

Critical Soft Skills South African Female Entrepreneurs Require for Business Success

Johann Landsberg^{1,*}, Verona Leendertz², Stephan van der Merwe³

¹School of Business Management, North-West University, Vanderbijlpark, South Africa, Orcid: 0000-0002-9309-3220

²Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences, North-West University, Vanderbijlpark, South Africa, Orcid: 0000-0002-2090-4272

³Business School, North-West University, Potchefstroom, South Africa, Orcid: 0000-0002-5144-0861

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Abstract

The South African economy is under pressure with low growth and high unemployment. An increase in entrepreneurial activity can act as a catalyst for economic growth and employment. Female entrepreneurs still lag behind male entrepreneurs. In the past decade, the interest in female entrepreneurs has increased, and the ratio between female and male entrepreneurs is improving yearly, even though female entrepreneurs face unique challenges. This study explores the critical soft skills female entrepreneurs in South Africa need to succeed in business. The qualitative study collected data via semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions and analysed through coding with Atlas.ti 9™. The results suggest that South African female entrepreneurs have specific soft skills training needs, and entrepreneurial education programmes should be customised to address these needs. The government and the Department of Education should encourage entrepreneurship education from a young age and promote customised and gender-equal entrepreneurship education.

*Corresponding Author

^{1*} johann.landsberg@nwu.ac.za

² Verona.Leendertz@nwu.ac.za

³ Stephan.VanDerMerwe@nwu.ac.za

1. Introduction

1.1. Background

The South African economy faces difficulties with consistent poor growth over the past five years and an intolerably high unemployment rate of 29.1% (StatisticsSA, 2020). The South African economy needs a catalyst to reverse the low growth and unemployment. Entrepreneurship has been acknowledged as a critical factor in economic development and progress worldwide (Stephens *et al.*, 2013:779). Increased entrepreneurial activity can act as the catalyst that South Africa requires (Stephens *et al.*, 2013:779). Entrepreneurs see market opportunities for new goods or services that may be offered profitably. At the same time, the entrepreneur assumes all of the risks and reaps all of the benefits (adapted from) (Spinelli & Adams, 2016:77).

In recent years, there has been a growing interest in female entrepreneurship as women continue contributing to the growth and development of their communities and countries (Bosma *et al.*, 2020:55; Bullough *et al.*, 2015:250). Despite women entrepreneurs' challenges, their impact on economic development is undeniable (Bosma *et al.*, 2020:55). These challenges can be broadly divided into internal and external difficulties. External problems include things like lack of financial resources, marketing barriers, and social and cultural constraints (Greene *et al.*, 2003:1). Social and cultural barriers, including gender biases, discrimination, and stereotyping, have an impact on how women are perceived and treated in the workplace. These biases make it harder for women to acquire capital and markets since they are not taken seriously as business owners (Bosma *et al.*, 2020:55; De Bruin *et al.*, 2006:586). According to research, female-owned businesses have less access to finance than their male counterparts (Greene *et al.*, 2003:1).

To succeed as an entrepreneur, female entrepreneurs require both entrepreneurial and soft skills (Henry *et al.*, 2005b:104). Entrepreneurial skills include financial management, marketing, planning, and organisational management (Henry *et al.*, 2005b:104). Financial management skills are critical as they enable entrepreneurs to manage their finances effectively and make informed decisions. Marketing skills are also vital, allowing entrepreneurs to promote their businesses and attract customers (Henry *et al.*, 2005b:104). Soft skills include leadership, communication, and networking (Fayolle, 2013:697-698). Leadership and communication skills are necessary for managing employees and making strategic decisions. Networking skills are essential for building relationships with potential customers, partners, and investors (Jaffar *et al.*, 2019:28).

Lack of confidence, failure phobia, and work-life balance are internal struggles that women entrepreneurs confront (Herrington & Kew, 2018:27; Kelley *et al.*, 2017:23,24,27,34). These difficulties, which frequently stem from societal and cultural prejudices, might harm the success of female entrepreneurs (Nambiar *et al.*, 2020:71-73; Van Vuuren & Groenewald, 2007:270,272,278).

Women are less likely than men to start businesses because they lack confidence and are terrified of failing (Herrington & Kew, 2018:27). In addition, many female entrepreneurs lack access to formal financial services and may not have the financial knowledge to manage their businesses effectively (Kelley *et al.*, 2017:23,24,27,34; Nambiar *et al.*, 2020:71-73).

1.2. Problem Statement

Research has shown that female entrepreneurs may require more assistance in self-esteem and confidence than male entrepreneurs (Botha *et al.*, 2007:163-164). The background study shows that female entrepreneurs experience unique barriers, problems, and constraints (Meyer & Landsberg, 2015:3454). Arthur and Adom (2020:717) demonstrated the importance of soft skills training as part of entrepreneurial education. In addition, Zheng *et al.* (2017:1398) argue that most people need help to improve their soft skills to be better entrepreneurs.

This paper explores the challenges female entrepreneurs face, the soft skills they require to succeed and the role of education in empowering women to become successful entrepreneurs.

The problem statement for this study: South African female entrepreneurs (particularly female entrepreneurs who have undergone the Enterprising Women Programme (EWP)) do not just require entrepreneurship education but also critical soft skills to ensure their business success.

Research objectives

- To explore the importance of soft skills training for female entrepreneurs.
- To explore the critical soft skills required by female entrepreneurs to achieve business success.

The rest of this paper is structured as follows: section 2 reviews the literature. Section 3 discusses the research methodology, while Section 4 presents the results and findings of the empirical investigation. Section 5 provides conclusions and limitations and outlines the managerial implications and avenues for future research.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Entrepreneurship

Entrepreneurship is the process through which an individual seeks market opportunities for brand-new goods or services that can be offered for a profit. At the same time, the entrepreneur assumes all of the risks and reaps all of the benefits (adapted from) (Spinelli & Adams, 2016:77).

Female entrepreneurship has increased significantly recently, with women starting enterprises more quickly than males. However, many of these firms fail because of a lack of resources and education (Bosma *et al.*, 2020:55). There is an urgent need for educational materials that are especially suited to the requirements of female entrepreneurs to ensure their success (Bosma *et al.*, 2020:55; Botha *et al.*,

2007:163-164). Soft skills training should be integral to any Entrepreneurship Education (EE) programme (Arthur & Adom, 2020:717).

2.2 Soft skills needs of female entrepreneurs

Often, "skills" refers to non-technical competencies that enable people to collaborate productively, communicate clearly, and control their emotions and conduct at work. As they support good leadership, cooperation, and communication, these abilities are increasingly acknowledged as essential for success in entrepreneurship (Osorio & Cordero, 2014:173).

Women can develop the self-assurance necessary to launch their enterprises by giving them access to successful female entrepreneurs. Female-focused mentorship programmes and networking events can offer ambitious business owners crucial guidance and assistance.

2.3 Most important soft skills for entrepreneurial success

Understanding and controlling one's emotions and those of others is referred to as having emotional intelligence. It enables people to develop relationships with others. It fosters effective leadership and teamwork (Zheng *et al.*, 2009:3). Training in emotional intelligence, which includes self-awareness, self-regulation, empathy, and social skills, can be found in EE that includes soft skills training programmes (Nugraheni *et al.*, 2019:195).

Time management and organisation are essential skills for a firm to run well. Still, they can be difficult for female entrepreneurs to handle because of the competing demands on their time (Botha, 2006:164).

For recognizing and resolving business difficulties, critical thinking and problem-solving abilities are crucial (Arthur & Adom, 2020:717). Due to their frequent lack of access to training in these areas, female entrepreneurs in Africa may find it challenging to innovate and adjust to shifting market conditions (Fayolle & Gailly, 2012:583; Nugraheni *et al.*, 2019:196-197). Programmes for developing soft skills can teach participants how to think critically and solve problems, including synthesis, analysis, and decision-making (Lindberg *et al.*, 2017:769).

Every enterprise needs strong management and leadership abilities to succeed, but female entrepreneurs, in particular, need these abilities because they may encounter impediments to leadership due to their gender (Botha *et al.*, 2007:164). Programmes for soft skills training can teach management and leadership abilities like performance management, team building, and strategic planning (Arthur & Adom, 2020:717).

Building relationships with consumers, suppliers, and other stakeholders requires effective communication and interpersonal skills (Quach *et al.*, 2020:10). However, training in interpersonal and communication skills is frequently unavailable to African women business owners (Botha *et al.*, 2007:164; Nugraheni *et al.*, 2019:196-197). Soft skills training programmes can meet this requirement by offering instruction in effective communication, negotiation, conflict resolution, and teamwork

(Botha, 2006:164). Success in any field requires strong leadership abilities, but female entrepreneurs need these talents even more. To make choices, lead teams, and negotiate transactions, they must be self-assured and forceful (Bell & Bell, 2016:12). The ability of female entrepreneurs to communicate their vision and plan to their staff, investors, and clients is another essential skill (Arthur & Adom, 2020:717).

Finally, soft skills training is crucial for the success of female entrepreneurs. EE programmes that include soft skills training must meet the specific requirements and experiences of female entrepreneurs, including instruction in communication and interpersonal skills, emotional intelligence, time management and organisation, critical thinking and problem-solving, and leadership and management (Arthur & Adom, 2020:717; Botha *et al.*, 2007:164). Table 1 summarises the proposed important soft skills that should be included in EE initiatives.

Table 1: Summary of the proposed soft skills

| Important soft skills | | |
|--|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leadership • Creativity • Pro-activeness • Propensity to take risk • Wakefulness | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teamwork • Communication skills • Problem-solving skills • Achievement motivating skills • Self-confidence | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Internal locus of control • Resilience • Self-efficacy • Planning skills • Budgeting skills |

Source: Adapted from: Arthur and Adom (2020:717); Botha *et al.* (2007:164); Li (2010:2); Nugraheni *et al.* (2019:195); Zheng *et al.* (2017:1398); Zheng *et al.* (2009:3)

The theoretical framework of the study is discussed in the next section.

2.4 Theoretical framework

This study's theoretical framework is built on several theories. These concepts cover various topics, such as access to capital theories, gender theories, theories of motivation, theories of performative belonging, and theories of entrepreneurial qualities. The research themes and their connections to the study's theoretical underpinnings about the research question are summarised in Table 2.

The work-life balance, systems, and boundary theories are the foundation for work-life balance. Life and work can be balanced only when there are no conflicts between roles. According to the systems theory, life segments operate better together to achieve better results since they overlap, are interconnected, and have hazy borders. According to the boundary theory, people required to meet two or more requests must strike a balance between them (Koubova & Buchko, 2013:701).

Interviewee 8 stated that she found it challenging to divide her time between academics, business, and other responsibilities.

Table 2: Relationship between the research question and the research themes

| Research Question | Research themes | Theory category | Relevant theory |
|--|---|--|--|
| How can the inputs from the participants of the EWP and the study of the literature on EE be used to develop a framework to assist in the development and delivery of high-quality entrepreneurial programmes to a more significant number of entrepreneurs? | Overview of EE (Include: Knowledge skills [technical & soft] and execution of EE) | Opportunity creation/discovery theory, work-life balance theory | Opportunity creation theory, work-life balance theory |
| | Entrepreneurial training and development (Include: Approach to EE, EE strategies and EE support) | Leadership theories Self-actuation theory Entrepreneurial attributes theories Gender theories | Leadership theories Self-actuation Need for achievement theory Social role theory |
| | Initial entrepreneurial framework (Include Existing EE models, use of business competitions, simulation and serious games, creativity, and experiential learning.) | Entrepreneurial attributes theories | Innovation theory Uncertainty theory |
| | Overview of EE (Include: Knowledge skills [technical & soft] and execution of EE) | Opportunity creation/discovery theory, work-life balance theory | Opportunity creation theory, work-life balance theory |

Source: Own compilation

2.4.1 The entrepreneurial training and development theme

Leadership ideas that stereotype women as unsuitable for leadership roles, such as "think manager, think like a man," are biased against female entrepreneurs. Gender roles are established by culture and society (UNFPA., 2005).

The desire to succeed is one of the EE strategies. The self-actualization hypothesis of Maslow serves as the foundation for the success theme. The theory emphasises a hierarchy of demands and self-actualization, regarded as the ultimate level of satisfaction (Heylighen, 1992:40).

The need for success is one of the hypotheses underlying entrepreneurial traits. Through examinations of the cultural, social, and psychological dimensions of entrepreneurship, David McClelland's research is seen as the beginning of the behavioural scientist's contribution to entrepreneurship research (Nieman & Nieuwenhuizen, 2009:4). According to McClelland's research, which focuses on how each person's motivation relates to entrepreneurship and management, people are motivated by three separate needs: a need for power, a desire for achievement, and a desire for belonging (Bjerke, 2007:72; McClelland, 2005:355-366).

The participants of the case study indicated that the EWP training empowered them. Meeting like-minded individuals and teamwork highlighted a sense of belonging.

The social role theory is one of the gender theories that holds that men and women behave following society's social roles assigned to each gender (Balachandra *et al.*, 2013:3).

The feminine stereotype model associates communal-expressive traits with gentlewomen, while the masculine stereotype model associates agentic instrumental attributes with self-assured, powerful males (Gupta *et al.*, 2012:773). Women entrepreneurs are at a disadvantage because of the traditional gender roles that assign males to the "breadwinner" position and women to the "caretaker" role (Balachandra *et al.*, 2013:6).

2.4.2 Initial entrepreneurial framework theme

Entrepreneurial qualities theories relating to creativity and uncertainty are part of the initial theme of the framework for entrepreneurship. Schumpeter connected entrepreneurship to innovation because he saw business owners as trailblazers who disrupt the status quo by bringing novel goods and services to market (Filion, 1997:4; Schumpeter, 1983:11). Entrepreneurship is said to require a certain amount of uncertainty. Due to the nature of the environment in which they operate, entrepreneurs are willing to take risks (Filion, 1997:4). Entrepreneurs are thought to be self-assured and dare to fearlessly carry on with their businesses in the face of significant danger and uncertainty (Long, 1983:51).

Interviewee 1 stated that she learned how to approach problems with a positive attitude and how to find solutions. Thanks to the training, she dares to shift her company's marketing strategy.

2.4.3 Framework for EE theme

The social capital theory, the opportunity relational feminist theory, the relational and collaborative women in leadership theory, the expectancy motivation theory, and the access to financial capital gender role congruity theory are among the theories that address entrepreneurial attributes in the framework for the EE theme.

According to the social capital hypothesis, people will receive assistance from others in a network they belong to (Bourdieu, 1986:171; Bowey & Easton, 2007:248-251).

The case study participants confirmed the value of networking and membership in pertinent professional organisations.

The relational and collaborative approach shows that women business owners interact more actively and cooperatively with clients and employees. Female entrepreneurs are more communicative, democratic, and relationship-focused (Moore *et al.*, 2011:221; Reavley & Lituchy, 2008:272).

According to the expectation motivation theory, people motivated to establish a business anticipate that it will be successful and provide them with financial incentives and more independence and flexibility (Manolova *et al.*, 2008:69).

Female entrepreneurs have more difficulties getting funding for their businesses (Herrington *et al.*, 2017:49; Manolova *et al.*, 2008:69). According to the gender role congruity theory, creditors have different standards for how well male and female entrepreneurs perform (Eddleston *et al.*, 2016:490). When applying for loans or interacting with loan officers at financial institutions, these practices negatively impact female entrepreneurs (Eddleston *et al.*, 2016:491).

Many of the case study participants said they needed more training on getting finance for their firms because they considered the financial management training difficult.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Approach

The research objective was addressed using a qualitative case study. To explore the importance of soft skills training for female entrepreneurs and the critical soft skills required by female entrepreneurs to achieve business success. This section explains the qualitative research design, characteristics of qualitative research, the role of the researcher in qualitative research, data collection strategies for qualitative research, data analysis techniques, the trustworthiness of qualitative research, and ethical considerations of the research in detail.

3.1.1 Qualitative research design

Researchers employ qualitative research methodologies to understand the how and why of human conduct, experience, and attitudes. They aim to comprehend a phenomenon that is typically more challenging to understand when using quantitatively oriented data collection techniques (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014:31). The fundamental goals of qualitative research are to comprehend a phenomenon, explain the reason for it, and describe the context (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014:31). The fundamental goals of qualitative research are to comprehend a phenomenon, explain the reason for it, and describe the context (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014:31). The foundation of qualitative research is human experience. Most qualitative data is not numerical but rather verbal. To gain a thorough knowledge of the data, the researcher searches and explores it using a variety of techniques (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014:31). The purpose of the study was to investigate the experiences that EWP participants had while taking part in the programme (both in-person and online). A qualitative research approach was utilised to collect this data.

3.1.2 Case study

The case study can be a limited-in-space-and-time event, activity, programme, or group of people. The case must be identified, together with its boundaries, by the researcher. The researcher may choose a case for its singularity or to serve as an example of a problem (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014:32). A case study can help people make more informed decisions by fostering a deeper awareness of a problem or practice (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014:362,371). McMillan and Schumacher (2014:32) and Merriam and Tisdell (2016:37) explain that the focus can be on a single entity (within-site research) or several entities (multisite study). This study, which focused on the EWP given at the bhive EDC, was a case study. Only individuals who completed the EWP could participate in the study's interviews (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014:32).

Because qualitative research techniques uphold the idea that each person has a distinct voice, qualitative research is a creative approach (Naresh, 2021). The typical researcher/respondent relationship can be

reversed using qualitative discourse and description, vital components of qualitative research. This method permits a humorous, light-hearted approach (Naresh, 2021). A qualitative design was most applicable as it was instrumental in engaging the EWP participants to develop the framework.

3.1.3 The role of the researcher

The qualitative researcher may assume interactive social roles in which they observe and document participant interactions in various circumstances. The researcher can assume a variety of roles, from that of a complete outsider—completely cut off from the participants' regular activities and behaviours—to that of a complete insider—within the context of the data collection setting (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014:374-375). Qualitative researchers frequently switch roles as data is gathered since the type and duration of their roles are based on the circumstances (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014:374-375). Following site selection, field input, and the initial mapping phase, the data-gathering tactics are frequently updated (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014:375). The value of data collection by a knowledgeable, prepared person rather than an instrument is stressed by qualitative researchers (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014:20). Throughout the entire research process; qualitative researchers engage in critical self-examination (reflection) of their function as the researcher. This is "disciplined subjectivity" (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014:20,362). The qualitative researcher must create a data selection plan tailored to his inquiry. The researcher took on the role of a participant observer throughout this investigation. Two impartial discipline specialists did the interviews.

Paragraph 3.2 discusses the research participants of the study.

3.2 Research participants

Different sources of information, such as documents, groups, people, websites, and reports, are used by qualitative researchers. Purposeful sampling is utilised regardless of the data source or form (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014:349). To improve the usefulness of data obtained from small samples, qualitative sampling is used (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014:350). Before choosing the sample, the researcher must gather knowledge on variances among subunits (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014:350). A deliberate sample of 14 participants was initially chosen from the three locations where the EWP was offered to ensure that each group was represented. The participant pool included both individuals who finished the EWP as an online course and those who completed it in person before Covid-19. Participants in the three groups were residents of the nearby towns and suburbs of the three campuses of the NWU.

3.3 Data collection strategy

The study's goal and setting will determine the interview approach that is used (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014:381):

- To determine the existing roles, activities, motivations, emotions, concerns, and perspectives.

- To identify predicted outcomes or expectations for the future.
- To enlarge or authenticate theories and hypotheses created by the researcher or participants.
- To supplement and confirm external information obtained from other sources.

Semi-structured interviews, which are less regimented than structured interviews and are more suited to qualitative research, provide an option (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016:110). Less structured interview methods assume that each participant defines the world in their own way. More open-ended questions need to be created by qualitative researchers (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016:110). In semi-structured interviews, the questions can be more flexible or a combination of more and less structured questions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016:110).

The researcher used semi-structured interviews as a data-gathering approach since they allowed the interviewee to go deeper. Experienced independent interviewers used Zoom to conduct the one-on-one interviews. The EWP training was closely overseen by the researcher. To reduce the possibility that respondents might not be forthright and honest because they were familiar with the researcher, it was decided to use independent interviewers.

3.4 Data analyses

In contrast to quantitative research, qualitative research involves simultaneous and dynamic interactive processes for data collecting and analysis. As data are gathered, the researcher should examine them so they can serve as a roadmap for the following data. Analyses intensify once all the data have been gathered (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007:160-171).

Data gathering is a continuous process; thus, it can continue forever. The question is how and when the researcher should decide that enough data are collected. The process should stop when data saturation occurs (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016:199). Data saturation transpires when the data collection produces no new insights or information (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016:199).

3.4.1 Deductive and inductive combination

When analysing qualitative data, qualitative researchers employ both inductive and deductive procedures. The primary method of analysis is inductive (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016:17). The qualitative researcher synthesises the data and gives it meaning through the inductive analysis process. The process begins with specific data and finishes with patterns and classifications (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014:395,469). This approach ensures that more conclusions and inferences emerge from the data rather than being imposed on the data before data collection (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014:395,469). Using computer software to aid in the process is secondary to the researchers' inductive assessments of the raw data (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014:395,469). To arrive at an accurate and comprehensible conclusion, deductive analysis techniques compare hypotheses to the information (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016:17,210-211). The researcher mixed deductive (pre-existing codes and themes that arose from the

Systematic Literature Review (SLR) phase of the research) and inductive (new codes and code groups that emerged during the data analysis).

3.4.2 Creating themes, codes, smart codes and relationships

Early in the study, the researcher should create a system to organise and organise the data. In this system, "coding" is used. To make obtaining specific bits of data simple, the researcher may code different features of the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016:199). These designations may comprise a combination of these, as well as numbers, letters, single words, colours, and phrases (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016:199). A code is typically a brief phrase or word that gives an essence-capturing, summative, or emotive aspect to a segment of language-based or visual data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016:199).

The data were organised by the researcher using Atlas. ti 9™. The interviews were coded using the same codes, code groups, and smart groups as in the SLR phase of the study. The codebook now includes new codes that weren't identified in the SLR phase of the study.

Paragraph 3.5 discusses the importance of trustworthiness in data analyses.

3.5 Trustworthiness

The research aims to generate trustworthy knowledge that is valid and conducted ethically (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016:237). The methods used in qualitative and quantitative research differ, and the standards for thoroughness vary (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016:237). The degree of confidence in the data, interpretation, and tactics used to ensure that the data analyses were carried out rigorously is what is meant by the reliability or rigour of a qualitative study. Therefore, the researcher should create certain criteria, methods, and procedures to ensure that the data analysis is carried out with rigour. Credibility, dependability, confirmability, transferability, and authenticity are some characteristics (Guba & Lincoln, 1994:105-117).

Confidence in the truth of the study and its findings is the most significant criterion for establishing credibility. Engagement with participants, observation, peer debriefing, member-checking, and reflective journaling are a few credibility-building techniques. To validate the validity of the data analysis findings, the researcher used member-checking with a colleague and peer debriefing with the promoters.

Dependability is related to the data's consistency over time and under different study settings (Connelly, 2016:435-436). A record of each peer debriefing with a colleague was audited as part of the reliability procedures. Confirmability is the degree to which findings may be reproduced and are neutral. Processes for dependability included an audit trail of the peer debriefings with a colleague. Confirmability is the degree to which findings may be reproduced and is neutral. To assure the dependability and confirmability of the research, the researcher and a peer performed a code and data analysis verification during the data analyses.

The degree to which discoveries are adaptable and valuable in various settings is the nature of transferability (Connelly, 2016:435-436). A thorough description of the context, locations, and participants ensures the transparency of the data collection and analyses. A comprehensive explanation of the analyses was also used to guarantee the transferability of the results of the interviews with EWP participants.

The degree to which researchers accurately depict a variety of distinct realities and genuinely describe participants' experiences is referred to as authenticity (Connelly, 2016:435-436)(Connelly, 2016:435–436). The researchers respond to this requirement by choosing suitable individuals for the study sample and offering a thorough, in-depth description.

3.6. Ethics

The ethical standards include rules regarding deceit, informed consent, anonymity, caring, confidentiality, and privacy because qualitative research has a higher likelihood of being personally intrusive. Applying these policies in intricate circumstances makes fieldwork difficult (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014:362). The work was submitted for approval to the faculty ethics committee to confirm that the research complied with the ethical requirements.

The EMS-REC ethics committee approved the study and provided the research with an ethics number NWU-00909-20-A4.

4 Results and Findings

This paper focuses on the critical soft skills female entrepreneurs require to start and grow their businesses successfully. The researcher will only refer to the codes, code groups and smart codes (Table 3) where the participants expressly referred to soft skills. Table 3 shows the applicable codes, code groups and smart codes.

Table 3: Applicable codes, code groups and smart groups

| # | Codes | Code Groups | Smart Groups |
|---|--|--|--|
| 1 | Camp Model of Entrepreneurial Education | Entrepreneurial tools | Initial Entrepreneurial Framework |
| 2 | Creativity, creative thinking and innovative entrepreneurship for entrepreneurial training and development | Entrepreneurial tools | Initial Entrepreneurial Framework |
| 3 | Continuous Entrepreneurial Learning | Approaches to Entrepreneurial training and development | Entrepreneurship training and development |
| 4 | Soft Skills Training | Entrepreneurial training and development strategies | Entrepreneurship training and development |
| 5 | Use of digital tools, online and social media | Existing Entrepreneurial Development Strategies | Framework for entrepreneurial training and development |

Source: Own Compilation

4.1 Model for training and development

The SLR's findings revealed several models that already exist to support EE. The interviewees who participated in the study also referred to a few of these models.

4.1.1 Camp Model of entrepreneurship education

According to the Camp Model for EE, students should be removed from their typical learning environment and placed in a setting where they can collaborate across disciplines to find solutions to business problems throughout a set amount of time (Li, 2010:1-2). All prospective participants were invited to participate in a physical idea generation/enhancement boot camp selection day before the COVID-19 outbreak caused the EWP to migrate online. The selection day programming included training in pitching and idea-generating. Teams of prospective participants had to cooperate. The potential participants were then required to pitch their business concepts to a panel of judges. The panel of judges selected the participants. In the interviews, the following advantages of the Camp Model found in the EWP were emphasised:

I enjoyed the "boot camp" approach to the selection day, where the applicants had to work in groups and do individual presentations. (Interviewee 2)

(Soft Skill = Networking & working in groups)

The following section explores how the Camp Model for EE may foster creativity and creative thinking.

4.1.2 Creativity and creative thinking

Entrepreneurs need a strong sense of creativity and innovative thinking (Lourenço & Jayawarna, 2011:225). The interview subjects claimed that the EWP training helped them to be more imaginative and creative. In the interviews, the following benefits of the EWP's creative training were highlighted:

I learned to be innovative and think outside the box through the EWP. (Interviewee 1) The EWP taught me to think strategically and sustainably about expanding my business. (Interviewee 2).

The programme helped me see that I need to be creative and that things need to change. I was inspired to research my industry. (Interviewee 4)

(Soft Skill = Creative thinking & strategic thinking)

The following section discusses continuous entrepreneurial learning in EE.

4.1.3 Continuous entrepreneurial learning

Continuous learning is the ongoing process of acquiring new skills and competence through constantly expanding one's knowledge (Osorio & Cordero, 2014:173; Wang & Chen, 2013:48-48). Additionally, Osorio and Cordero (2014:173) contend that EE needs to change its emphasis from start-up entrepreneurs to established business owners who need to expand their operations. The participant interviews support Osorio and Cordero (2014:173) position. The following positive aspects of the

continuous entrepreneurial learning linked to soft skills included in the EWP were highlighted in the interviews:

The curriculum helped me understand that I must keep learning to set my company apart from the competition. Connecting with other businesswomen who shared the same goals of self-improvement and learning was excellent. (Interviewee No. 2).

I'd be interested in taking a subsequent training course if one were to open so I could learn how to handle company issues. (Interviewee 1)

I'd want to participate in a follow-up/next-level training session, and it would be wonderful to have ongoing access to the training materials in PDF format for future reference. I can expand my business through ongoing training, direction, and coaching. As a learning technique, I prefer seeing, listening, and drawing to reading. I'd like access to every training video to review what I've learned. (Interviewee 4)

(Soft Skill = Continuous learning & networking)

The next section discusses soft skills training in EE

4.1.4 Soft skills training

When preparing potential entrepreneurs, including soft skill training is a crucial supplemental element (Nugraheni *et al.*, 2019:195). Li (2010:20) contends that developing new businesses is impossible without the following soft skills: leadership, creativity, pro-activeness, propensity to take risks and wakefulness. Prospective entrepreneurs must possess soft skills, including problem-solving, communication, and accomplishment motivation (Zheng *et al.*, 2009:30). The results of the participant interviews for the EWP support the necessity for soft skill development for business owners. In the interviews, the following benefits of the EWP's soft skills training were emphasised:

I am now confident in my ability to respond to inquiries regarding my company. (Interviewee 1).

Learning how to convey your needs and wants for your business and the image you wish to project were critical soft skills to acquire. (Interviewee No. 9)

It required some practice to perfect time management. I had difficulty finding time to devote to my academics, business, and other aspects of my life. (Interviewee No. 8)

The EWP should incorporate training in fundamental life skills, spiritual intelligence, and soft skills to assist entrepreneurs in starting and operating successful firms and balancing business with life. (Interviewee 3).

Time management is a crucial skill for business owners. How to link my business to my mission, and how to set goals that address the "why" question. How can I decide to have a positive outlook? Social networking Skills. (Interviewee No. 5)

More emphasis should be placed on presentation skills in the EWP. (Interviewee No. 8)

The EWP should include competencies in time management and critical thinking (Interviewee 9).

(Soft Skills = self-confidence, communication, time management, work/life balance, positive outlook, social networking skills, presentation skills and critical thinking skills)

Entrepreneurs must also possess soft skill competencies to be prepared for business in the 4IR. The following paragraph discusses digital, online, and social media use.

4.1.4 Use of digital, online, and social media

A developing trend in small business marketing is the use of digital, online, and social media platforms (Seo & Park, 2018:36). With the help of social media marketing, a business can connect and create relationships with its clients (Li *et al.*, 2021:52-53; Sajid, 2016:2; Seo & Park, 2018:36-37) Online, digital, and social media usage are accessible tools for marketing and managing a firm. In terms of the use of digital, online, and social media, interviewees suggested that the following may be added to the EWP:

I want to increase activity on social media for my company, and instead of hiring someone else to do it for me, I would like training on how to do it myself. Additionally, I'd like to take part in some Instagram usage training. I'm interested in learning how to employ online surveys for consumer discovery. (Interviewee No. 4)

As online tools are a part of the future of business, I would like to use them to develop my company. (Interviewee No. 7)

(Soft Skill = social media skills)

5. Conclusions, Limitations and Future Research

5.1 Overview of the study

This study aimed to identify the critical soft skills South African female entrepreneurs (particularly female entrepreneurs who have undergone the EWP) require to achieve business success. There has been a growing interest in female entrepreneurs over recent years (Bosma *et al.*, 2020:55). An increase in entrepreneurial activity can act as the catalyst that South Africa needs to create new businesses and have a positive impact on the unemployment rate (Stephens *et al.*, 2013:779). Female entrepreneurs face unique challenges to start and grow their businesses (Bosma *et al.*, 2020:55; Greene *et al.*, 2003:1). One of the critical challenges faced by female entrepreneurs is the lack of EE as well as soft skills training (Bosma *et al.*, 2020:55; De Bruin *et al.*, 2006:586; Greene *et al.*, 2003:1; Henry *et al.*, 2005a:104).

5.2 Main findings

The literature review identified the following critical soft skills for entrepreneurial success: achievement motivating skills, budgeting skills, communication skills, creativity, internal locus of control, leadership, planning skills, pro-activeness, problem-solving skills, propensity to take risks,

resilience, self-confidence, self-efficacy, teamwork, and wakefulness (Arthur & Adom, 2020:717; Botha *et al.*, 2007:164; Nugraheni *et al.*, 2019:195).

The female entrepreneurs that completed the EWP identified the following soft skills that were important to them for entrepreneurial success: communication, continuous learning, creative thinking, critical thinking skills, networking, positive outlook, presentation skills, self-confidence, social media skills, social networking skills, strategic thinking, time management, work/life balance, working in groups (teamwork). Table 4 Compares the soft skills identified in the literature with those identified by the EWP participants.

Table 4: Important soft skills identified in the literature and by the EWP participants

| # | Soft skills identified in the literature | Soft skills identified by EWP participants |
|----|--|--|
| 1 | achievement motivating skills | |
| 2 | budgeting skills | |
| 3 | communication skills | communication |
| 4 | | continuous learning |
| 5 | creativity | creative thinking |
| 6 | | critical thinking skills |
| 7 | Internal locus of control | |
| 8 | leadership | |
| 9 | | networking |
| 10 | planning skills | |
| 11 | | positive outlook |
| 12 | | presentation skills |
| 13 | pro-activeness | |
| 14 | problem-solving skills | |
| 15 | propensity to take risk | |
| 16 | resilience | |
| 17 | self-confidence | self-confidence |
| 18 | self-efficacy | |
| 19 | | social media skills |
| 20 | | social networking skills |
| 21 | | strategic thinking |
| 22 | Teamwork | working in groups (teamwork) |
| 23 | | time management |
| 24 | wakefulness | |
| 25 | | work/life balance |

Source: Own compilation and adapted from Arthur and Adom (2020:717); Botha *et al.* (2007:164); Nugraheni *et al.* (2019:195)

Interestingly, only four soft skills (communication, creativity, self-confidence, and teamwork) identified as important by the EWP participants also appeared on the list of important soft skills identified in the literature. This phenomenon confirms the argument by Carranza *et al.* (2018:1-28) and

Fayolle *et al.* (2020:4,8) that EE initiatives cannot take a one-size-fits-all approach but must be tailored to the target audience's specific needs.

5.3 Theoretical and practical contribution of the study

This paper focuses on the crucial soft skills that South African female entrepreneurs need. The study confirms how important it is for EE programmes to cover both the art and science of entrepreneurship (Li, 2011:2-3). EE programmes should include soft skills training as an important element (Quach *et al.*, 2020:2-4). The case study's findings emphasise the significance of determining the target audience's particular demands to tailor an EE programme to meet those needs.

Due to the case study's very focused nature, the findings cannot be generalised to all South African business owners. Still, they provide insight into the obstacles and training requirements facing female start-ups in Gauteng, Free State, and North-West. The results of the specific soft skills needs of the EWP participants confirm the importance of custom-made EE programmes designed to address the particular needs of the target audience of the EE programme.

5.4 Managerial implications

5.4.1 Government policy

Government development strategies should be modified to encourage entrepreneurship education as a component of fundamental education from a young age (Almodóvar-González *et al.*, 2020:15; Herrington *et al.*, 2017:17).

5.4.2 Department of Education

Promote EE in educational and economic frameworks as well as gender equality in entrepreneurship (Gatewood *et al.*, 2009; Herrington & Kew, 2018:27; Herrington *et al.*, 2017:18,82; Van Vuuren & Groenewald, 2007:270,272,276,278). To combat high unemployment rates, the government should also provide financial aid for professional and EE training for female entrepreneurs and other targeted populations, such as young entrepreneurs (Herrington & Kew, 2018:27). Recommend, support and fund research in EE and the measurement of the success of EE programmes. The Department of Education (DoE) should encourage early education (EE) commencing in elementary school, moving on through secondary school, and finally into tertiary education. The department can assess current EE initiatives' content and training strategies using the study's findings in conjunction with the EE framework and update or modify these programmes as necessary.

5.4.3 Public and private universities and TVET colleges

Tertiary Institutions should abandon generalist EE training in favour of more specialised EE curricula that align with current best practices. The following interconnected key educational questions must be addressed in EE programmes: Why (Objectives at socio-economic and learning levels), What - (Content), How - (Pedagogies and methods), For whom - (Target Audience), and For what result - (Evaluation) (Fayolle & Gailly, 2012:585-587). Universities and TVET institutions must emphasise

and fund research on the EE success factors and build and maintain a database of the most recent EE best practices appropriate for South African conditions.

5.4.4 Corporate South Africa

In line with the findings of the study, corporate South Africa can use corporate social investment and Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment (BBBEE) initiatives to promote entrepreneurship on various levels like the development or funding of EE programmes for specific groups or communities

5.4.5 Limitations of the study and possible future research

The sole subjects of the qualitative interviews were the EWP participants. Therefore, the survey only covered the opinions of female entrepreneurs in some areas of South Africa, primarily in Gauteng and the North-West. The study's conclusions cannot be applied to all EE programmes. To ensure that all pertinent South African data is included in the study, a quantitative study of all South African universities offering EE training programmes can be carried out. The female entrepreneurs near the NWU campuses were the focus of the case study. Future studies can concentrate on additional categories, such as young entrepreneurs, township entrepreneurs, and men beginning businesses in the pre-start and start-up stages.

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