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Discursive Culture in Industrial Design: Entrepreneurial Initiatives of National University of La Plata Graduates (2009–2019)

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the notion of discursive culture in industrial design by analysing entrepreneurial initiatives developed by graduates of the Industrial Design programme at the National University of La Plata, Argentina, between 2009 and 2019. Industrial design education in Argentina has historically emphasised project-based learning and creative autonomy. Yet, graduates increasingly face the challenge of positioning themselves within entrepreneurial ecosystems marked by economic uncertainty and shifting labour markets. This tension provides fertile ground for understanding how design knowledge and entrepreneurial logics intersect. The research adopts a qualitative approach based on 28 in-depth interviews with graduates and the study of eight entrepreneurial cases embedded in the Buenos Aires design ecosystem. Through these narratives, the article investigates how graduates negotiate the cultural values of design practice in relation to the pragmatic demands of business development. The findings highlight three central dimensions. First, the systemic role of products within entrepreneurial projects, where artefacts function not only as market goods but also as cultural mediators. Second, the articulation of professional practice with life projects, showing how entrepreneurship becomes entangled with personal trajectories and aspirations. Third, the influence of the local socio-productive environment, which shapes opportunities, resources, and symbolic recognition. By introducing the concept of "discursive culture" into the analysis of design practices, this article contributes to bridging design studies, cultural discourse theory, and entrepreneurship research. This framework underscores the symbolic, cultural, and communicative dimensions of design beyond its technical and commercial functions. In doing so, it expands the discussion of design's role in contemporary societies, particularly in Latin American contexts where design, culture, and the economy are deeply interwoven.

Keywords: *discursive culture, industrial design, entrepreneurship, project of life, Buenos Aires ecosystem*

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INTRODUCTION

Industrial design in Argentina has emerged as a professional and academic field that integrates creativity, problem-solving, and the translation of social needs into artefacts. Since the establishment of the first university programmes in the late 20th century, industrial design has been associated not only with technological innovation but also with cultural production and identity formation. Within this context, the Industrial Design programme at the National University of La Plata (UNLP) has played a central role in shaping successive generations of designers whose training combines project-based methodologies, critical reflection, and an emphasis on the social role of design.

In recent decades, however, the professional landscape for designers has been increasingly influenced by entrepreneurial logics. The precariousness of labour markets, the dynamism of the creative industries, and the expansion of design as a cultural and economic resource have confronted graduates with the challenge of developing entrepreneurial initiatives. This scenario demands not only technical and aesthetic skills but also the ability to navigate business models, funding opportunities, and market-oriented practices. As a result, tensions emerge between the symbolic values of design culture (autonomy, creativity, and cultural expression) and the instrumental rationalities of entrepreneurship (efficiency, profitability, and competitiveness).

This article seeks to understand how young industrial designers negotiate these tensions and construct professional identities at the intersection of design culture and entrepreneurial practice. The study focuses on graduates of the UNLP programme who developed entrepreneurial projects between 2009 and 2019 within the Buenos Aires metropolitan ecosystem. By analysing these trajectories, the article introduces the concept of "discursive culture" as a tool for accounting for the symbolic, communicative, and cultural dimensions that underpin both design and entrepreneurial practices. Its aim is to expand current discussions of design's role in society by showing how entrepreneurial initiatives are not merely economic strategies but also cultural projects embedded in life trajectories and territorial contexts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Design as Cultural Practice

Design research has increasingly moved beyond a focus on technical problem-solving to emphasise design as a cultural and epistemic practice. Buchanan (2001, 5) describes design as a "discipline of integrative thinking" that mediates between fields of knowledge and social needs, situating artefacts within broader cultural contexts.

Industrial design has often been framed as a discipline concerned with functionality and aesthetics. However, recent scholarship highlights that design is also a cultural practice, embedded in symbolic systems and discursive formations. Julier (2010) and Julier et al. (2022) describe design culture not only as a set of professional practices but also as a network of processes and forms of action that shape social life. Similarly, Margolin (2002) argues that design must be studied as a cultural production system in which artefacts mediate between social needs and symbolic meanings.

In this sense, design is not only a practice of material production but also one of communication. Krippendorff (2006) proposed the idea of a "semantic turn," according to which design is fundamentally concerned with making sense: artefacts function as semantic systems that

enable the interpretation, negotiation, and circulation of meaning. This view strengthens the argument that design should be understood as a discursive practice oriented towards producing coherence in the social world.

Latin American scholars have stressed this cultural dimension with particular force. Bonsiepe (2017) suggests that "coherence" is to design what "truth" is to science, highlighting the epistemic and cultural stakes of design activity. Manzini (2015, 2019) further elaborates that design generates "atmospheres" that shape human experience, pointing to the symbolic environment created by artefacts. From this perspective, industrial design cannot be reduced to functionality or aesthetics; it is a cultural field in which identities, values, and worldviews are projected.

Entrepreneurship as a Cultural and Social Phenomenon

Entrepreneurship has traditionally been studied through economic and managerial lenses, focusing on firm creation, innovation, and risk management. Yet research has increasingly recognised its cultural underpinnings. Federico et al. (2020) define entrepreneurial culture as the set of values and beliefs that facilitate or inhibit entrepreneurial behaviour within a society. From this perspective, entrepreneurship is not merely a techno-economic process but a cultural phenomenon shaped by dominant ideologies.

Critical voices have also interrogated the ambivalence of entrepreneurship. Han (2014) described it as a form of "self-exploitation," while de Sousa Santos (2019) linked the discourse of entrepreneurship to the glamorisation of precarity under neoliberal conditions. This echoes earlier reflections by Best (2010) and Vargas (2013), who noted the tensions between business imperatives and the symbolic commitments of professional practice.

Other scholars emphasise the relationship between entrepreneurship and life trajectories. Fayolle (2017) argued that entrepreneurship education must integrate personal projects and existential dimensions. Similarly, Pallares et al. (2005) suggested that entrepreneurship can be understood as a life project in which work, identity, and values converge. These perspectives open the way for analysing entrepreneurship as a symbolic and discursive practice, rather than merely an economic one.

In this article, discursive culture is anchored in three complementary lenses that guide the analysis. First, discourse–identity approaches help explain how ventures are narrated as coherent professional selves and justified trajectories (Bruner 1991; Ricoeur 1991; Somers 1994; Rae 2005; Giddens 2023). Second, discourse-historical and critical discourse perspectives situate those narratives within broader socio-political contexts and power relations (Fairclough 1992; van Dijk 1998; Wodak 2009; Wodak and Meyer 2009). Third, sociological institutionalism helps explain how designers seek legitimacy across different arenas and institutional logics (Suchman 1995; Thornton et al. 2012; DiMaggio and Powell 2000). Positioning and symbolic boundary work are used as bridging concepts to trace how participants locate themselves vis-à-vis markets, peers, and institutions (Gieryn 1983; Harré 1991). From this combination, discursive culture is understood as coherence-building work enacted through products, routines, and narratives under entrepreneurial pressure.

Operationalisation of Discursive Culture

In this article, discursive culture designates a mode of active coherence through which designers—especially designer-entrepreneurs—seek to align design values with situated practice. It refers to the relationship between how designers think about design and how they enact it through decisions, routines, products, and professional relationships. In Bonsiepe's formulation,

it involves the "conversation between thinking and doing" intrinsic to design (Bonsiepe 2013). From this perspective, discursive culture structures practices, generates meanings, and shapes professional identities within a project ethos (Montero 2020; Galán 2011).

To make it analytically observable, we operationalise discursive culture as a semiotic–material field of tension in which coherence is continuously built and renegotiated. We trace this work through the articulation of (1) praxis, or how participants work and make decisions; (2) modes of thought, or how they justify and orient design; and (3) products/artefacts, or how objects mediate relationships and feed back into local ecosystems. In this sense, discursive culture is not a background value system but an ongoing practical accomplishment.

This working definition is distinguished from adjacent concepts such as design culture, entrepreneurial culture, narrative identity, and symbolic capital. These notions illuminate relevant dimensions, but discursive culture refers specifically to the semiotic–material work through which values, practices, and artefacts are rendered coherent in entrepreneurial settings.

Design culture typically refers to shared repertoires of values, styles, canons, sensibilities, and disciplinary traditions. Discursive culture, by contrast, is not exhausted by that cultural background: it foregrounds the work of making values coherent with situated practice, that is, how designers translate (or contest) such frameworks in concrete decisions and in their own professional self-configuration (Bonsiepe 2013; Montero 2020).

Entrepreneurial culture refers to norms, rationalities, and expectations linked to economic performance, competitiveness, and market orientation. Discursive culture does not deny these pressures, but treats them as a field of tension: it examines how designer-entrepreneurs build an internal coherence framework (Bonsiepe 2017) that guides action even when it conflicts with hegemonic market logics, through narratives, self-defined quality criteria, and positioning strategies (Del Giorgio Solfa and D'Amico 2019).

Narrative identity focuses on the biographical construction of the self through stories, memories, and projections. In our operationalisation, discursive culture includes this identity work but goes beyond it: it incorporates the practical–material dimension through which identity is stabilised or reconfigured via productive, aesthetic, organisational, and ethical choices that entangle work and life within a project ethos (Galán 2011; Montero 2020).

Symbolic capital commonly refers to resources of recognition and legitimacy (prestige, reputation, authority) that enable advantageous positions within a field. Discursive culture may generate effects of legitimation, but its core lies not in the accumulation of prestige but in the semiotic–material consistency between practices, values, and artefacts as a condition of agency and project orientation—particularly visible when designers problematise contexts and define their own criteria of quality and meaning (Bonsiepe 2017; Urteaga 2011; Correa 2020).

In operational terms, we analyse discursive culture through three dimensions developed in the findings section: (1) the autonomous definition of quality parameters and internal lines of meaning; (2) the proactive problematisation of contexts in order to intervene in material culture; and (3) the construction of narratives that articulate goals, strategies, and professional identities in tension with hegemonic market logics. Together, these dimensions make it possible to trace empirically how coherence and legitimacy are built in practice.

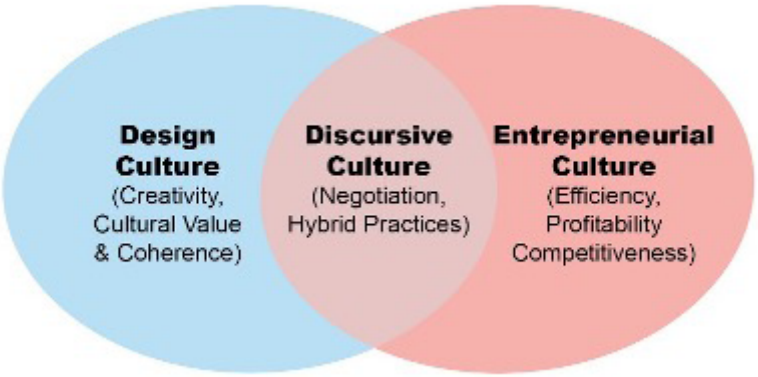

Figure 1 Conceptual map of design culture, entrepreneurial culture, and discursive culture
Source: Adapted from Julier et al. (2022), Federico et al. (2020), and Tharp and Tharp (2013)

To connect theory and empirics, these strands were used as sensitising concepts rather than as a fixed classificatory scheme. They informed both the interview guide and the initial coding, while leaving room for categories to be refined through engagement with the material. Empirically, the analysis was organised around three axes: products as systems and cultural mediators; entrepreneurship as a life project and professional trajectory; and the Buenos Aires ecosystem as a socio-productive and symbolic environment.

The Intersection of Design and Entrepreneurship

The relationship between design and entrepreneurship has historically been characterised by both distance and potential integration. Early studies pointed to the marginalisation of design within business organisations. Gorb and Dumas (1987) described the phenomenon of "silent designers," highlighting how non-design professionals often made design-related decisions without recognising design expertise, thereby undervaluing the role of trained designers. More recently, Chaves (2022) reaffirmed that design and business frequently operate according to divergent logics: while design prioritises meaning, coherence, and cultural contribution, business tends to privilege efficiency, profitability, and competitiveness.

At the same time, scholars have highlighted the opportunities that arise at the intersection of these domains. Rae (2005) conceptualised entrepreneurship as a narrative process through which individuals construct identities and legitimise professional trajectories, an approach that resonates strongly with the experiences of designer-entrepreneurs. Kimbell (2011) examined the adoption of design thinking within business contexts, framing design as a strategic resource for innovation and organisational change (Steyaert and Hjorth 2013). Similarly, Crossick and Kaszynska (2016), in the AHRC Cultural Value Project, argued that cultural and creative practices should be valued not only as economic drivers but also as sources of meaning, identity, and social cohesion.

This dual perspective suggests that the intersection of design and entrepreneurship cannot be reduced to either conflict or convergence alone. As Verganti (2009, 35) proposed, innovation is a relational asset: design contributes to markets not simply by adding functionality but by introducing new meanings and symbolic repertoires. For Bonsiepe (2017), this implies that design must negotiate its autonomy within entrepreneurial contexts rather than be subordinated to economic rationality.

From this perspective, the intersection of design and entrepreneurship emerges as a discursive space in which tensions and synergies coexist. Designers are required to navigate between competing logics, but this negotiation can itself become a source of creativity and cultural value. This view provides the conceptual bridge to understanding design entrepreneurship not merely as a market-oriented activity, but as a practice embedded in cultural discourse (Del Giorgio Solfa and D'Amico 2024a, 2024b).

Discursive Design and Discursive Culture

A more recent development in design research has been the increasing focus on discourse. Tharp and Tharp (2013, 2019) introduced the concept of discursive design to describe practices that intentionally communicate ideas, provoke reflection, and contribute to public debate. Within this framework, design artefacts are not simply functional objects, but vehicles of discourse that invite interpretation and dialogue.

Building on this insight, D'Amico (2024) and D'Amico and Del Giorgio Solfa (2024) have examined how coherence in design projects emerges in contexts marked by tension between disciplinary values and market imperatives. Their work highlights the narrative and symbolic negotiations that underpin design practice, particularly in Latin America. Similarly, Ingold (2021) proposed that intellectual work integrates life and craft, suggesting that design cannot be separated from the existential dimensions of its practitioners.

Approaching design as a discursive practice also resonates with discourse-historical perspectives. Wodak (2009) stressed that discursive practices are always embedded in socio-political and cultural contexts. This view reinforces the argument that design entrepreneurship must be analysed not only as an economic strategy, but also as a discursive arena in which cultural values, power relations, and identities are negotiated.

The concept of discursive culture advanced in this article extends these perspectives. While "design culture" (Julier 2010; Sparke 2004) refers to professional values and practices, and "entrepreneurial culture" (Federico et al. 2020) emphasises economic behaviours, discursive culture focuses on the interplay between the two. It highlights the symbolic and narrative processes through which designers articulate their projects simultaneously as cultural artefacts, entrepreneurial ventures, and life trajectories.

Latin American Context and Territorial Belonging

Latin American scholarship provides an important lens for analysing these dynamics. García Canclini (2010) characterised cultural production in the region as hybrid, shaped by the intersection of local identities, global markets, and structural precarity. Bonsiepe (2013) and Fernández and Bonsiepe (2008) documented how Latin American designers have historically navigated conditions of economic instability, often positioning design as a tool for social development and cultural affirmation.

In Argentina, the design ecosystem is closely connected to territorial identity (D'Amico and Del Giorgio Solfa 2024). Studies show that designers incorporate references to local materials, symbols, and narratives into their work, both as a strategy of differentiation and as a means of affirming belonging. This territorial dimension resonates with de Sousa Santos's (2019) call to recognise epistemologies of the South, in which knowledge and practice are rooted in specific socio-cultural contexts rather than in universalising models.

Research Gap and Contribution

Although scholarship on design culture, entrepreneurship, and discursive practices has grown, research remains limited on how designer-entrepreneurs in Latin America negotiate design values, market pressures, and legitimacy simultaneously. Existing studies often privilege either innovation and business outcomes or cultural interpretation, leaving underdeveloped the semiotic, narrative, and institutional work through which design-based ventures become viable and recognisable.

By analysing eight entrepreneurial initiatives and 28 interviews with UNLP industrial design graduates and ecosystem actors in Buenos Aires Province, this article addresses that gap in three ways. First, it shows that these ventures are organised around coherence-building work: designers align values, everyday practices, and material outputs while seeking recognition in differentiated arenas such as fairs, industrial networks, incubators, and science–technology collaborations. Second, it proposes discursive culture as a transferable framework for analysing discourse not merely as branding, but as semiotic–material work enacted through products, routines, and narratives. Third, it demonstrates how comparative qualitative analysis can map variations in these mechanisms according to orientation and territorial infrastructure.

METHODOLOGY

This research adopts a qualitative methodology aimed at exploring how industrial design graduates from the UNLP construct entrepreneurial trajectories within the Buenos Aires design ecosystem. Rather than seeking statistical generalisation, the study emphasises depth and richness of description, focusing on the meanings, narratives, and symbolic dimensions expressed by participants.

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive design aimed at understanding how industrial design graduates construct meaning, identity, and professional practice through independent entrepreneurship. The empirical strategy combines in-depth interviews with a multiple-case approach, enabling both within-case interpretation and cross-case comparison.

Participants and Sampling

The study followed a qualitative multiple-case design and relied on a flexible, non-probabilistic sample oriented towards analytical depth rather than statistical representativeness. Consistent with a maximum-variation logic, the sampling strategy sought to document heterogeneous perspectives and capture the complexity of industrial design entrepreneurship within the Buenos Aires entrepreneurial ecosystem.

The empirical material was generated from 28 semi-structured interviews, organised around three participant profiles. First, case entrepreneurs comprised founders or co-founders who were UNLP industrial design graduates leading entrepreneurial initiatives located in Buenos Aires Province and analysed within the 2009–2019 temporal scope of the ventures.

Second, key informants (n = 10) were actors with extensive ecosystem experience, selected for their roles in teaching, technical assistance, institutional management, and design and production policy. This group included expert practitioners, researchers, public-sector agents

linked to design and production, consultants, and design entrepreneurs from UNLP and other institutions.

Third, complementary design entrepreneurs (n = 10) were additional designers who met the general inclusion criteria (design-based value creation and active entrepreneurial practice) and were interviewed at a lower level of case depth in order to broaden the interpretive horizon and triangulate emerging patterns.

Interviews were conducted between 2022 and 2023, both in person and via Zoom, owing to the geographical dispersion of initiatives across the province. In several instances, case entrepreneurs were interviewed twice and remained in ongoing contact so that the status and evolution of their initiatives could be kept up to date.

Criteria for Selecting the Eight Cases

Eight cases were selected for in-depth analysis using explicit inclusion criteria:

1. Active initiatives with at least three years of activity, whose origin fell within the 2009–2019 period;
2. Ventures led by UNLP industrial design graduates, located within the Buenos Aires entrepreneurial ecosystem, and distributed one per sub-region following the provincial regionalisation approach;
3. Initiatives whose value-creation process and business model were explicitly grounded in industrial design;
4. Cases showing diverse and distinctive approaches to self-organised design practice (beyond merely "starting a firm"), thereby ensuring variation in products, business models, and roles within the ecosystem.

Interview Guide: Structure and Focus

Data collection combined semi-directed and semi-structured interviews with open and closed questions. The interview guide focused on: (1) trajectories and professional identity; (2) venture formation and value creation through design; (3) everyday practices and decision-making; and (4) relationships with ecosystem actors and institutional support.

Key-informant interviews were conducted at two stages (early exploration and later-stage contrast), allowing for initial framing and the subsequent validation and refinement of the analytical dimensions.

Data Analysis Procedures and Researcher Reflexivity

The analysis followed a thematic and narrative approach in three iterative stages.

First, a cycle of descriptive/open coding identified recurring references to design culture (e.g., creativity, autonomy, problem-solving), entrepreneurial culture (e.g., business models, market orientation, financial sustainability), and broader life-project concerns (e.g., personal aspirations, family, community, and territorial belonging).

Second, these initial codes were grouped through focused coding into broader analytical categories and compared across interviews and cases. Third, a cross-case interpretive reading was used to consolidate the higher-level dimensions that informed the articulation of discursive culture. Throughout the process, brief analytical memos were used to compare emerging patterns and refine category boundaries.

Finally, reflexivity was treated as a methodological requirement. Given the researcher's position within design education and prior proximity to the field, the interpretation explicitly considered how institutional affiliation and experiential knowledge might shape readings of participants' accounts.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

The analysis draws on eight entrepreneurial initiatives led by UNLP industrial design graduates, selected to reflect heterogeneous orientations across the Buenos Aires design ecosystem, ranging from industrial production and agro-industrial equipment to craft-based studios and knowledge-economy initiatives. Following a territorial logic, one case was included for each sub-region considered in the study, yielding eight cases. The set also covers an extended chronology in which one initiative began in 2009 and is treated as an early antecedent within the broader period under study (Table 1).

To make the analytical moves explicit, the findings are reported not only as thematic patterns but also as discursive mechanisms through which designer-entrepreneurs produce coherence and legitimacy. Across the cases, we trace: (1) identity construction (how actors narrate who they are as designers/entrepreneurs); (2) legitimacy narratives (how ventures are justified as credible and valuable in specific arenas); (3) rhetorical positioning (how participants locate themselves vis-à-vis markets, institutions, and peers); and (4) symbolic boundary-making (how distinctions are drawn to protect values and define "proper" design practice). These mechanisms are evidenced through recurring formulations in interviews and case-specific episodes, and are interpreted in relation to the three analytical dimensions developed subsequently.

Table 1 summarises the initiatives and supports a comparative reading of how graduates mobilise products, trajectories, and ecosystem linkages in positioning themselves as designer-entrepreneurs.

Table 1 Overview of the eight entrepreneurial cases analysed

Case	Year	Sub-region (Buenos Aires)	Main activity	Orientation	Ecosystem linkages
(A) Expanded craft	2009	Southwest (Tres Lomas)	Metalworking industry	Industrial production	Local suppliers, regional manufacturing networks
(B) Design for small scale	2009	Centre (9 de Julio)	Machinery for grain milling	Agro-industrial design	Agricultural cooperatives, fairs
(C) Small-town designer	2012	Northeast (Pergamino)	Furniture design	Product-oriented	Design fairs, municipal support
(D) Di-nfluencers	2015	Capital (La Plata)	Footwear and fashion accessories	Cultural/ creative	Local markets, creative-economy programmes

(continued on next page)

Table 1 *(continued)*

Case	Year	Sub-region (Buenos Aires)	Main activity	Orientation	Ecosystem linkages
(E) Intrapreneur	2015	Greater Buenos Aires (Lanús)	Welding equipment marketing	Technical/ industrial	Industrial clusters, SMEs networks
(F) Slow design	2016	Coastal (Mar del Plata)	Design studio and fabrication	Hybrid practices	Cultural festivals, university incubators
(G) Design in deconstruction	2016	South (Bahía Blanca)	Innovation-oriented design	Experimental	Collaborations with science and tech institutions
(H) Self-designed trajectory	2019	Northwest (Junín)	Knowledge-economy, Industry 4.0	Territorial/ strategic	Smart-industry initiatives, sustainability networks

The following subsections develop three cross-cutting analytical dimensions: (1) products as systemic and cultural mediators; (2) entrepreneurship as a life project and professional trajectory; and (3) the Buenos Aires ecosystem, territorial contexts, and symbolic recognition.

Across the eight initiatives, one shared pattern is that entrepreneurship is narrated less as a linear business "growth path" and more as a situated practice of making design viable under conditions of constraint. Regardless of orientation, founders describe their ventures as ongoing negotiations between what they consider "good design" and what the environment makes possible through available infrastructures, networks, and rhythms of production. In this sense, the cases converge in treating entrepreneurial action as a process of coherence-building: aligning decisions about work routines, collaborations, and value propositions with a preferred professional identity and a feasible way of sustaining the project over time.

At the same time, the cases diverge markedly in terms of where legitimacy is produced and which infrastructures stabilise the venture. A first contrast separates initiatives anchored in regional productive networks (e.g., Case A in metalworking and Case B in agro-industrial machinery) from those relying on public-facing cultural circuits (e.g., Case D in footwear and accessories, and Case F as a studio–fabrication practice). In the former, credibility tends to be built through performance, reliability, and trust-based relationships with suppliers, cooperatives, and manufacturing partners; in the latter, legitimacy is more closely tied to visibility and recognition in fairs, markets, festivals, and creative-economy programmes. This difference produces distinct entrepreneurial rhythms: industrial and agro-oriented cases are shaped by operational continuity and sectoral adoption, whereas cultural-production cases depend more on narrative circulation, curation, and episodic moments of public encounter.

A second contrast concerns the role of territory as either a constraint, a resource, or a strategic horizon. Some initiatives are explicitly rooted in proximity-based contexts, where scale, reputation, and local ties regulate decisions about demand and growth (e.g., Case C). Others mobilise territory as a platform for innovation agendas and future-oriented positioning (e.g., Case H), linking their projects to smart-industry initiatives and sustainability networks. Between these poles, experimental practices (e.g., Case G) use institutional collaborations as a form of territorial infrastructure, in which alliances with science and technology actors enable prototyping and legitimacy that cannot be reduced to immediate market performance.

Finally, a cross-case reading reveals that "designer-entrepreneurship" does not correspond to a single model, but rather to a set of patterned configurations. Three recurrent clusters become visible: (1) industrial/B2B configurations (A, B, E), in which legitimacy is tied to

sectoral networks and technical credibility; (2) cultural and craft-oriented configurations (C, D, F), in which recognition emerges through public circuits and identity-bearing products; and (3) experimental/strategic configurations (G, H), in which collaboration ecosystems and programme-based infrastructures play a central role. These contrasts strengthen the article's conceptual argument: discursive culture is shared as a coherence-seeking dynamic, yet it is enacted through different mediators depending on orientation and territory, making cross-case comparison essential if overly abstract thematic claims are to be avoided.

Products as Systems and Cultural Mediators

A central finding concerns the systemic role of products within entrepreneurial initiatives. Across participants' accounts, products are rarely framed as isolated artefacts; rather, talk about products functions as a legitimacy narrative through which founders explain how ventures become viable and recognisable. In Oso Studio, the venture "gained entity through a product" (plant water dispensers), an origin account that legitimises the shift from domestic experimentation to renting a shared workshop and, analytically, shows how an artefact can precipitate infrastructural and relational reconfiguration (Bargo, personal communication, 7 November 2022; authors' translation). Here, the product operates as a discursive anchor: it is used to narrate a turning point, justify organisational change, and stabilise a coherent venture identity.

This systemic conception is also articulated through rhetorical positioning, as products are framed not merely as commodities but as devices that mediate social interaction and meaning-making in contexts of public circulation. Oso Studio emphasises that sensorial and affective responses are part of the value proposition: when people encounter its objects at fairs, they "smile," and the pieces are described as capable of "softening environments" and easing tensions (Bargo, personal communication, 11 September 2023; authors' translation). Analytically, this wording performs an identity claim about what "good" design does—producing atmospheres and relationships—thereby positioning the venture within cultural-production circuits where recognition depends on encounter and interpretation.

In parallel, Oso Studio makes value "legible" through explicit discursive technologies of explanation and contextualisation: the initiative highlights the need to show "who and what made each piece possible" and to present objects "in context," including open-studio events ("Open Yerta") and a portfolio-like use of Instagram, where each post is described as "a small brick" added to the project's construction (Bargo, personal communication, 11 September 2023; authors' translation). These practices are not merely communicational; they provide analytical evidence of how discursive culture is enacted as coherence work—linking artefacts to process, networks, and situated meanings so that legitimacy can be claimed in specific arenas.

Beyond Oso Studio, products mediate discursive culture through different mechanisms depending on orientation. In Las Pulpas, mediation is narrated through an evolving portfolio: the "star product" (sneakers) remains central while models "mutate," and complementary lines are incorporated as new challenges and demands emerge (Rossi and Fuhr, personal communication, 2 March 2023; authors' translation). Importantly, the founders explicitly resist describing this as simple assortment expansion; instead, they frame it as iterative redesign through use, stating that products "evolve as we become users, and then re-designers, and then users again" (Rossi and Fuhr, personal communication, 2 March 2023; authors' translation). Analytically, this is identity work performed through practice: the product becomes the medium through which the venture narrates learning, competence, and market positioning as a daily cycle rather than as a linear growth trajectory.

In Dip Studio, products mediate discursive culture through symbolic boundary-making and territorial semiotics. Biomaterial-based outputs are described as "semiotic objects" that "carry a message," "speak of the place" where they were developed, and pursue a "regional aesthetic"; this orientation translates into traceable decisions such as using local seeds and selecting exclusively local suppliers and equipment (Mené Arcuri, personal communication, 26 July 2023; authors' translation). This discourse draws a boundary against purely market-centred notions of value by grounding legitimacy in place, material choices, and ethics, while also positioning the venture within an ecosystem of scientific–technical collaborations where credibility is negotiated through both experimental practice and institutional ties.

In industrial and agro-oriented trajectories, product mediation becomes explicitly socio-technical and user-driven. In Cross Molinos, innovation is narrated as originating from users who "run into problems during use," and the founder stresses that "the user always ends up polishing the final proposal" (Tierno, personal communication, 10 November 2022; authors' translation). The thesis also documents a dynamic in which a "new project" for a specific client can later become a product offered under the brand (Tierno, personal communication, 10 November 2022; authors' translation). Analytically, these accounts operate as legitimacy narratives that position design competence in terms of responsiveness and operational reliability, and they make visible a discursive mechanism of translation: from situated problem episodes to stabilised product lines.

Finally, the Depino/RMB case expands the notion of "product" into a service-and-translation system. Design and marketing dialogue extends into manuals, parameter-setting tutorials, in-plant commissioning, and technical contests that translate advanced equipment functions into "concrete benefits" for operators and into credible sales arguments for commercial partners (Depino, personal communication, 1 February 2023; authors' translation). This reveals a further discursive mechanism—rhetorical translation for legitimacy—through which technical performance is converted into usable meanings and trust in B2B arenas, and in which product value is co-produced through training, after-sales protocols, and user-experience infrastructures.

Overall, these cases challenge linear accounts that reduce artefacts to commodities. Instead, products emerge as nodes within socio-technical and cultural systems, and the analysis becomes more precise when reported as discursive mechanisms: products anchor origin stories and legitimacy narratives, enable rhetorical positioning in specific arenas of recognition, support identity work through iterative practice, and sustain symbolic boundaries around value and quality. Across the eight initiatives, the "product-as-mediator" logic therefore varies by orientation: craft and cultural-production cases rely more on affective encounter and narrative circulation; experimental and material-led initiatives foreground territorial semiotics and traceable material decisions; and industrial or agro-oriented ventures emphasise user feedback loops and service infrastructures that translate technical performance into workable practices and credible market propositions.

Life Projects and Professional Trajectories

A second key finding concerns how entrepreneurial practice is linked to broader life projects. Participants often frame entrepreneurship as identity work: a way of aligning professional activity with personal values, aspirations, and preferred ways of living, rather than as a purely market-driven strategy. This is stated explicitly in a key informant's formulation: "Decisions to undertake are rooted in life decisions beyond merely solving economic subsistence; they have a philosophical basis articulated with the social agenda" (Ramírez, personal communication,

23 November 2022; authors' translation). Analytically, such statements function as legitimacy narratives, grounding entrepreneurial action in ethical and existential coherence rather than in profitability alone.

This life-project framing also appears as a form of self-design enabled by design methodology. In the thesis corpus, Wozniak states: "Beyond designing a product, design serves to design life" (Wozniak, personal communication, 27 October 2022; authors' translation). Here, "design" is extended from a professional skill to an orientation for navigating uncertainty and making decisions, positioning the designer-entrepreneur as an actor who actively shapes a trajectory. The venture thus becomes a site in which coherence is negotiated across craft commitments, autonomy, rhythms of production, and biographical choices about how, and where, to live.

These narratives are not celebratory; they foreground tensions that render discursive culture visible as coherence work under pressure. Oso Studio problematises the temporality imposed by platforms: "Responding to these demands, subordinated to the 'rush' to satisfy the algorithm, can generate communicational blur and avoidable anxiety" (Bargo, personal communication, 11 September 2023; authors' translation). The accompanying discussion—summarised as "algorithms count, but do not narrate"—shows symbolic boundary-making: participants contrast meaningful narrative time with the quantified tempo of platforms in order to defend a legitimate pace of making, and thereby stabilise who they are as designers.

Trajectory narratives also link biography and territory to entrepreneurial choice. Paz connects his path to scale and place—"I didn't want to live in Capital… it seemed like a very large scale, and I could never adapt" (Paz, personal communication, 6 December 2022; authors' translation)—framing relocation as an intentional condition of professional viability. Motivation is rendered as an existential commitment: "My intention… was to live and think about design every day… I was always a fanatical and fundamentalist supporter of the discipline" (Paz, personal communication, 6 December 2022; authors' translation). Analytically, these formulations legitimise persistence by tying it to a durable self-definition and clarify that "entrepreneurial success" is judged against coherence with a life model, not only against growth metrics.

Overall, life projects are not background stories appended to business narratives. They are mechanisms through which designer-entrepreneurs justify decisions, draw boundaries around acceptable forms of work, and position themselves in relation to expectations of visibility, speed, and scalability. This supports the argument that discursive culture captures entrepreneurship as an effort to sustain design as a viable life form under territorial, labour-market, and platform constraints.

The Buenos Aires Ecosystem and Territorial Contexts

The third dimension concerns the socio-productive environment in which initiatives unfold. Participants portray the Buenos Aires ecosystem not as a passive background, but as a set of heterogeneous infrastructures—programmes, fairs, institutions, and local circuits—that shape opportunities and constraints. Analytically, the ecosystem appears in the interviews as a legitimation infrastructure: actors describe where recognition is produced, who grants credibility, and what forms of participation make initiatives intelligible and viable.

Visibility and legitimacy are repeatedly tied to embodied circuits of exchange, especially fairs and curated events. Bargo notes that fairs enable "real interaction with a heterogeneous public," ranging from silent observation to "quite deep or philosophical dialogues," and that these encounters help entrepreneurs understand who engages with their work and why (Bargo, personal communication, 11 September 2023; authors' translation). This account functions as a

legitimacy narrative in which recognition is produced through situated interpretation and face-to-face dialogue rather than solely through formal market channels. It also involves rhetorical positioning: the venture positions its credibility in relation to publics and peer circuits that validate meaning, not merely sales.

Ecosystem resources also appear as institutional instruments that reshape practices, rather than merely as external "support." In the Bemol Industrial trajectory, the thesis records that obtaining a seed fund was "fundamental to leverage the project economically," and that the requirement to prepare a business plan increased viability by forcing a more conscious incorporation of commercial and financial dimensions (Depino, personal communication, 1 February 2023; authors' translation). Analytically, this episode reveals an ecosystem mechanism: public funding and incubation can operate as disciplining devices that reorganise routines (planning, accounting, strategy) and enable a transition from an idea-driven initiative to a stabilised venture. Reporting this mechanism explicitly strengthens the link between empirical evidence and implications by showing how a specific instrument reconfigures organisational practice.

Finally, territorial belonging operates simultaneously as a resource and as a boundary condition for entrepreneurial strategies. For Oso Studio, participation in the ecosystem is framed as identity-making at the level of place: "Getting involved in these circuits makes your identity become part of a place's identity… design has great power, so for us it is important to decide in the service of what we put it" (Bargo, personal communication, 7 November 2022; authors' translation). This formulation performs symbolic boundary-making (design should serve explicit purposes), while also positioning the venture within a territorial moral economy of design, where legitimacy is tied to local participation and responsibility. In this sense, discursive culture is enacted as ongoing coherence work between design values, entrepreneurial action, and the arenas—territorial, institutional, and relational—through which initiatives circulate and gain recognition.

DISCUSSION

The findings presented in this study highlight three interrelated dimensions of design entrepreneurship among graduates of the Industrial Design programme at the UNLP: products as systemic and cultural mediators, entrepreneurship as a life project, and the role of the Buenos Aires ecosystem. Read together, and in light of the cross-case contrasts (Table 1), these dimensions support the usefulness of discursive culture for explaining how design practices intersect with entrepreneurial logics in Argentina—particularly under conditions of economic volatility, heterogeneous infrastructures, and territorially uneven opportunities.

Products as Mediators of Meaning and Systemic Value

Graduates consistently described their products not only as functional or market-oriented artefacts, but also as carriers of symbolic value. This observation aligns with Julier's (2010, 2017) and Julier et al.'s (2022) notion of design culture, in which artefacts are embedded in processes of meaning-making and social negotiation. It also resonates with Margolin's (2002) call to study design as a system of cultural production, and with Manzini's (2015, 2019) reflections on design's capacity to generate "atmospheres" that shape social experience.

By framing their products as systemic elements—nodes within wider networks of materials, stories, and cultural references—graduates positioned their work as discursive acts. This challenges linear models of entrepreneurship that treat artefacts merely as commodities.

Instead, as Bonsiepe (2017) suggested, design operates within its own epistemic horizon, in which coherence becomes the central criterion of validity. From this perspective, products are both market goods and cultural mediators, embodying the duality of design entrepreneurship in Argentina.

Cross-case comparison indicates that this mediating role is enacted through different infrastructures: sectoral credibility and production ties in industrial and agro-oriented cases, public-facing fairs and narrative circulation in cultural-production cases, and institutional collaborations in experimental or innovation-oriented initiatives (Table 1).

Entrepreneurship as a Life Project

A second result concerns the articulation between entrepreneurial practice and personal trajectories. Graduates often narrated their initiatives as extensions of life projects, using design competence and entrepreneurial action to align work with values, preferred rhythms, and identity commitments. These narratives vary according to orientation and territory: some cases sustain coherence through deliberate limits on scale or visibility, while others pursue coherence through strategic alignment with sectoral or innovation agendas (Table 1). This resonates with work that links entrepreneurship to existential dimensions and life trajectories (Fayolle 2017; Pallares et al. 2005), as well as to the integration of life and craft (Ingold 2021). The cases also show that "life-project" entrepreneurship is negotiated under recurring constraints—unstable demand, inflationary pressures, and uneven access to resources—and thus intersects with critiques that highlight vulnerability and the risks of self-exploitation (Han 2014; de Sousa Santos 2019). Discursive culture helps make these patterned differences intelligible by situating coherence claims within differentiated opportunity structures and regimes of legitimation.

The Buenos Aires Ecosystem and Territorial Belonging

The third finding emphasised the importance of the local ecosystem. Graduates' initiatives were shaped by participation in fairs, exhibitions, incubators, and policy programmes, which provided not only material resources but also symbolic recognition. This recalls Verganti's (2009) insight that innovation is a relational asset, dependent on networks of legitimacy as much as on technical novelty.

At the same time, the territorial dimension was central. Many participants rooted their products in local materials, aesthetics, or narratives, thereby articulating a sense of belonging to Buenos Aires and Argentina. This strategy reflects García Canclini's (2010) characterisation of Latin American cultural production as hybrid—simultaneously local and global, precarious and inventive. It also resonates with Bonsiepe's (2013) insistence that Latin American design cannot be understood outside its socio-political and cultural context, where precariousness often functions as a constraint that prompts adaptive strategies of creativity and cultural affirmation.

Towards a Concept of Discursive Culture

These findings converge in the proposal of discursive culture as a conceptual tool. Building on Tharp and Tharp's (2013, 2019) framework of discursive design, which emphasises the communicative potential of artefacts, discursive culture extends the analysis to include not only objects, but also entrepreneurial practices, life projects, and territorial identities.

Whereas "design culture" focuses on professional values (Julier 2010; Sparke 2004) and "entrepreneurial culture" highlights behavioural norms (Federico et al. 2020), discursive culture captures the negotiation between the two. It traces how graduates weave together

repertoires from design, business, and everyday life in order to legitimise initiatives, and how cultural meaning is produced through these negotiations under market pressure (Del Giorgio Solfa and D'Amico 2019).

Implications for Design Education and Policy

The findings suggest that the implications for design education and ecosystem support are contingent on the arenas of legitimation through which initiatives become viable (Table 1). For design education, the cases indicate that an exclusive focus on technical skills or generic business training may overlook a recurrent empirical challenge: graduates repeatedly negotiate trade-offs between coherence, autonomy, and feasibility under volatile conditions. Educational approaches that integrate ecosystem literacy, reflective decision-making under uncertainty, and attention to the cultural and semiotic dimensions of value creation may therefore be particularly relevant in contexts where graduates must sustain projects without stable infrastructures. For policy and incubators, the cross-case comparison suggests that support is not a uniform input: industrial/B2B initiatives stabilise through production networks and technical credibility, cultural-production cases through fairs and curated circuits, and experimental practices through science and technology alliances and programme-based infrastructures. Policy instruments may therefore be most effective when aligned with these differentiated pathways to legitimacy rather than applied as one-size-fits-all incentives.

This study is based on a bounded set of cases and retrospective interviews; transferability, therefore, depends on contextual similarity in ecosystem infrastructures and economic volatility. The case portfolio captures heterogeneity within Buenos Aires Province, but does not exhaust the diversity of Argentine design entrepreneurship. Future research could extend the comparison to other provinces and adopt longitudinal designs to examine how discursive culture evolves as ventures mature and as ecosystem conditions change.

Synthesis

In sum, the discussion highlights how design entrepreneurship in Buenos Aires Province emerges as a discursive practice in which artefacts, life projects, and ecosystems converge. Products act as mediators of meaning, initiatives are framed as existential projects, and ecosystems function as discursive environments. The concept of discursive culture synthesises these dimensions, offering a framework that bridges design studies, entrepreneurship research, and cultural discourse theory.

By foregrounding discourse, this perspective reveals the cultural labour behind entrepreneurial initiatives and affirms the need to analyse design practice beyond economic categories. In contexts of instability and hybridity, such as Argentina, discursive culture provides a lens through which to understand how designers construct coherence, legitimacy, and belonging in their professional trajectories.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study examined the entrepreneurial trajectories of graduates from the Industrial Design programme at the UNLP, focusing on their initiatives within the Buenos Aires design ecosystem between 2009 and 2019. By analysing interviews and case studies, the article has shown that design entrepreneurship cannot be understood solely as an economic activity, but must also be seen as a cultural and discursive practice.

Three key findings stand out. First, products were conceived as systemic and symbolic artefacts that mediate between designers, markets, and cultural contexts. Second, entrepreneurial practice was closely articulated with life projects, highlighting the ways in which professional activity became entangled with personal values, aspirations, and identities. Third, the socio-productive environment of Buenos Aires emerged as an active force shaping opportunities, constraints, and symbolic recognition for entrepreneurial initiatives.

To account for these dynamics, the article introduced the concept of discursive culture, which foregrounds the negotiation between design and entrepreneurial cultures and underscores the symbolic, communicative, and narrative dimensions of professional practice. This concept extends existing discussions of design culture by integrating cultural discourse theory and entrepreneurship research, offering a framework that is particularly useful for analysing contexts characterised by economic uncertainty and strong cultural identities, such as Latin America.

The implications of these findings are threefold. For design education, the results stress the importance of training students not only in technical and business skills, but also in critical reflection on the cultural and symbolic dimensions of their work. For policy-making, the study suggests that supporting design entrepreneurship requires more than economic incentives: it demands the fostering of ecosystems that value cultural expression, territorial identity, and symbolic recognition. For research, the concept of discursive culture opens up avenues for comparative studies across regions, enabling a deeper understanding of how designers negotiate tensions between professional ideals and entrepreneurial demands.

In conclusion, industrial design entrepreneurship in Argentina should be understood not only as a strategy for economic survival but also as a discursive arena in which cultural values, personal trajectories, and territorial contexts converge.

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