COMO OS PEQUENOS NEGÓCIOS SE ADAPTAM ESTRATEGICAMENTE EM CONTEXTOS DE CRISES: UMA METASSÍNTESE POR MEIO DA EFFECTUATION E DA BRICOLAGE

HOW SMALL BUSINESSES STRATEGICALLY ADAPT TO CRISES: A META SYNTHESIS THROUGH EFFECTUATION AND BRICOLAGE

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Comunicação:
O XIV SINGEP foi realizado em conjunto com a 14th Conferência Internacional do CIK (CYRUS Institute of Knowledge) e com a SPARK (Society for Promoting Academic Research and Knowledge), em formato híbrido, com sede presencial na UNINOVE - Universidade Nove de Julho, no Brasil.

Agradecimento à orgão de fomento:
CAPES - CNPQ - UNINOVE

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Objetivo do estudo
Integrar evidências qualitativas sobre como pequenos negócios se adaptam estrategicamente em contextos de crise, construindo uma interpretação teórica de ordem superior dos mecanismos por meio dos quais Effectuation e Bricolage operam como lógicas de ação empreendedora sob condições de incerteza e restrição.

Relevância/originalidade
O estudo avança a compreensão da adaptação estratégica de pequenos negócios em contexto de crises ao revelar como Effectuation e Bricolage, tradicionalmente analisadas separadamente, operam de forma complementar, identificando uma lacuna de mecanismos entre pressões da crise, decisões empreendedoras e respostas adaptativas.

Metodologia/abordagem
Metassíntese qualitativa de 42 estudos identificados na Web of Science e Scopus e por rastreamento de citações. Fundamentada na tradição metaetnográfica, a análise utilizou a estrutura Gioia para organizar conceitos de primeira ordem, temas de segunda ordem e dimensões agregadas.

Principais resultados
A metassíntese identifica quatro dimensões e seis padrões de adaptação estratégica Effectuation e Bricolage coexistem em 86% dos estudos como lógicas complementares diante da incerteza e escassez Evidencia-se uma lacuna de mecanismos sobre como empreendedores articulam essas lógicas ao longo das crises.

Contribuições teóricas/metodológicas
Teoricamente, o CEAF integra Effectuation e Bricolage como mecanismos complementares, conectando pressões de crise, ação empreendedora e adaptação estratégica. Metodologicamente, a metassíntese combina tradição metaetnográfica e estrutura analítica Gioia para integrar evidências qualitativas e construir interpretações teóricas de ordem superior.

Contribuições sociais/para a gestão
O estudo orienta empreendedores a combinar experimentação, improvisação, mobilização de redes e desenvolvimento de capacidades em crises. Para formuladores de políticas, evidencia que apoio oportuno e acessível, associado a recursos financeiros, capacitação, redes e bem-estar, amplia as possibilidades de adaptação empresarial.

Palavras-chave: crises, pequenos negócios, adaptação estratégica, Effectuation, Bricolage

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Study purpose
To integrate qualitative evidence on how small businesses strategically adapt in crisis contexts, constructing a higher-order theoretical interpretation of the mechanisms through which Effectuation and Bricolage operate as entrepreneurial action logics under uncertainty and resource constraints.

Relevance / originality
The study advances understanding of small business strategic adaptation in crisis contexts by revealing how Effectuation and Bricolage, traditionally examined separately, operate complementarily, while identifying a mechanism gap between crisis pressures, entrepreneurial decision-making, and adaptive responses.

Methodology / approach
A qualitative meta-synthesis of 42 studies identified through Web of Science, Scopus, and citation tracking was conducted. Grounded in the meta-ethnographic tradition, the analysis employed the Gioia structure to organize first-order concepts, second-order themes, and aggregate dimensions across the synthesized evidence.

Main results
The meta-synthesis identifies four dimensions and six strategic adaptation patterns. Effectuation and Bricolage coexist in 86% of studies as complementary logics under uncertainty and scarcity. A mechanism gap remains regarding how entrepreneurs articulate these logics throughout crises.

Theoretical / methodological contributions
Theoretically, the CEAF integrates Effectuation and Bricolage as complementary mechanisms linking crisis pressures, entrepreneurial action, and strategic adaptation. Methodologically, the meta-synthesis combines the meta-ethnographic tradition with the Gioia analytical structure to integrate qualitative evidence and develop higher-order theoretical interpretations.

Social / management contributions
The study guides entrepreneurs in combining experimentation, improvisation, network mobilization, and capability development during crises. For policymakers, it highlights that timely and accessible support, combined with financial resources, capability building, networks, and wellbeing, expands opportunities for business adaptation.

Keywords: crisis, small business, strategic adaptation, Effectuation, Bricolage

HOW SMALL BUSINESSES STRATEGICALLY ADAPT TO CRISES: A META-SYNTHESIS THROUGH EFFECTUATION AND BRICOLAGE

1 Introduction

Strategic adaptation by small businesses in crisis contexts has gained considerable attention in both entrepreneurship and strategy research. Crises compress decision time, disrupt planning assumptions, and impose severe resource constraints on firms that typically operate without the financial buffers or organizational slack available to larger organizations (Hermann, 1963; Pearson & Clair, 1998; Belitski et al., 2022).

The COVID-19 pandemic is the crisis most represented in the recent empirical record, generating extensive evidence on how entrepreneurs act when prediction is unreliable and resources are scarce, but the corpus also includes studies on geopolitical conflicts, polycrises, and other disruptive contexts (Rashid &Ratten, 2021; Kovpak & Lebid, 2022; Ojong & Simba, 2025).

Research on small business responses to crisis conditions has documented a wide range of adaptive behaviors. Studies report digitalization responses, including shifts to online sales, digital platforms, and virtual service delivery (Varma & Dutta, 2022, 2023; Koul et al., 2022; Noor Azmi et al., 2023), alongside network mobilization and ecosystem collaboration (Hadjielias et al., 2022; Harima, 2022; Wasehudin et al., 2021), resource improvisation under scarcity (Marjanski & Sutkowski, 2021; Assoba & Mefi, 2021; Jaim, 2024), and business model reconfiguration (Chapman & Karau, 2023; Dib et al., 2024; Vecchiarini et al., 2024).

Conceptual frameworks have interpreted these responses through lenses including resilience (Hutchinson et al., 2021; Mukherjee et al., 2023), dynamic capabilities (Rashid &Ratten, 2021), and ecosystem perspectives (Harima, 2022; Caiazza et al., 2021). The theoretical frameworks of Effectuation (Sarasvathy, 2001, 2008) and Bricolage (Baker & Nelson, 2005) have also been invoked in this literature as candidate explanations for how entrepreneurs act under uncertainty and constraint, though rarely in an integrated manner and seldom as the primary analytical frame.

Despite this accumulation of evidence, the literature on small business crisis adaptation presents two persistent limitations. Studies tend to document what firms did and what outcomes they achieved within specific sectors or geographic contexts, without systematically identifying the action logics that connect crisis conditions to adaptive behavior (Newman & Obschonka, 2022; McMullen & Shepherd, 2006). The resulting picture is empirically rich but theoretically dispersed: adaptation patterns are described at the local level without the cross-study interpretation needed to explain why certain combinations of behaviors emerge under crisis conditions.

Furthermore, Effectuation and Bricolage, though conceptually well-positioned to explain crisis behavior, have not been integrated within a synthesis that examines how they operate jointly, when each predominates, and what mechanisms link them to observable adaptation outcomes (Sarasvathy, 2001; Baker & Nelson, 2005; Pearce et al., 2022).

This study addresses these limitations through a meta-synthesis of 42 peer-reviewed qualitative and interpretive studies on small business adaptation in crisis contexts, with COVID-19 as the most represented episode and geopolitical conflicts, polycrises, and other disruptions also present in the corpus. The research question guiding the synthesis is: **What do published studies reveal about the mechanisms through which small businesses strategically adapt in crisis contexts, and how can these mechanisms be interpreted through the action logics of Effectuation and Bricolage?**

Meta-synthesis, as developed in the tradition of Noblit and Hare (1988) and adapted for management research by Hoon (2013), moves beyond aggregating findings to translate them

across studies and construct second-order theoretical interpretations that are not visible within individual studies. This approach is suited to the present purpose because the existing literature is methodologically heterogeneous and fragmented across contexts, and what is needed is interpretive integration rather than statistical pooling.

The meta-synthesis follows a Gioia-informed analytical procedure (Gioia et al., 2013) in which first-order concepts extracted from the 42 studies are organized into second-order themes and then into aggregate theoretical dimensions. The corpus was identified through structured searches of the Web of Science and Scopus databases, supplemented by citation tracking, and includes studies published between 2020 and 2025 covering geographic contexts from the United States, Brazil, India, Pakistan, Africa, Europe, and beyond. Action-mode coding was applied to each study to assess the relative presence of effectual and bricolage reasoning, enabling systematic comparison of patterns.

The synthesis identifies four aggregate dimensions of crisis adaptation, namely Strategic Reconfiguration, Adaptive Resource Reconfiguration, Relational Adaptation, and Adaptive Capability Development, and six strategic adaptation patterns with frequencies ranging from four to fourteen studies. The predominant finding is that effectuation and bricolage co-occur in 86% of synthesized studies, operating as complementary rather than alternative logics. These findings are integrated into the Crisis Entrepreneurial Action-Mode Framework (CEAF), which positions entrepreneurial action logics as the mechanism layer connecting crisis pressures to adaptive behavior and outcome tendencies.

The study contributes to the entrepreneurial action literature by reframing Effectuation and Bricolage as complementary crisis mechanisms, extends the strategic adaptation literature by specifying the mechanism layer absent from prior frameworks.

2 Theoretical Background

2.1 Crisis Contexts and the Strategic Adaptation Problem for Small Businesses

A crisis is a high-threat event characterized by surprise and limited decision time, accompanied by deep uncertainty about causes and response options (Hermann, 1963; Pearson & Clair, 1998). Crises can emerge from diverse sources, including economic shocks, pandemics, geopolitical conflicts, and natural disasters, but they share a common structural property: they destabilize the assumptions on which existing routines and plans are built, forcing actors to respond under conditions they did not anticipate and cannot fully control (Doern et al., 2016; Baur et al., 2023).

For small businesses, crisis conditions weigh heavily on small businesses. Unlike large corporations, small firms typically operate with limited financial buffers, fewer slack resources, and less capacity for formal strategic planning (Belitski et al., 2022; Caiazza et al., 2021). This structural vulnerability means that during crises, small businesses face a compressed version of the strategic adaptation problem: they must adjust quickly, with limited resources, in the absence of reliable market signals, and without the organizational infrastructure that supports structured crisis management in larger firms (Newman & Obschonka, 2022; Gianiodis et al., 2022).

Strategic adaptation involves continuously adjusting organizational actions to changing economic and institutional environments (Chakravarthy, 1982; Schindehutte & Morris, 2001; Sarta et al., 2021). In small businesses, it often occurs through patterns of action and resource allocation rather than formal planning, highlighting the behavioral and decision processes underlying adaptation (Schindehutte & Morris, 2001; Newman & Obschonka, 2022). Crisis responses can thus be understood as strategic behaviors rather than merely reactions.

Crisis conditions vary across type, sector, geography, institutional support, and firm profile, producing different configurations of uncertainty, scarcity, and adaptive responses

(Patel, 2025; Ojong & Simba, 2025; Kovpak & Lebid, 2022). The corpus therefore spans multiple crisis types rather than treating a single episode as representative.

2.2 Effectuation and Bricolage as Entrepreneurial Action Logics

Two theoretical frameworks are relevant for interpreting how small businesses act strategically under uncertainty and resource constraints.

Effectuation, introduced by Sarasvathy (2001, 2008), describes an entrepreneurial decision logic that begins from a given set of means, comprising who I am, what I know, and whom I know, rather than from a pre-specified goal. Under effectual logic, entrepreneurs set affordable loss rather than expected return as a decision criterion; treat surprises and contingencies as inputs to be incorporated rather than deviations to be avoided; and build commitments through stakeholder engagement, expanding the means available to the project as it evolves. Effectuation is especially suited to conditions of genuine uncertainty, where future states cannot be reliably predicted, because it enables action without requiring prediction (Sarasvathy, 2001; Sarasvathy & Dew, 2005). Crisis conditions, which are characterized by unpredictability and disrupted planning, thus provide a natural context in which effectual logic should be observable.

Bricolage (Baker & Nelson, 2005) refers to making do by creatively recombining available resources to address new problems and opportunities despite resource constraints. Activated by scarcity, it enables improvisation when conventional resources are unavailable, inaccessible, or unaffordable. Crisis conditions, characterized by resource constraints, supply disruptions, and limited financial buffers, therefore provide a natural context for bricolage reasoning.

Effectuation and *Bricolage* are complementary logics of action under uncertainty and constraint. While *Effectuation* emphasizes expanding possibilities through stakeholder engagement and experimentation, *Bricolage* focuses on creatively recombining existing resources under scarcity. In crises, entrepreneurs may alternate or combine these logics as conditions evolve (Newman & Obschonka, 2022; Pearce et al., 2022), and the meta-synthesis examines these configurations and their implications.

3 Method

3.1 Meta-Synthesis as Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative meta-synthesis design. Meta-synthesis refers to the systematic integration of findings from qualitative and interpretive studies to produce a new theoretical understanding that transcends what individual studies have reported (Noblit & Hare, 1988; Sandelowski & Barroso, 2007). Unlike systematic reviews that aggregate evidence, or meta-analyses that pool statistical estimates, meta-synthesis is an inherently interpretive process: it translates findings across studies, identifies analogies and tensions between them, and constructs second-order theoretical claims that represent a genuinely new contribution (Noblit & Hare, 1988; Timulak, 2014).

This approach is well-suited to the present purpose for several reasons. First, the literature on small business crisis adaptation is methodologically heterogeneous, including case studies, qualitative interview studies, ethnographic accounts, and conceptual-empirical work, which means statistical aggregation is neither feasible nor desirable. Second, the theoretical question concerns mechanisms and logics, not effect sizes: what is needed is an interpretation of why entrepreneurs behave as they do under crisis conditions, not a count of how many firms adopted which practices. Third, the evidence is fragmentary at the level of any individual study but potentially coherent at the level of cross-study synthesis, making the translation and integration of findings across studies the appropriate analytical move.

The methodological approach draws primarily on the meta-ethnographic tradition (Noblit & Hare, 1988) as adapted for management and entrepreneurship research (Hoon, 2013), complemented by Gioia et al.'s (2013) structured analytical approach for grounding theoretical constructs in qualitative evidence. This combination supports both the interpretive translation of findings across studies and the systematic presentation of the resulting theoretical structure.

3.2 Search Strategy and Corpus Identification

The meta-synthesis corpus was identified through a structured search of peer-reviewed literature using the Web of Science and Scopus databases, supplemented by forward and backward citation tracking from foundational conceptual articles. Search strings combined terms related to entrepreneurship (entrepreneur*, small business, SME), crisis contexts (crisis, COVID-19, pandemic, geopolitical, shock), and the target theoretical frameworks (effectuation, bricolage, strategic adaptation, resilience), for articles in English, in the field of management and business, up to February 2026.

Inclusion criteria required studies to: (i) address small businesses, SMEs, or micro-enterprises as the primary unit of analysis; (ii) engage with a crisis context, whether pandemic, geopolitical, economic, or other disruptive events, as the empirical setting; (iii) report qualitative, interpretive, or mixed-method findings relevant to entrepreneurial behavior, decision-making, or strategic adaptation; and (iv) be published in peer-reviewed outlets. Studies were excluded if they focused primarily on large corporations, addressed crisis only as background context, or did not generate evidence relevant to the mechanism-level questions guiding the synthesis.

This process yielded a final corpus of 42 studies published between 2020 and 2025, distribution 2020 (1); 2021 (10); 2022 (13); 2023 (10); 2024 (5); 2025 (3), spanning diverse geographic contexts including the United States (4), Brazil (2), India (3), Pakistan (2), Africa (2), Europe (2), and developing economies (2); cross-regional/general (25), as well as diverse methodological designs **Qualitative designs** - 23 studies; **Quantitative/mixed designs** - 9 studies; **Conceptual-empirical/review** - 10 studies) and sectoral foci.

3.3 Analytical Procedure

The analytical procedure unfolded in four phases, following the meta-ethnographic tradition (Noblit & Hare, 1988) adapted by Hoon (2013).

Phase 1: Repeated reading and initial familiarization. Each study was read in full and systematically coded for crisis context, research design, theoretical framing, evidence of *Effectuation* and *Bricolage*, adaptation mechanisms, and main findings.

Phase 2: First-order concept identification. First-order concepts were extracted representing the vocabulary and categories used by study authors to describe small business behavior during crises. Examples include online sales, digital platforms, making do with existing resources, partnerships, ecosystem support, product pivot, learning and resilience.

Phase 3: Second-order thematic interpretation. First-order concepts were grouped into second-order themes through interpretive comparison, identifying underlying dimensions that cut across multiple studies. This phase produced five second-order themes: Digital Transformation, Business Model Adaptation, Resource Bricolage, Network Mobilization, and Entrepreneurial Resilience.

Phase 4: Aggregate dimension construction. Second-order themes were further interpreted to generate aggregate theoretical dimensions: Strategic Reconfiguration (encompassing Digital Transformation and Business Model Adaptation); Adaptive Resource Reconfiguration (encompassing Resource Bricolage); Relational Adaptation (encompassing Network Mobilization); and Adaptive Capability Development (encompassing Entrepreneurial

Resilience). These dimensions represent the third level of abstraction in the analytical structure and organize the findings in the following sections.

Given the interpretive nature of meta-synthesis, quality assurance depends not on methodological homogeneity but on transparency of analytical reasoning. Each interpretive move, from first-order concepts to second-order themes to aggregate dimensions, was documented and checked for consistency across the corpus. Transparent coding of dominant action logic (Effectuation, Bricolage, Mixed) per article was conducted for all 42 studies. Where evidence was insufficient to support action-mode interpretation, this was recorded as mixed or unclear rather than forcing an interpretation.

4 Findings

4.1 Corpus Overview: Evidence Base and Topical Distribution

The inclusion of geopolitical conflicts, polycrises, and broader crisis contexts extends the corpus beyond COVID-19. The decline in publication volume since 2023, alongside greater geographic and methodological diversity, suggests a shift toward more theoretically refined and comparative research. The topical range spans resilience and continuity, digitalization, network effects, resource improvisation, gendered and inclusion-related constraints, institutional and policy conditions, and the microfoundations of entrepreneurial decision-making. The analytical procedure yielded a data structure organized across three levels of abstraction, shown in Table 1. This structure serves as the analytical backbone for the findings.

Table 1

Gioia-Informed Analytical Structure: From First-Order Concepts to Aggregate Dimensions

First-order concepts (from the data)	Second-order themes	Aggregate dimensions
Online sales; digital platforms; social media use	Digital transformation	Strategic Reconfiguration
New products; new channels; market shift; pivot	Business model adaptation	Strategic Reconfiguration
Making do; resource recombination; cost cutting; frugal solutions	Resource bricolage	Adaptive Resource Reconfiguration
Partnerships; communities; ecosystem support; stakeholder ties	Network mobilization	Relational Adaptation
Learning; resilience; leadership; wellbeing	Entrepreneurial resilience	Adaptive Capability Development

Note. Elaborated by the author (2026).

4.2 Aggregate Dimension I: Strategic Reconfiguration

The most prominent aggregate dimension in the meta-synthesis is Strategic Reconfiguration, encompassing the second-order themes of Digital Transformation and Business Model Adaptation. This dimension captures the deliberate restructuring of how value is created and delivered, prompted by the disruption of existing channels, customer access points, and operational routines.

Digital Transformation emerges as a near-universal adaptive response. Studies spanning Pakistan (Afshan et al., 2021), India (Varma & Dutta, 2022, 2023; Koul et al., 2022), Brazil (Dib et al., 2024; Brito et al., 2022), Malaysia (Noor Azmi et al., 2023), Indonesia (Wasehudin et al., 2021), and the United States (Rashid & Ratten, 2021; Hoelscher & Garcia, 2024) consistently report small businesses shifting to online sales, digital platforms, social media engagement, and virtual service delivery as core adaptive responses. Across these studies,

digitalization functions not merely as a tactical response to resource constraints and lockdown-induced physical constraints but as a strategic repositioning of market access, a reconfiguration of the customer interface that, in many cases, outlasted the acute phase of the crisis.

Meta-synthesis shows that digital responses rarely occur in isolation, but are combined with broader adaptive moves. Digitalization co-occurs with business model and stakeholder reconfiguration (Afshan et al., 2021), ecosystem adaptation and market reorientation (Rashid & Ratten, 2021), and partnership development (Brito et al., 2022), revealing a bundling pattern of digital reconfiguration and adaptation mechanisms.

Business Model Adaptation involves shifts in products, services, markets, and delivery channels through innovation, market redirection, and flexible experimentation (Cook & Karau, 2022/2023; Chapman & Karau, 2023; Vecchiarini et al., 2024). Strategic Reconfiguration is primarily effectual, relying on experimentation with available means and emerging opportunities (Sarasvathy, 2001), while bricolage emerges through the improvised use of existing resources in digital adaptation.

4.3 Aggregate Dimension II: Adaptive Resource Reconfiguration

Adaptive Resource Reconfiguration, centered on Resource Bricolage, captures how small businesses respond to scarcity by creatively recombining available resources. Evidence includes reliance on family resources (Marjanski & Sutkowski, 2021), making-do and loss-reduction strategies (Assoba & Mefi, 2021), and intersectional bricolage under economic and institutional constraints (Jaim, 2024). Resource improvisation may also combine with opportunity recognition, reflecting hybrid *Effectuation–Bricolage* patterns (Belitski et al., 2022). Notably, making-do often coexists with opportunity scanning (Ojong & Simba, 2025; Nouri, 2023), suggesting that crisis bricolage can enable means-based opportunity creation rather than merely survival.

4.4 Aggregate Dimension III: Relational Adaptation

Relational Adaptation, centered on Network Mobilization, captures the strategic use of relationships, partnerships, and ecosystem ties as adaptation resources. Networks function both as mechanisms, providing information, customers, and resources, and as outcomes through new relational configurations. Evidence shows that network ties supported crisis survival (Hadjielias et al., 2022), while ecosystem-level resource sharing enabled firms to navigate disruption collectively (Harima, 2022).

Network mobilization also enables other adaptation dimensions through collective learning and capability building (Wasehudin et al., 2021), while regenerative practices and social innovation extend relational adaptation toward community resilience (Boluk & Panse, 2022). Its action-mode signature is primarily effectual, as stakeholder commitments expand available means, reduce uncertainty, and provide critical resources and information when formal market signals are disrupted (Sarasvathy, 2001).

4.5 Aggregate Dimension IV: Adaptive Capability Development

Adaptive Capability Development, centered on Entrepreneurial Resilience, encompasses learning, leadership, wellbeing, and capabilities developed through crisis experience. It reflects a micro-level perspective on the psychological and behavioral foundations of organizational responses (Newman & Obschonka, 2022), with resilience supported by positive mindset, learning orientation, and relational resources that sustain adaptation under prolonged disruption (Hutchinson et al., 2021).

Resilience trajectories are shaped by institutional and cultural contexts (Patel, 2025), while evidence from geopolitical turbulence shows entrepreneurs developing capabilities to operate under continuous and unpredictable disruption (Kovpak & Lebid, 2022). Wellbeing and leadership further act as enablers of strategic adaptation (Hadjielias et al., 2022; Hutchinson et al., 2021), positioning Adaptive Capability Development as a meta-level resource that influences how other adaptation dimensions are enacted.

4.6 Action-Mode Patterns Across the Corpus

Table 2 presents the action-mode distribution across the 42-study corpus. The predominance of mixed logic patterns (86% of studies) is the meta-synthesis primary action-mode finding.

Table 2

Dominant Action-Mode Logic Across the 42-Study Corpus

Dominant Logic	Studies	Percentage	Characteristic Pattern
Mixed (Effectuation + Bricolage)	36	85.7%	Hybrid co-occurrence of opportunity-shaping and constraint-solving
Effectuation-dominant	3	7.1%	Iterative experimentation, stakeholder engagement, means-based action
Bricolage-dominant	3	7.1%	Making-do, resource recombination, scarcity-driven improvisation

Note. Elaborated by the author (2026).

Predominantly effectual studies reflect crisis-generated opportunities and experimentation (Afshan et al., 2021; Rashid & Ratten, 2021; Varma & Dutta, 2022, 2023), whereas bricolage-dominant studies involve severe resource scarcity and survival-oriented making-do (Assoba & Mefi, 2021; Jaim, 2024; Marjanski & Sutkowski, 2021). Their relative dominance depends on the perceived opportunity-threat balance, resource constraints, market disruption, institutional support, and network resources. In 36 mixed-logic studies, these conditions coexist, producing hybrid adaptation patterns. Table 3 maps action-mode signatures across the four aggregate dimensions.

Table 3

Action-Mode Signatures by Aggregate Dimension

Aggregate Dimension	Primary Action-Mode Signature	Evidence Clarity	Key Illustrative Studies
Strategic Reconfiguration	Effectuation-leaning, with bricolage elements	Medium to High	Afshan et al. (2021); Varma & Dutta (2022, 2023); Chapman & Karau (2023); Dib et al. (2024)
Adaptive Resource Reconfiguration	Bricolage-dominant, with effectual opportunity elements	Medium	Marjanski & Sutkowski (2021); Assoba & Mefi (2021); Jaim (2024); Belitski et al. (2022)
Relational Adaptation	Effectuation-leaning (stakeholder engagement)	Medium to High	Hadjielias et al. (2022); Boluk & Panse (2022); Pearce et al. (2022); Wasehudin et al. (2021)
Adaptive Capability Development	Mixed / both logics present	Medium	Newman & Obschonka (2022); Hutchinson et al. (2021); Kovpak & Lebid (2022); Patel (2025)

Note. Elaborated by the author (2026).

4.7 Strategic Adaptation Patterns: A Cross-Synthesis View

Beyond the aggregate dimensions, the meta-synthesis identifies six strategic adaptation patterns that recur across the corpus, presented in Table 4.

Table 4

Strategic Adaptation Patterns Identified Across the 42-Study Corpus

Strategic Adaptation Pattern	Frequency (n)	Primary Action Logic	Core Mechanisms	Illustrative Studies
Resilience and Continuity	14	Mixed	Consolidation, wellbeing practices, network support, learning	Hutchinson et al. (2021); Mukherjee et al. (2023); Patel (2025)
Digital Adaptation	10	Effectuation-leaning	Digital platform adoption, online market access, capability building	Afshan et al. (2021); Varma & Dutta (2022, 2023); Koul et al. (2022)
Strategic Reconfiguration	5	Hybrid	Business model pivot, market repositioning, innovation	Chapman &Karau (2023); Vecchiarini et al. (2024)
Network-Enabled Resilience	5	Effectuation-leaning	Partnership mobilization, ecosystem support, collective action	Hadjielias et al. (2022); Boluk & Panse (2022); Wasehudin et al. (2021)
Mixed Adaptation	4	Mixed	Multiple simultaneous mechanisms; context-specific combinations	Baur et al. (2023); Newman & Obschonka (2022); Giunipero et al. (2022)
Resource-Constrained Survival	4	Bricolage-dominant	Making-do, frugal improvisation, family resource use	Marjanski & Sutkowski (2021); Ojong & Simba (2025); Kovpak & Lebid (2022)

Note. Elaborated by the author (2026).

Resilience and Continuity is the most frequent pattern, indicating that, in crisis contexts, many small businesses prioritize maintaining operations, supported by mixed *Effectuation* and *Bricolage* logics. Digital Adaptation shows a predominance of *Effectuation*, while Resource-Constrained Survival is more closely associated with *Bricolage*, particularly in contexts of extreme scarcity, such as developing economies, conflict-affected environments, and firms with limited family resources.

A central finding of the meta-synthesis is the mechanism gap. Across the 42 studies, the "what" of crisis adaptation, including actions, resources, and outcomes, is well documented, while the "how," involving decision sequences, shifts between action logics, and entrepreneurial reasoning under uncertainty, remains underspecified. Although 86% of studies show mixed *Effectuation* and *Bricolage* patterns, few explain how entrepreneurs alternate between these modes or decide when to experiment, conserve resources, evaluate affordable loss, and build stakeholder commitments as crises evolve.

5 An Integrative Framework: The Crisis Entrepreneurial Action-Mode Framework (CEAF)

The Crisis Entrepreneurial Action-Mode Framework (CEAF), presented in Figure 1, organizes the evidence from studies into a response to the study question. Rather than cataloguing crisis strategies, the CEAF traces a causal path from crisis conditions to adaptive behavior and outcome tendencies, positioning the action logics of Effectuation and Bricolage as the mechanism layer that connects pressures to behavior.

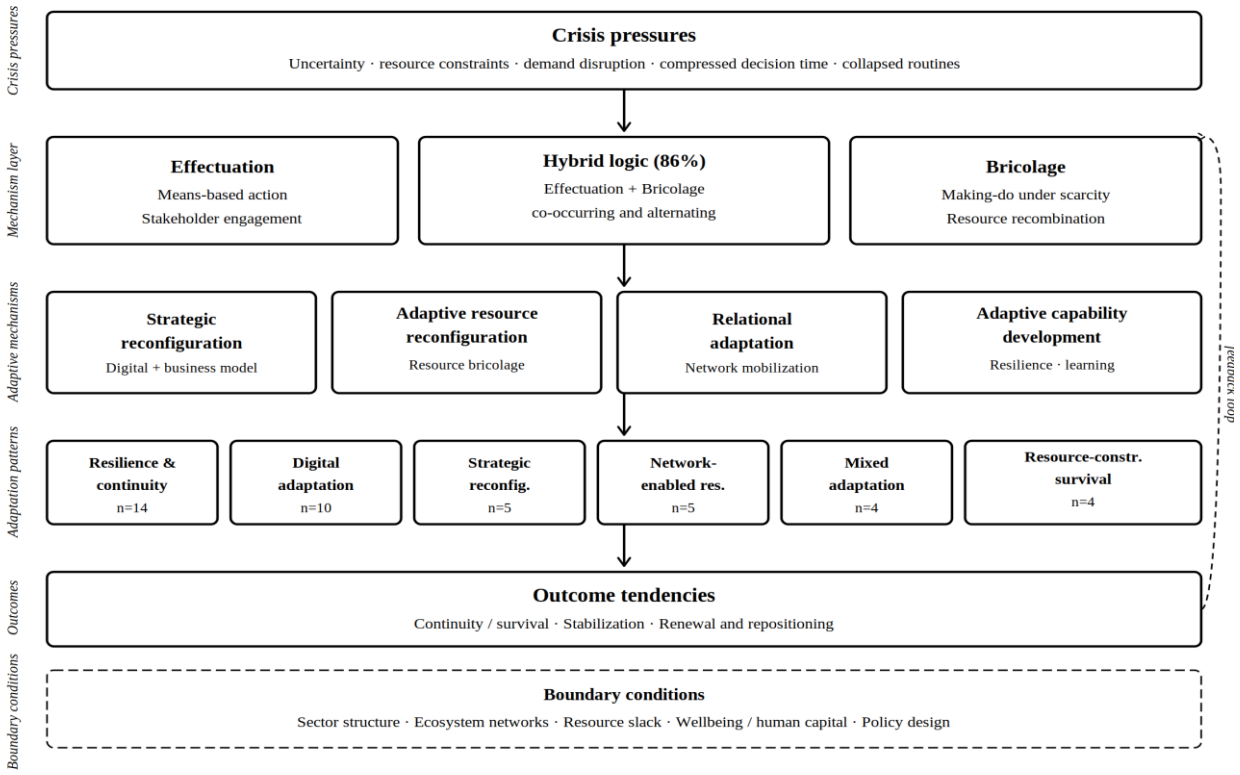


Figure 1.
Crisis Entrepreneurial Action-Mode Framework (CEAF)
Note: *Created based on the research (2026).*

Framework begins with crisis pressures, which reshape the decision environment for small businesses by compressing decision time, disrupting established routines, imposing resource constraints, and generating demand volatility (Hermann, 1963; Newman & Obschonka, 2022; Marjanski & Sutkowski, 2021). These pressures are the triggering condition: they create the need for adaptation by rendering prior plans insufficient and forcing entrepreneurs to act under uncertainty and scarcity simultaneously. Their intensity and character vary by crisis type, sector exposure, geographic context, and the resource profile of the firm (Patel, 2025; Ojong & Simba, 2025; Kovpak & Lebid, 2022).

Crisis pressures do not produce adaptation directly. They first activate entrepreneurial action logics, the mechanism layer through which entrepreneurs interpret what the crisis requires and choose how to respond. The meta-synthesis establishes that these logics are predominantly hybrid: effectual reasoning, encompassing means-based action, stakeholder engagement, and iterative experimentation, and bricolage reasoning, encompassing making-do and resource recombination under scarcity, co-occur in 86% of the synthesized studies rather than operating as alternatives.

The relative dominance of each logic depends on crisis pressures: effectuation prevails when reconfiguration opportunities emerge, whereas bricolage dominates under resource constraints. Because existing studies emphasize what firms did rather than how entrepreneurs decided, the CEAF positions this mechanism layer at the framework's explanatory core.

From the mechanism layer, action logics are expressed as adaptive mechanisms, the four aggregate dimensions identified in the synthesis: Strategic Reconfiguration, Adaptive Resource Reconfiguration, Relational Adaptation, and Adaptive Capability Development. These dimensions represent the observable behavioral content of entrepreneurial action under crisis,

translating the decision logics of effectuation and bricolage into actions that can be identified and compared across studies.

They do not operate independently: the study reveals that they tend to appear as bundles, with digital reconfiguration and network mobilization co-occurring, and operational adaptation coupled with resource conservation. The bundling of dimensions reflects the fact that crisis conditions create multiple simultaneous demands that cannot be addressed through any single adaptive action.

The combination and sequencing of adaptive mechanisms, shaped by the action logics and the crisis context, produces the strategic adaptation patterns that the synthesis identifies at the macro level: Resilience and Continuity, Digital Adaptation, Strategic Reconfiguration, Network-Enabled Resilience, Mixed Adaptation, and Resource-Constrained Survival. These patterns represent the configurations that emerge when entrepreneurs activate particular combinations of the four dimensions under specific crisis conditions. They are outcomes of the mechanism layer, not independent strategies: the same firm could exhibit different patterns as crisis conditions evolve and as the balance between effectual and bricolage reasoning shifts.

The patterns, in turn, translate into outcome tendencies, the observable results that the literature documents: operational continuity and survival are most commonly reported, followed by stabilization of resources and operations, with renewal and repositioning toward improved post-crisis viability observed in a smaller subset of cases (Vecchiarini et al., 2024; Jayasuriya et al., 2025; Dib et al., 2024).

The framework does not predict which outcome a given firm will achieve, because that depends on boundary conditions that the synthesis identifies as moderating the entire causal path: sector structure and demand characteristics, ecosystem network strength and accessibility, access to finance and resource slack, human capital, wellbeing and leadership capacity, and the design and accessibility of institutional support programs (Cowling et al., 2020; Hadjielias et al., 2022; Patel, 2025). These boundary conditions shape what action logics are feasible, which adaptive mechanisms are accessible, and how effectively patterns translate into outcomes.

The framework closes with a feedback loop, shown as a dashed arrow on the right side of Figure 1, running from outcome tendencies back to the mechanism layer. This loop reflects a finding that runs across the corpus: outcomes from one adaptation cycle reshape the entrepreneur's available means and constraints, which in turn influence the action logics activated in subsequent cycles (Rashid & Ratten, 2021; Belitski et al., 2022; Newman & Obschonka, 2022). A firm that achieves digital capability through crisis adaptation enters the next crisis with a different resource profile and a different balance of effectual and bricolage options than it had before. The CEAF is therefore not a static model of a single crisis episode but a dynamic architecture in which each cycle of crisis, action, and outcome reconfigures the starting conditions for the next.

6 Research Gaps and Agenda

The meta-synthesis identifies six priorities for theoretical and empirical development. **Gap 1: Mechanisms.** Process-level evidence remains limited on how entrepreneurs select, sequence, and alternate action logics across crisis phases, calling for longitudinal and process-oriented research. **Gap 2: Durability and capability trajectories.** Although digital adaptation is a dominant crisis response, it remains unclear whether these configurations persist and develop into capabilities beyond temporary continuity measures. **Gap 3: Crisis type and phase sensitivity.** The predominance of COVID-19 studies limits understanding of whether action-mode patterns vary across crisis types, including geopolitical conflicts and polycrises, and across shock, adjustment, and recovery phases. **Gap 4: Heterogeneity and inclusion.** Evidence of gendered, cultural, and institutional constraints on adaptation (Boluk & Panse, 2022; Jaim,

2024; Ojong & Simba, 2025; Namatovu & Larsen, 2021; Kovpak & Lebid, 2022) calls for intersectional and comparative research. **Gap 5: Wellbeing and human capital.** Resilience, learning, leadership, and wellbeing should be examined as strategic mechanisms enabling adaptation rather than primarily as outcomes. **Gap 6: Policy as mechanism.** Research should examine how policy design, timing, and access shape the activation and relative dominance of effectual and bricolage responses rather than treating institutional support as context.

Table 5

Evidence-Derived Research Agenda

Gap	What the synthesis shows	Why it matters	Research directions
1. Mechanism gap	Actions documented but decision sequences and logic alternation underspecified	Without process evidence, adaptation theories remain descriptive	Process-tracing designs; longitudinal qualitative studies; retrospective interviews
2. Capability durability	Digital adaptation widespread but evidence on lasting capabilities is thin	Crisis adaptations may be temporary; understanding what endures is relevant	Longitudinal performance tracking; comparative pre/post-crisis designs
3. Crisis type and phase	COVID-19 is the most represented episode; other crisis types and phases comparatively underrepresented	Boundary conditions on adaptation theories unclear without more comparative crisis evidence	Comparative designs across crisis types; within-case phase analysis
4. Heterogeneity and inclusion	Gendered and institutional constraints shape feasibility but not theoretically integrated	Risk of one-size-fits-all models obscuring unequal access to adaptation resources	Intersectional sampling; comparative institutional designs
5. Wellbeing as mechanism	Resilience and wellbeing enable other dimensions but treated as outcomes	Incomplete explanations of why some entrepreneurs sustain adaptation capacity	Mixed-method designs integrating wellbeing and strategy measures
6. Policy as mechanism	Government support treated as context, not as shaping action-mode activation	Without understanding policy-agency interaction, support programs may be poorly designed	Program evaluation designs; comparative policy-access analysis

Note. Elaborated by the author (2026).

7 Discussion

The predominance of mixed *Effectuation* and *Bricolage* patterns in 86% of studies shows that these traditionally distinct logics operate complementarily in crises, where uncertainty and scarcity coexist. Aligned with calls to integrate entrepreneurial action frameworks (Newman & Obschonka, 2022), this both/and configuration suggests that opportunity shaping and constraint solving are interdependent responses to crisis pressures.

The four aggregate dimensions identified through the Gioia-informed procedure extend crisis adaptation beyond broad typologies. Within Strategic Reconfiguration, Digital Transformation and Business Model Adaptation show that digitalization is not an isolated tactic but part of broader reconfigurations of value creation and stakeholder engagement (Rashid & Ratten, 2021; Belitski et al., 2022).

Adaptive Resource Reconfiguration extends Bricolage to intersectional contexts where economic and social constraints coexist (Baker & Nelson, 2005; Jaim, 2024). Relational

Adaptation connects to ecosystem perspectives (Harima, 2022; Rashid & Ratten, 2021), while Adaptive Capability Development aligns with microfoundational accounts of entrepreneurial resilience (Newman & Obschonka, 2022; Hutchinson et al., 2021). Together, these dimensions show that crisis adaptation is structural, economic, relational, and behavioral.

The mechanism gap reflects the limited understanding of how entrepreneurs sequence decisions, alternate between Effectuation and Bricolage, and evaluate trade-offs during crises, calling for longitudinal and process-oriented research (McMullen & Shepherd, 2006). Moreover, the coexistence of bricolage with active opportunity scanning (Ojong & Simba, 2025; Nouri, 2023) suggests that the boundary between *Bricolage* and *Effectuation* is more permeable in practice than theory implies.

7.1 Theoretical and Practical Implications

The meta-synthesis contributes to entrepreneurial action literature by reframing Effectuation and Bricolage as complementary crisis mechanisms through which entrepreneurs simultaneously address uncertainty and scarcity (Sarasvathy, 2001; Baker & Nelson, 2005). It also extends strategic adaptation literature by positioning entrepreneurial action logics as the mechanism linking crisis pressures to adaptive behavior. While existing frameworks describe what small businesses adjust rather than how entrepreneurs decide (Schindehutte & Morris, 2001; Sarta et al., 2021), the CEAF bridges individual decision-making and organizational adaptation, connecting entrepreneurship and strategy. Integrating evidence across geographic, sectoral, and methodological contexts, the framework organizes six components—crisis pressures, mechanism layer, adaptive mechanisms, strategic adaptation patterns, outcome tendencies, and boundary conditions—linked by a feedback loop that reflects the iterative nature of adaptation and provides a basis for testing theoretical propositions across crisis types.

Practically, the findings suggest that entrepreneurs and small business managers should combine effectual experimentation with bricolage constraint-solving rather than rely on a single logic. This involves creatively using available means while exploring new possibilities (Rashid & Ratten, 2021; Chapman & Karau, 2023; Pearce et al., 2022), integrating experimentation and stakeholder engagement with resource conservation and improvisation, and treating relational practices and employee wellbeing as strategic enablers of adaptation (Hadjielias et al., 2022; Hutchinson et al., 2021).

For policymakers and ecosystem actors, the design, timing, and accessibility of support programs shape the action logics available to entrepreneurs (Cowling et al., 2020; Tang, 2021; Pedauga et al., 2022). Early and accessible support can enable effectual experimentation, whereas delayed or inaccessible support may constrain firms to bricolage survival. Programs combining financial support with capability building, network development, and wellbeing resources are therefore better aligned with crisis adaptation than capital-only interventions (Belitski et al., 2022; Wasehudin et al., 2021).

7.2 Limitations and future research

The corpus is limited by database and keyword choices, potentially excluding non-English and non-indexed studies, while the predominance of COVID-19 restricts generalizability to other crisis types. Action-mode coding also involved interpretive judgment because underlying decision logics were often implicit, although mixed and unclear cases were systematically recorded. Similarly, the Gioia analytical structure (Gioia et al., 2013) involves interpretive choices that may yield alternative theoretical configurations.

These limitations and the synthesis findings suggest five research directions. First, longitudinal and process-oriented studies should examine how entrepreneurs sequence and alternate *Effectuation* and *Bricolage* across crisis phases, addressing the mechanism gap (Newman & Obschonka, 2022; McMullen & Shepherd, 2006). Second, research should assess

whether crisis-driven digital adaptations become lasting capabilities or temporary responses (Belitski et al., 2022; Rashid & Ratten, 2021). Third, comparative studies should examine whether CEAF boundary conditions, particularly resource slack and ecosystem network strength, operate differently under structural scarcity and temporary disruption (Assoba & Mefi, 2021; Kovpak & Lebid, 2022; Ojong & Simba, 2025). Fourth, wellbeing, resilience, and human and relational capital should be examined as mechanisms shaping adaptation (Hutchinson et al., 2021; Hadjielias et al., 2022; Boluk & Panse, 2022). Finally, intersectional and comparative institutional research should investigate how gender, ethnicity, and institutional position shape access to effectual and bricolage responses (Jaim, 2024; Boluk & Panse, 2022; Ojong & Simba, 2025).

8 Conclusion

This meta-synthesis integrated qualitative evidence from 42 peer-reviewed studies to generate a mechanism-oriented theoretical understanding of how small businesses strategically adapt in crisis contexts, drawing on a corpus in which COVID-19 is the most represented crisis episode alongside geopolitical conflicts, polycrises, and other disruptive contexts, and using Effectuation and Bricolage as the theoretical lenses. The synthesis identifies four aggregate dimensions of adaptation, specifically Strategic Reconfiguration, Adaptive Resource Reconfiguration, Relational Adaptation, and Adaptive Capability Development, as well as six strategic patterns that represent the observable configurations through which these dimensions are combined.

The central finding is that crisis adaptation is characteristically hybrid: effectual and bricolage logics co-occur in 86% of studies, operating as complementary mechanisms that address different facets of the adaptation problem simultaneously. The synthesis also documents a persistent mechanism gap, a deficit of process-level evidence on how entrepreneurs decide, sequence, and alternate action logics, which both limits current theoretical integration and motivates the in-depth empirical inquiry.

The Crisis Entrepreneurial Action-Mode Framework (CEAF) integrates these findings into a causal architecture that positions entrepreneurial action logics as the explanatory center of crisis adaptation, connecting crisis pressures to observable adaptive behavior and outcome tendencies through the mechanism layer that existing studies have left underspecified.

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