerns the construct itself. Entrepreneurial burnout remains operationally fragmented. Of the 59 quantitative studies, more than half rely on exhaustion-focused measures, while substantially fewer retain multiple burnout dimensions. Emotional exhaustion is therefore the dominant empirical representation of the phenomenon, even though it does not capture the full syndrome. Greater construct precision is essential if the literature is to accumulate reliably across studies, theories, and contexts.

The second conclusion concerns the process underlying burnout. Entrepreneurial demands extend from workload and role stress to work-family interference, venture and financial adversity, structural constraints, self-generated overinvestment, and digital strain. Resources include psychological and self-regulatory capacities, autonomy and fit, relational support, and recovery opportunities, but their contribution depends on function and context. The mechanism evidence shows how appraisal, rumination, cross-domain transmission, identity and fit, coping, and recovery connect these conditions to depletion. Figure 2 integrates these findings by positioning demands

and resources as parallel conditions, mechanisms as proximal processes, burnout as the focal state, and downstream outcomes as a subsequent stage of the evidence.

The third conclusion is that the consequences of entrepreneurial burnout are more concentrated than broad discussions of the topic sometimes imply. Career continuation and withdrawal and venture performance, development, or resilience have the strongest direct empirical support. Burnout can contribute to withdrawal or impaired venture functioning, but neither outcome is automatic; identity, obligations, resource availability, alternatives, and organizational redesign can change the trajectory. Evidence for direct family and broader stakeholder spillovers remains comparatively limited.

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