

# Exploring The Role of Entrepreneurial Networking in Female Entrepreneurial Growth

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Entrepreneurial growth  
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Entrepreneurial performance  
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Entrepreneurship skills

## Abstract

While the World Bank ranks South Africa at the top of the list concerning the growth of female entrepreneurs worldwide in 2019, it seems females are still in the minority regarding networking and running a business. This study explores the role of entrepreneurial networking in female entrepreneurial growth. The study employs a qualitative approach, drawing on eight purposive sampled high-profile female entrepreneurs in South Africa. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analysed through coding and categorisation using the thematic analysis approach. The results suggest that although networking assists with financial, moral, and other material supports, most female entrepreneurs in South Africa are not aware of such networks. Hence, they are finding it difficult to improve their business performance. The study recommended that the Department of Trade, Industry and Competition (Dtic) and other stakeholders should continue working and encouraging South African female entrepreneurs to join and actively participate in entrepreneurial networks. This research contributes to the body of knowledge on female entrepreneurs in South Africa. This study has implications for building relationships for networking, as it is an excellent link for opening doors for business opportunities, growth and running a successful business.

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# 1. Introduction

## 1.1. Background

In today's post-modern age, the role of female entrepreneurs in developing a nation's economy is inevitable. Females are willing to act in business to contribute meaningfully to the national growth agenda (Chinomona & Maziriri, 2015:835). Despite playing a considerably bigger and more significant role in some of the 50 economies participating in the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM) research, female entrepreneurs still lag behind men (Bosma *et al.*, 2020:55). Female entrepreneurship plays an increasingly significant role in the economic well-being of nations worldwide by contributing to job creation, innovation, wealth, and family income (Neneh & Welsh, 2022:1631). More female entrepreneurs are beginning businesses intending to improve the world. Compared to men, female business owners are more purpose-driven (Bosma *et al.*, 2020:48,55).

Despite the growing number of female-led businesses and a significant increase in the number of initiatives, resources, and policies designed to promote and develop female entrepreneurs, evidence shows that female-owned businesses in South Africa have achieved limited growth (Bosma *et al.*, 2020:48,55; Magigaba & Jili, 2019:94). Shava and Chinyamurindi (2022:86), Ambrish (2014:224) and Phillips *et al.* (2014:86) ascribe the limited growth in female entrepreneurship in South Africa, especially those operating in the informal sectors, to the absence of formal entrepreneurial training, networks and the lack a expansion strategies.

In the business environment, networking is interacting with others to exchange information and develop professional or social contacts (Öberg, 2018:125). The entrepreneurial business network is a multidimensional network of businesses working together to accomplish the objectives of the organisation (Jaffar *et al.*, 2019:28). One of the characteristics that contribute to business success is entrepreneurial networking.

Females in South Africa accounted for 29.88 million in 2019 and 30.5 million in 2021, which is more than half of the total population (O'Neill, 2023). Despite this, their role in economic participation in the country remains lower than that of men (Herrington *et al.*, 2017:24). A significant gain in female entrepreneurs' economic engagement is shown in the SA GEM report for 2021–2022. However, they still lag behind male entrepreneurs (Bowmaker-Falconer & Meyer, 2022:21). Additional obstacles that female entrepreneurs must overcome include: (1) poorer educational attainment, (2) less business-focused networks, (2) a lack of finance and assets, (5) obligations to family members, (6) lack of confidence, and (7) a lack of female role models (Herrington & Kew, 2018:27; Kelley *et al.*, 2017:23,24,27,34; Nambiar *et al.*, 2020:71-73; Van Vuuren & Groenewald, 2007:270,272,278). The 2018 GEM report indicated that South African early-stage entrepreneurial activity is more opportunity-driven (75%) compared to other African countries. However, opportunity-driven female

entrepreneurship has decreased from 2016 (71.6%) to 2017 (65.7%), while necessity-driven female entrepreneurship has increased from 27.1% in 2016 to 34.3% in 2017 (Herrington *et al.*, 2017:24,28).

In the current South African economic environment, Small and Medium-sized Entities (SMEs), especially those owned by females, seem to lack adequate access to abundant resources (Jaffar *et al.*, 2019:28). Female networks can be a beneficial initiative to help enhance the success of females in businesses. Sharing information can help entrepreneurs have a different perspective on their current business ventures and new opportunities (Jaffar *et al.*, 2019:28). Female entrepreneurs have developed over the years to show the ability to work together and share resources through social and entrepreneurial networking. However, females are reported to network less effectively than men due to social factors such as work-family balance (Jaffar *et al.*, 2019:28).

In South Africa, various female networking organisations provide financial, material, and moral support to female entrepreneurs. Some of these organisations include South African Women in Construction (SAWIC); South African Women Entrepreneurship Network (SAWEN); Black Businesswomen's Association (BBWA); Women in Finance (WIF); Women in Business; Phenomenal Women South Africa; Businesswomen's Association (BWA), Technology for Women in Business (TWIB), Women's Development Business (WDB); and Women in Oil, Energy in South Africa (WOESA). These organisations assist female entrepreneurs by providing services such as advocacy to unlock land property ownership for females; Enterprise Development Program (EDP); access to material supply, finance, and economic opportunities; and access to training in all aspects of skills required to be in business and financial literacy to improve business performance.

Despite recognition of the potential role of entrepreneurial networking as an engine of exclusive business growth, relevant literature indicates that entrepreneurial networking among female entrepreneurs in developing countries remains an under-research topic in social sciences in general and in business studies (Brixiová & Kangoye, 2019; Irene, 2017:1-9; Jack *et al.*, 2010:333; Jaffar *et al.*, 2019:20; Mahadea & Kaseeram, 2018:5-9; Mohamad & Chin, 2019:603; Zeb & Kakakhel, 2018:107). Based on this observation, this article addresses this knowledge gap by exploring the role of entrepreneurial networking in female entrepreneurial growth. The novelty of this research is that it could provide valuable information to female entrepreneurs, policymakers, the Department of Trade, Industry and Competition (Dtic), and other stakeholders on encouraging South African female entrepreneurs on the importance of actively participating in entrepreneurial networks.

## **1.2. Problem Statement**

All over the world, females are referred to as a weaker gender compared to men in terms of emotions and physical attributes - hence the opportunity and prospects available to females in the business world are still under-explored at the academic level (Zeb & Kakakhel, 2018:107). While the World Bank ranks South Africa at the top of the list about the growth of female entrepreneurs worldwide in 2019, it

seems that females are still in the minority regarding networking and running a business. Studies have assumed that entrepreneurship is male-dominated; therefore, female entrepreneurship and networking between female entrepreneurs in a business environment do not feature prominently in the academic community (Ramesh, 2013:118). The purpose of the study is discussed in the next section.

### **1.3. Purpose of the study**

The study's main goal is to determine the contribution of entrepreneurial networking to the growth of female entrepreneurs by examining the literature and the opinions of a sample of female entrepreneurs.

### **1.4. Objectives of the study**

The background research reveals that female entrepreneurs face unique obstacles, difficulties, and limitations. The difficulties include the fact that, because of social issues like work/family balance, female entrepreneurs are less successful at networking with other entrepreneurs (Jaffar *et al.*, 2019:28).

#### **1.4.1. Primary objective**

To obtain a deeper comprehension of how female entrepreneurial growth is impacted by entrepreneurial networking.

#### **1.4.2. Secondary objective**

- Examine the literature to determine how entrepreneurial networking contributes to the growth of female entrepreneurs.
- To investigate the challenges for female entrepreneurs to network effectively in the South African business environment.

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 outlines the managerial implications, and Section 6 provides conclusions, limitations, and avenues for future research.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1. Defining entrepreneurship**

There are many ways to define entrepreneurship. The definitions can be either straightforward or extremely complex. The professional decision to work for your account while accepting the dangers illustrates a straightforward definition (Stephan & Uhlaner, 2010:1348). The more comprehensive definition of Seikkula-Laino *et al.* (2010:119) Seikkula-Laino *et al.* (2010:119) identifies the following five views of entrepreneurship to distil the substance of the many definitions of entrepreneurship:

- 1) Entrepreneurship bears uncertainty, so the entrepreneur attempts to balance market supply and demand (Drucker, 1985:28-29).

- 2) New innovations and amalgamations of products, production methods, organisational types, and markets (Schumpeter, 1983:7-27).
- 3) Kirzner (1973:94) and Scott and Venkataraman (2000:218) view exploring new opportunities as the essence of entrepreneurship.
- 4) Pinchot (1985:19) and Gartner (1988:26) condensed the essence of entrepreneurship as the rise and formation of organisations from a compilation of the definitions of several researchers.
- 5) Johannisson and Nilsson (1989:26) focus on community and social entrepreneurship.

Entrepreneurship is where an entrepreneur identifies opportunities in the market for new products or services that can be sold at a profit while the entrepreneur carries all the risk and keeps all the rewards ((Spinelli & Adams, 2016:77). The current economic situation in South Africa requires a focus on entrepreneurship to grow the economy and create jobs (Herrington & Kew, 2018:17).

In a dominating male society such as South Africa, starting an enterprise is very challenging, especially for female entrepreneurs (Irene, 2017:2; Rashmi, 2016:60). In this regard, most females start their entrepreneurial role through small and micro-enterprise. Cited challenges for female entrepreneurs are family obligations, inadequate start-up capital, lack of marketing skills, management problems, mobility constraints and inability to take a risk (Rashmi, 2016:61).

One way to evaluate entrepreneurial success is to measure the extent to which the business meets the demands and needs of interested stakeholders and the satisfaction of people with a real interest in the company. Bosma and Kelley (2019:21-23) found that there are approximately 163 million female entrepreneurs globally, and the majority are between the ages of 25 to 44 years. These statistics are indications that females can manage successful businesses if only they face minimal challenges. Van Blokland (2018) provided evidence in favour of this claim, noting that female entrepreneurship is on the rise in the UK and has climbed by 45% over the past ten years. Of this increase in entrepreneurs, 38% were females under age 35, indicating that young females are starting businesses in greater numbers.

## **2.2. Defining entrepreneurship networking**

The concept of entrepreneurship networking includes the activities of organisations to establish and build their businesses through social relationships, whereby employees and employers sell and market their products within entrepreneurial communities (Leskinen, 2011:4-8). Lerotholi (2018:128) described social networks as communal structures that embody connections and strengthen relationships among people. An entrepreneurial network is known as a socioeconomic business activity and a platform by which it brings business executives and entrepreneurs together to discuss available business opportunities (Abbas *et al.*, 2019:2). Guercini and Ranfagni (2016:770) argue that “the entrepreneurial business network also provides a platform to build relationships, identify, develop or

act upon opportunities of business, share information and seek potential business partners for ventures". Hedvall *et al.* (2019:412-413) advocated that an entrepreneurial business network is a way in which entrepreneurs can influence their business network, as well as personal networks and relationships, to help increase new business opportunities.

### **2.2.1. Types of Entrepreneurial Networks**

The entrepreneurial business network is a multidimensional business network of business firms that work together to achieve common business objectives (Abbas *et al.*, 2019:2). These objectives are classified into operational and strategic, and entrepreneurial networks adopt these objectives based on the role they play in the competitive environment in the market (Ford *et al.*, 2014:1). Three types of entrepreneurial business network classifications are tasks networks, professional networks (entrepreneurial career network) and social network (Abbas *et al.*, 2019:2-3).

**Task networks:** Task networks comprise the exchange of work-related information (Abbas *et al.*, 2019:2). This information includes professional expertise, professional advice, material resources, and political access. For female entrepreneurs to be successful, they must work with experts who can help them accomplish a particular task (Abbas *et al.*, 2019:2). Shmailan (2016:5) argued that in terms of task networking skills, females are less likely to seek professional expertise compared to men. Minai *et al.* (2012:183) affirmed that most successful entrepreneurs are usually associated with those who can obtain information from contacts, especially informational resources.

**Professional networks:** Professional or entrepreneurial career networks involve creating associations with different individuals who have the skills and abilities to offer guidance and directions for entrepreneurial careers (Abbas *et al.*, 2019:2). These individuals may include high-level managers, sponsors, mentors, career advisors and coaches, teachers, and other entrepreneurs (Brixiová & Kangoye, 2019:3). Furthermore, connections to the professional network have a crucial role in the performance and success of female entrepreneurs since they increase their chances of accessing official financial sector financing (Brixiová & Kangoye, 2019:3). Female business owners with higher levels of education start their companies with more capital than their less-educated peers (Brixiová & Kangoye, 2019:1).

**Social networks:** Social networks are known as entrepreneurial interrelationships with higher levels of closeness and trust (Abbas *et al.*, 2019:2). These relationships are with individuals, including friends and families, with whom the entrepreneur has a common background and interest (Brixiová & Kangoye, 2019:3). Social networks are considered a vital source of information, access to resources and gaining access to advisors and coaches (Klyver & Terjesen, 2007:682-688). Social networking has five key benefits for entrepreneurs (Lerotholi, 2018). Minai *et al.* (2012:180) conclude that female entrepreneurs can create brand awareness and build goodwill through social entrepreneurial networking. They can

draw customers' attention, facilitate customer interaction, establish a relationship with customers, and access available support from the state through government agencies (Minai *et al.*, 2012:180).

### **2.3. Role of entrepreneurial networking in entrepreneurial growth**

Most entrepreneurs continuously gain competitive advantage through network business models and gain business talents from external sources to increase their growth (Dangelico & Pontrandolfo, 2015:413; Jack *et al.*, 2010:333). Hampton *et al.* (2011:588-606) and Abbas *et al.* (2019:20) posited that effective entrepreneurial networking significantly influences business sustainability and progress. Minai *et al.* (2012:180), Dhameria *et al.* (2021:945-946) and Irene (2017:6-7) argue that entrepreneurial networking is essential for female entrepreneurs to reach potential customers and create brand awareness and goodwill.

Abbas *et al.* (2019:1) further emphasised how the entrepreneurial business network allows entrepreneurs to find, develop, and take advantage of economic possibilities, network with other businesspeople, share knowledge and look for possible business partners. Creating supportive relationships among female entrepreneurs can play an important role in helping more females advance in their businesses (Abbas *et al.*, 2019:1; Minai *et al.*, 2012:180). Associating with other female entrepreneurs through entrepreneurial networks who understand business ventures can contribute significantly to business success (Mohamad & Chin, 2019:603; Van Blokland, 2018).

Emuwa (2018) demonstrates several factors female entrepreneurs could derive from effective networking. The nine benefits include inclusion, creative stimulation, sharing, interactive knowledge acquisition, validation, collaboration, authenticity, reflexivity, and a booster of energy (Emuwa, 2018). Bate (2018) concludes that most female entrepreneurs prefer female-only networking sessions as it gives them a sense of belonging, an excellent way to find a mentor and inspiration, get results and build confidence. There is a direct correlation between participating in female network social activities and higher levels of career-related support, improved intellectual well-being, and a more optimistic outlook on the business (Bate, 2018). Greguletz *et al.* (2019:1237) found that females build fewer effective networks than men.

Social and professional networks create a mechanism that helps entrepreneurs increase business performance and design and pursue new opportunities (Leyden *et al.*, 2014:1157-1163). Networks allow business owners to get resources for less money and access to resources they wouldn't have otherwise (Markussen & Røed, 2017:356-359). Entrepreneurs who used networks and dynamics capacities effectively and efficiently typically produced sustained success (Abbas *et al.*, 2019:1-2).

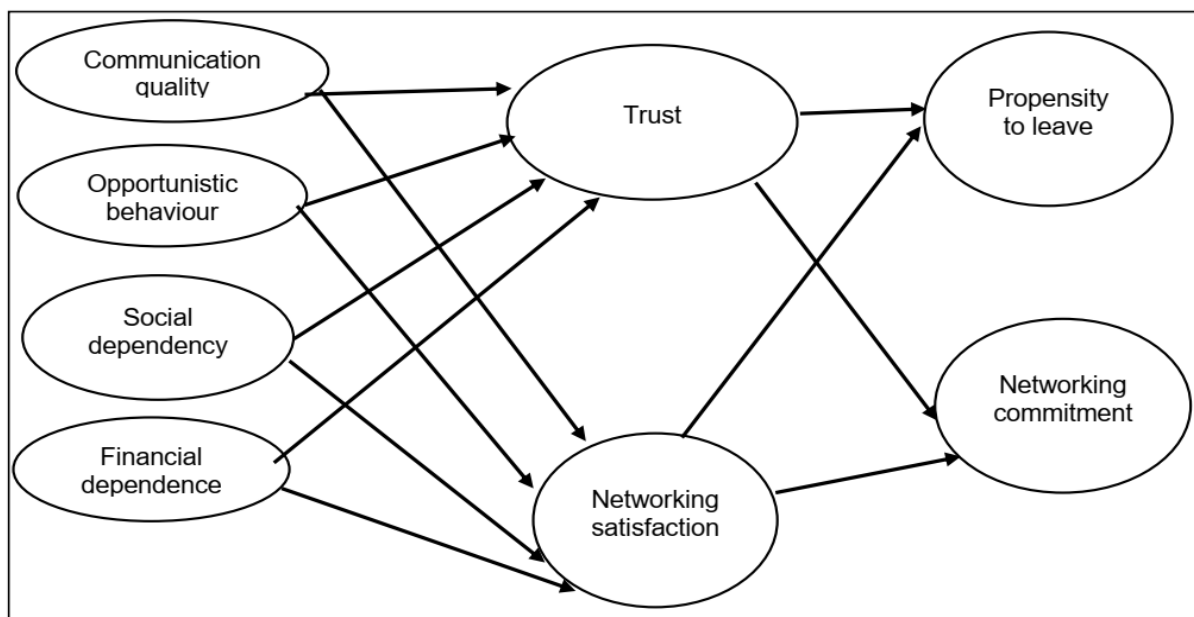
Engaging in a network is vital for entrepreneurial success as it facilitates access to significant entrepreneurial-building resources such as business advice, technical knowledge, strategic insight, or emotional support (Greguletz *et al.*, 2019:1234). Networking is a key factor in determining success for most businesses (Lerotholi, 2018). Females who belong to and receive support from professional,

entrepreneurial networks have access to money. They also frequently have access to outside funding sources after receiving financial literacy training from their networks (Brixiová & Kangoye, 2019:1).

## 2.4. Theoretical framework

While no unified theory of entrepreneurial networking exists, this study was grounded on the social exchange theory, with a focus on the personal characteristics of the entrepreneurs, institutional environment and professional and social networks as essential factors influencing female entrepreneurship behaviours, performance, and growth. The social exchange theory stipulates that entrepreneurs are more likely to reciprocate positivity through networking as soon as they perceive that networking can benefit them (Blau, 1964). The social exchange theory provides an understanding of how networking relationships evolve, as well as how businesses function and grow from a network context (Saleem *et al.*, 2020:4). The social exchange theory attempts to provide an in-depth understanding and explanation of exchange behaviours among entrepreneurs and relationship developments at any level in the network perspective (Möller & Halinen, 2000:36).

Figure 2.1 shows the theoretical model applicable to this study. Based on the social exchange theory, a trade-off in the relationship whereby an individual entrepreneur receives any kind of assistance, training, or reward would try to respond with something of similar value (Saleem *et al.*, 2020:3). The exchange relationship is an intermediary construct between two or more entrepreneurs, and the nature of the interaction will define the outcomes (Erdurmazlı, 2019:4). In the business network environment between entrepreneurs and networking organisations, trust is portrayed as a promising interaction construct (Erdurmazlı, 2019:4). It is a fundamental element in the successful relationship between entrepreneurs and networking organisations (Jeong & Oh, 2017:1-26). A proposed model of social exchange theory is shown in Figure 1.



**Figure 1: A Proposed Model of Social Exchange Theory**

**Source:** (Jeong & Oh, 2017:20-26)



### **3. Research Methodology**

This section provides a discussion of the study's methodology and research strategy, the design of the study, and the justification for using a qualitative approach. The theoretical perspective, presumptions, and relevant worldview for this research were determined using the model of Burrell and Morgan (2005). The radical structuralist, radical humanism, interpretative, and functionalist paradigms are among the meta-theoretical presuppositions. The study's main research question," to explore the role of entrepreneurial networking in female entrepreneurial growth," fits under the interpretive paradigm. The researcher had to observe the participants in their natural environment to answer the research question.

#### **3.1. Research Approach**

This study employed a qualitative research approach. Qualitative research entails gathering, analysing, and interpreting data by paying attention to what people say and do (Saunders *et al.*, 2016:53). The qualitative research approach was considered vital for this study because it provided an in-depth understanding of the actions, attitudes and behaviours of South African female entrepreneurs concerning business networking. The research problem under investigation involves female entrepreneurs' perceptions, meaning and experiences concerning business networking in South Africa.

#### **3.2. Qualitative research design**

Mishra and Alok (2018) argue that research design is a general process by which the researcher consistently and logically incorporates diverse study components. A research design, then, consists of a plan for data collection, measurement, and analysis. For this study, an investigative research design was employed. When there are few or no prior studies to forecast a research problem's outcome, an exploratory research design is used (Kabir, 2016:160). Various participants were engaged over time to acquire a deeper understanding of the phenomenon being studied. The researcher was, therefore, able to clarify existing ideas and develop new terms concerning networking between female entrepreneurs in the South African business sector. An exploratory research approach was deemed appropriate for this study since it gave the researcher a solid understanding of how South African women entrepreneurs network in the business environment.

#### **3.3. Sampling Method**

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). Qualitative sampling aims to improve the accuracy of the data obtained from small samples (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014:350). Before choosing the sample, the researcher must gather knowledge on variances among subunits (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014:350). The qualitative researcher then looks for important information-rich groups, informants, occasions, or locations to study (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014:350). As a result, samples are chosen based on how

well they provide information on the phenomenon being studied (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014:350). A few well-examined examples will result in a wealth of information on the subject, which is the strength of qualitative sampling (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014:350). The method used to decide how many interviews were chosen for this study is covered in the following section.

Instead of being static, the sampling techniques utilised by qualitative researchers are dynamic, phasic, and ad hoc. Qualitative sampling has just guidelines, not statistical rules, instead of probability sampling (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014:352). The sample size is chosen according to the following rules (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014: 352):

- Study goals: A self-contained descriptive/explanatory study will need more participants than a descriptive/explanatory case study, and a phenomenological study normally needs fewer informants to create rich concepts than a grounded theory study.
- Research focus: A network sampling interview research would need more participants than a single-site, process-focused study.
- The main method of gathering data for qualitative researchers is context. Even though the sample size of a study may be limited, the researcher can frequently go back to the same subjects or circumstances to gather additional data. A qualitative study will typically report on the number of days spent in the field because of this.
- Informants' accessibility: Not all informants are simple to find and identify.
- Redundancy of data: It is unclear whether including more people or returning to the field would result in fresh discoveries.
- Researchers submit the final sample size for peer review: Typically, qualitative researchers will start with a small sample size and increase it as the study progresses.

Sample selected for this study.

A purposeful sample of eight participants was selected for this study.

### **3.4. Research participants**

A sample definition is “a group of a relatively smaller number of people selected from a population for investigation purposes” (Alvi, 2016:10). Purposive sampling of eight high-profile female entrepreneurs was conducted. Interviews were conducted until saturation was reached. High-profile entrepreneurs have hands-on experience of entrepreneurial networking and other challenges as they already went through all the processes and experienced the advantages first-hand. It makes sense to get their view on the importance of entrepreneurial networking rather than the view of start-up female entrepreneurs]. Their size typically relies on the 39 concepts of “saturation”, or the point at which no new information or themes are observed in the data. McMillan and Schumacher (2014:32) and Merriam and Tisdell

(2016:31) cautioned that collecting data should stop when the categories (or themes) are saturated and when gathering new data no longer sparks new insights or reveals new properties. Purposive sampling was considered appropriate for this study, as it involves using knowledge to select the model from the population based on the characteristics of interest. The aim was to gather a sample of participants that would provide the most insight into the phenomenon under investigation for this study and, therefore, those who would best answer the research question.

### **3.5. Data collection**

Primary data was obtained through semi-structured Zoom interviews with the selected participant. All interviews were audio-recorded. Participants signed the informed consent form before their interviews at the request of the authors. The interviews were held in the participants' offices at the appointed time. Sub-questions were asked when the participants' responses to initial questions did not cover specific topics of interest. All participants were asked identical questions in the same sequence, but the interviewer probed inductively on critical responses. The interview guide included questions that explored seven perspectives on female entrepreneurial networking, namely: entrepreneurial background and personal characteristics of the respondent; current networking in the South African business environment, including social and family networking; type and methods of networks as female entrepreneurs; the role of networking in the business environment; benefits of networking on business growth; significant challenges for female entrepreneurs to network effectively in the business environment; and networking advice. The average interview duration was 55 minutes, with the shortest interview lasting for 50 minutes and the longest for 61 minutes.

### **3.6. Data analysis**

The authors transcribed the recorded data and, after extensive collaboration and consultation with a qualitative analyst, the authors then put the transcribed output into themes and categories, the data generated from the qualitative data. For accuracy, transcription output was also checked against the voice recording. The transcribed data were analysed using the thematic analysis approach. The results of the analysis are presented and discussed in Section 4.

### **3.7. Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness is how the qualitative research method is demonstrated to be logical, credible, and ethical (Lincoln & Guba, 1985:331). Utilising the following techniques, this qualitative study's trustworthiness was increased:

- **Credibility:** Peer debriefing is a requirement for the research proposal. An accomplished study leader assessed the study proposal. The researcher employed member-checks and triangulation methods to establish credibility to ensure that the research's findings were plausible or credible (Guba & Lincoln, 1994:105-117).

- **Dependability:** The researcher conducted data analysis and had consensus meetings with the study leader to establish agreement about themes. The research measured consistency and evaluated if the research outcomes could be repeated (Connelly, 2016:435-436).
- **Transferability:** The research's adaptability to diverse contexts and its ability to be compared to other studies. The researcher will thoroughly explain the research and methodology (Connelly, 2016:435-436).
- **Conformability:** The researcher conferred with the supervisor to review the research procedures, voice recording transcriptions, and independent coding for comparison with the researcher's coding (Connelly, 2016:435-436). Field notes will be available for audit purposes.

### **3.8. Ethics**

Research has an ethical-moral dimension, and the authors have a moral and professional obligation to be ethical even when the study participants are unaware of ethics (Neuman, 2011:145). In the study, the authors applied for ethical clearance from North-West University (NWU). Written permission letters were sent to all the selected participants for the study seeking their consent for participation in the study. Consent forms were sent to participants to sign before the interview. The authors ensured voluntary participation and granted them the right to withdraw at any stage of the research process. The authors also ensured that there was no exposure to any risk or harm to the participants and that confidentiality was maintained.

## **4. Results and Findings**

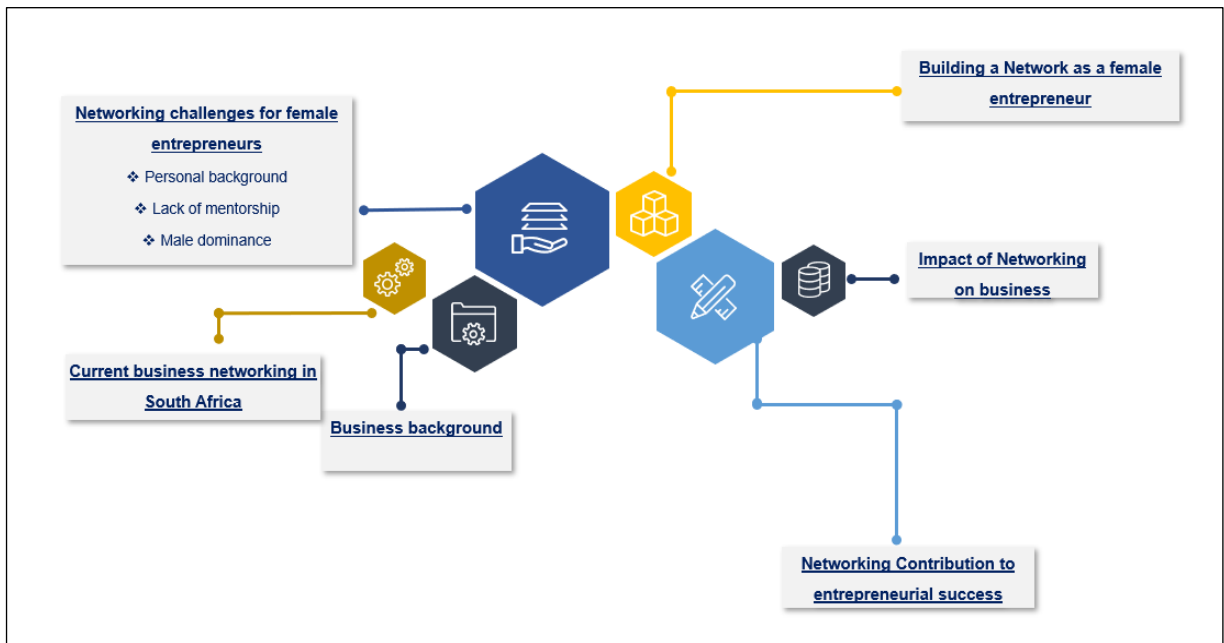
The seven main themes emanated from the analysis, as shown in Figure 2, are: i) the business background; ii) the current business networking in South Africa; iii) building a network as a woman entrepreneur; iv) the impact of networking on business; v) networking contribution to entrepreneurial success; vi) networking challenges for females; and vii) networking advice for other female entrepreneurs.

### **4.1. Businesses background**

The background of businesses entails a business overview, also known as business information or a business summary, as it is an essential part of a business structure. It overviews the most significant points about the business history, how it started, the management team, location, mission statement and legal framework.

Personal background in entrepreneurial networking or small business experience depends on support from a community or an environment in which one operates. Usually, networking is tricky when one has no entrepreneurial background. Family background has impacted entrepreneurial networking (Ghannad & Andersson, 2012:136). Participants used their previous corporate experiences and

qualifications as a conduit through which the backbone of their businesses was set. For example, one participant who had worked for a marketing and events firm went on to start an events and catering company of her own.



**Figure 2: Themes that emanated from the research questions**  
**Source: compiled by the researcher**

The following are some of the quotes where participants reveal what compelled them to start their businesses.

*“I am a graduate. I am a former teacher who has been involved in informal businesses from a very young age and never imagined owning a thriving formal business one day. I realised that I am an entrepreneur only when I discovered and acknowledged my passion for service through various business awards”. (Participant 5: Zoom interview. 03 Aug.,10:30).*

*“I consult, so I do not have your generic kind of business to say this is the business that I do. But I consult in different areas as I consult mainly in entrepreneurship. For young people and females, in particular, that’s where my interest is. The journey began long ago when I was the executive director of economic empowerment at the Pretoria Metropolitan Council”. (Participant 2. Zoom interview. 04 Jul., 16:30).*

#### **4.2. Current business networking in South Africa**

In South Africa, business networks have necessitated new business structures, and 78% of entrepreneurs are at present using these modern business structures to adapt to the demands of a networked economy. Entrepreneurs in South Africa should be informed about the significance of shared knowledge,

intellectual capital and establishing strategic partnerships that are promoted using networks. It is essential to incorporate constructive management and added value in business processes that can improve the competitive edge of South African enterprises. The following are some of the quotes where participants professed their ignorance of the availability of female business networking organisations.

*“I do not belong to any of them. I always go as a non-member” (Participant 3: Zoom interview. 29 Jul., 12:00)*

*“Not that I am aware of, unfortunately. I was part of a group called South Africa Women Entrepreneurs, SAWES Entrepreneurs, but I do believe it is closed now”. (Participant 7: Telephonic interview. 12 Aug., 12:30).*

*“I am aware of a lot of them, but the organisations that I am in are affiliated with a lot of wicked South African women in construction I have been with for many years...” (Participant 4: Zoom interview. 03 Aug., 08:00).*

Literature has shown that entrepreneurs in South Africa should be informed about the significance of shared knowledge, intellectual capital and establishing strategic partnerships that are promoted using business networks. The study revealed that most female entrepreneurs in South Africa do not belong to any entrepreneurial or business network. Some of the reasons were that most businesswomen were unaware of female entrepreneurial networks in South Africa and inadequate education and training on entrepreneurship. These findings agree with a study by Chinomona and Maziriri (2015:835-850). Lack of entrepreneurial education and training are some of the significant challenges facing female entrepreneurs in the Gauteng province of South Africa. These findings are also in line with research by Rudhumbu *et al.* (2020:190-201), which found that “female entrepreneurs faced a complex web of challenges, including access to finance, lack of training leading to lack of technical skills, lack of knowledge of sources of financing and technical support, high levels of market competition, marginalisation of females, and lack of knowledge of marketing strategies.”

### **4.3. Building a network as a woman entrepreneur**

Before the wide availability of information technology, entrepreneurs used conventional business models and underwent significant restructuring and growth to adapt to the new demands of technological change (Anwar *et al.*, 2020:265). Entrepreneurs are more likely to use a system that facilitates participatory decision-making and improves the effective use of modern information technology in the global economic climate (Manello *et al.*, 2019:332). The size and form of a business will determine the degree of decentralising networks (Mohamad & Chin, 2019:595). Entrepreneurs are increasingly involved in networking activities to ensure businesses grow and remain active.

Abbas *et al.* (2019:2) identify three types of entrepreneurial business networks: task networks, professional networks (also known as entrepreneurial career networks), and social networks. The

responses from participants proved social networks to be popular among them, while other participants' answers varied. There was a consensus on the benefits and challenges of building and maintaining business networks. The following quote illustrates the typical position participants had on how they built their networks:

*"We network a lot through social media. So, most of our networking is done through Instagram and Facebook. We do a lot of work online now because of the pandemic. A lot of our work is not done through societies, but it is done through people reaching out to us and us even reaching out to other entrepreneurs or people within their businesses. And it is usually done online." (Participant 7: Telephonic interview. 12 Aug., 12:30).*

In terms of maintaining the networks, two approaches emerged. These are physical interactions and virtual interactions. Physically, females meet socially and on business occasions such as expos. Participants also indicated the internet's pivotal role in maintaining their networks through the continuous and consistent use of social media and emailing. The following quote is of a participant who described how they maintain their networks:

*"I would say one: because I am an extrovert and also the character works if somebody approaches me and I want to do 1, 2, 3. My immediate first response is to say yes before I think about many things, of how am I going to do that, so my first response is first, yes okay, let us do it and then all I will say oh God how are we going to do this let me go and do research. I promised someone K this this this and that, and let me go see how best we can go do this and how best I can go and assist her." (Participant 2: Zoom interview. 04 Jul., 16:30).*

*"I do not think women network differently because I think we have the same methods of approaching people talking to them, taking them out for lunch, having those business things. I do not think we network differently except for those that maybe might go the way to the top using that method in a network that will be a different method that some might use, but I honestly think our networking methods are not so different from the ones that men do" (Participant 6: Zoom interview. 03 Aug., 11:30).*

#### **4.4. Impact of networking on business**

Literature has shown that networking allows businesses to stand out (Cisi *et al.*, 2020:1183). Potential clients can begin to put a name with a face. An entrepreneur who is successful in networking will remain ahead of the competition because of the impact they had. Networking offers a chance to impact business and attracts and retains clients in business (Cisi *et al.*, 2020:1185). Below are extracts of participant responses to the question of networking's impact on business:

*“I think it contributes a great deal, and networking has helped push a lot of entrepreneurs. A lot of businesses are through those networks and what it does. These are through those networks that some of the businesses were able to be out there...”*  
(Participant 4: Zoom interview. 03 Aug. 08:00).

*“Networking is vital for a brand, brand development, brand association.”*  
(Participant 1 & 3 Zoom interview. 30 Jun., 09:30 and 29 Jul., 12:00)

Formal networks significantly influence an entrepreneur’s performance (Zeb & Kakakhel, 2018:119). The current study revealed that female entrepreneurs who belong to a particular network have a competitive advantage over those that do not belong to any entrepreneurial network. This competitive advantage was because networking assisted the entrepreneur with brand development, business growth, publicity, and idea generation. These findings are in line with a study by Cisi *et al.* (2020:1185-1186) whose results revealed that an entrepreneur who is successful in networking would remain ahead of the competition because they would have made an impact. Networking offers a chance to impact, attract and retain clients in business.

These results are consistent with the findings of Markussen and Røed (2017:360-373) and Leyden *et al.* (2014:1160-1163). These authors postulated the network’s impact on the business environment by arguing that it allows entrepreneurs to find more opportunities, acquire resources and support, and lower their cost of doing business through economies of scale.

#### **4.5. Networking contribution to entrepreneurial success**

Networking offers a great source of contacts for entrepreneurs and opens the door to highly influential individuals who can be of business help (Cisi *et al.*, 2020:1183). Networking can assist entrepreneurs in developing their credibility as experienced, efficient, and supportive entrepreneurs who can provide valuable information and connection to people in need. Casciaro *et al.* (2014:705) identified access to resources such as funding, business advice, technical knowledge, strategic insight, and emotional support as major networking contributors to entrepreneurial success. Blomqvist *et al.* (2014:2-8) argue that through networking, females can shape their identity and further integration into societies. The following summarises the significant responses from the participants. The following are quotes from participants on their views on how networking contributes to entrepreneurial success:

*“Hmmm, the stronger your networking relationships, the easier you will find your business. At some point, you’re going to need help, and in South Africa, it’s who you know and not what you know. It is crucial to have a network established that can assist you in the times of need, you know, and not in your day-to-day business but more when you need help.”* (Participant 8: Zoom interview. 04 Sep., 18:30).



*“I got exposed to many clients who became my friends and supported me in other businesses. Except for this one of clothing, from then my sales went up. Because like I say; if you have one client that client is going to tell others, and then you find yourself that instead of having one client, now you have ten because of the one client that you met, and then friendships start there. You know others are my friends now. They started being my clients.” (Participant 1: Zoom interview. 30 Jun., 09:30).*

#### **4.6. Networking challenges for females**

Females face challenges when it comes to networking, especially strategic networking. At the same time, strategic networking is complicated for several entrepreneurs. Some studies have shown that it is more difficult for female entrepreneurs and those working in industrial environments. The study revealed that female entrepreneurs in South Africa experience challenges in obtaining start-up capital. Some of the participants’ emphasis was that access to finance is one of the biggest challenges hindering female entrepreneurs to network effectively in the business environment in South Africa. These findings are in line with a study by Chinomona and Maziriri (2015:840-850) that highlighted the lack of financial resources as one of the significant challenges facing female entrepreneurs in the Gauteng province of South Africa.

##### **4.6.1. Social challenges**

Participants were asked to give an overview of their businesses and explain how they started them. Most participants indicated that boredom, lack of freedom in their corporate jobs, and the hunger and desire to pursue new adventures and more income were the major driving forces in starting their businesses. Women’s need to balance family responsibilities and maintain a full-time job proved daunting for many. The prospect of being one’s boss with all the freedom and income associated with it was incredibly appealing to most of the respondents.

*“I think for me, I was privileged because I managed to go through university and in total, I have been to four universities in South Africa. I have been to the University of Limpopo, Wits University, Stellenbosch, and I have been to the University of Kwazulu Natal. There I have contacts even now. Some are into business; some are heads of departments, so you see it is quite different from someone who has never had the opportunity to study or interact with people who are in business. Imagine someone who is in a remote community with no connections whatsoever. I think an individual’s background can also determine their ability to network as an entrepreneur...” (Participant 6: Zoom interview. 03 Aug., 11:30)*

##### **4.6.2. Male dominance**

Some of the networking challenges for females are family and cultural influences. They oppose that many cultures in the world still believe that females are solely responsible for home and family-related

tasks. Irene (2017:3-9) added funding and management challenges to the list of networking challenges for female entrepreneurs. From the responses, it was evident that participants felt that gender bias, gender stereotyping and culture in the business world worked against them. Participants also thought that they must work harder and be exceptionally good at their work to gain recognition from their male counterparts.

*“I think some women to women it is not a real challenge, but I think from woman to man, the challenges are to be recognised, to be taken seriously, to be seen as an equal, you know, men are getting better with regards to that. But there are still a lot of men out there who view women as being inferior, you know as themselves being superior to women. I have had a few incidences of walking into an office where people think I need to make them tea. They will say, oh you know two sugars and milk, and I say no. No, I am here for the meeting and not up to serve you. So, unfortunately, there is still a stigma attached out there where women are not recognised as being senior...” (Participant 7: Zoom interview. 12 Aug., 12:30)*

*“You know, as females, we still have to work hard and obviously, the majority of females have families and children, added pressure to that running a household. It is not just about your job but having two jobs.” (Participant 4: 03 Aug., 08:00)*

*“It is also a big challenge that now that you have to go and do these networks. And you are asked what you bring to the party or what you put on the table. They ask whether you have the money. Sometimes they say to you okay you want this document to be signed so now you must bring your husband if you are married in the community of property. So, at the time the antenuptial contract was not in place, and it was a problem, and people that you are networking with will be saying to you, put something on the table. If not, they start taking advantage of you of your vulnerability or your gender and say that if you do not have money, they will have to sleep with me...” (Participant 2: Zoom interview. 04 Jul., 09:30).*

#### **4.6.3. Lack of mentorship**

Mentorship is indispensable when it comes to business. This is not only because of the knowledge and skills that entrepreneurs can learn from mentors but also because mentoring provides professional socialisation and personal support to facilitate the success of businesses (Ajuna *et al.*, 2018:93). Good mentorship significantly enhances entrepreneurs' chances for success.

*“It is very critical as a new player in business to be able to identify key stakeholders or other people who have been in business before to act as role models or to provide you with mentorship...These people have been around for some time, and they know the challenges associated with the kind of business that you want to do, and they should be able to assist you in growing your business...” (Participant 5: Zoom interview 03 Aug., 10:30).*

*“... the one thing that I have noticed is that women are women. Whether they are experienced and have many years in business, they tend to compete against one another and sabotage each other instead of trying to provide mentorship to those who are coming in...” (Participant 4: Zoom interview. 03 Aug., 08:00)*

#### **4.7. Networking advice for other female entrepreneurs**

Business owners with broader and more varied networks tend to build more successful businesses (Herrington *et al.*, 2017:17). McAdam *et al.* (2019:459) conclude that female entrepreneurs tend to have smaller networks when compared to their male counterparts. The issue could result from female entrepreneurs looking for guidance from more private environments, for example, family members and spouses, instead of a more diverse network of friends and colleagues (McAdam *et al.*, 2019:459-460). This smaller and narrower network can hinder female entrepreneurs from growing their businesses. Female entrepreneurs must expand their social and professional networks to include people from more diverse fields who can provide specialised advice or assistance (McAdam *et al.*, 2019:459-460). Building relationships with other business leaders and experts will help open doors to exciting business opportunities for entrepreneurs, additional financing sources, and new markets for their businesses to expand (Herrington *et al.*, 2017:17).

The following quotes illustrate the participant’s responses on this matter:

*“Yeah, in the beginning, my advice would be just to be yourself, you do not have to be afraid to be yourself, do not be afraid to admit that you are new, you know.”*

*“...with regards to networking as a woman, it is just about being open and honest, working hard, and you know to never give up. It is not easy; it is not easy, but to persevere.”*

*“At the beginning, work hard on your networking to establish, you know, a reputation for yourself and your brand.”*

*“I would say let us embrace one another, let us celebrate each other, let us you know that instead of being jealous or talking about this one in a bad way, let us rather build each other up, you know, as we stand strong as women and we stand our ground I think will achieve so much more...”*

From the participants’ responses, it was deduced that female entrepreneurs must expand their social and professional networks to include people from more diverse fields who can provide specialised advice or assistance. Building relationships with other business leaders and experts will help open the door to exciting business opportunities for entrepreneurs, additional financing sources, and new markets for their businesses to expand. The results indicate that a platform where female entrepreneurs can network should be established. The forum will provide information on the entrepreneurial network and other available assistance. Pakistan policymakers, for example, fell short amidst these findings as little to no

effort is being made to assist female entrepreneurs in making effective networks (Zeb & Kakakhel, 2018:119).

## **5. Managerial implications and recommendations**

The current study offers many managerial implications for female entrepreneurs in South Africa. The findings showed that entrepreneurial networks are inclined to improve the abilities of females to acquire valuable information, business opportunities and resources from surrounding business networks. The implication for this is that entrepreneurial networks might differentiate members who belong to the networks from other business networks who do not have this resourceful benefit.

Another practical implication for the research was building networking relationships, as this is an excellent link to opening doors for business opportunities, growth and running a successful business. Another practical implication is that female entrepreneurs need more training in business entrepreneurship to gain more knowledge and skills in entrepreneurial networking. The social significance of this study is that female entrepreneurs can perform much better than men if they join virtual entrepreneurial networks and if they are given the necessary support.

The findings of this study highlighted the importance of female entrepreneurial networks in which businesswomen endorse their available entrepreneurial network posture and develop valuable guidelines for managers, executives, and owners on how they might cultivate specific business ties and configurational combinations.

In general, the findings of this study indicate that female entrepreneurial network can assist businesswomen in exploiting external resources and opportunities for knowledge and technologies. The findings provide a platform of insight into the focused research area, and results might help improve small firms' performance and sustainability. The findings of this study are advantageous and helpful for businesswomen to consider results implications in various emerging sectors and to develop markets around the world which might have a significant impact on female entrepreneurs' sustainable performance.

This study recommended that the Department of Trade, Industry, and Competition (Dtic) continue working and encouraging South African female entrepreneurs to join and actively participate in entrepreneurial networks. The study further suggested that female entrepreneurs should raise confidence and empower themselves through entrepreneurial networking, which is one of the initiatives that can be designed to enhance skills and knowledge in entrepreneurship.

Networking should be formalised in South Africa as a supporting tool for females in business. It is important to note that more females should be afforded opportunities and resources to make decisions and learn more about entrepreneurial networking. It is recommended that female entrepreneurs should acquire skills that will help break the stereotypes and value systems that hinder them from participating

in everyday activities. Female entrepreneurs should consider forming partnerships with individuals from different areas of knowledge and expertise to learn from one another.

## **6. Conclusions, limitations and future research**

This study explored the role of entrepreneurial networking in female entrepreneurial growth. Networking was an essential tool in developing and promoting an entrepreneurial culture in society, especially when it comes to helping female entrepreneurs with material, moral and financial support (Zeb & Kakakhel, 2018:122). Female entrepreneurs nonetheless continue to face multiple challenges, such as low levels of business networking, work-life conflict, inadequate financial resources, lack of support services, inefficient business, management and marketing skills, and poor access to information, technology, and digital marketing (Kamberidou, 2020:5-25). For these reasons, female entrepreneurs who are not registered to or belong to any formal network while running their businesses need traditional networks to promote their products (Zeb & Kakakhel, 2018:121).

Business networks help integrate relationships with business competitors and relationship mechanisms like network status, power of resource control, cohesion, and trust that result from communication and interaction between business industries and other network members. (Abbas *et al.*, 2019:19). The study reveals that female entrepreneurs who are members of entrepreneurship business networks can share resources, exchange knowledge, and complement capabilities through business networks.

In terms of the influence of networking between female entrepreneurs in the business environment on the success of female entrepreneurs in South Africa, the study concluded that female entrepreneurs in South Africa have limited access to formal entrepreneurs' networks. This limitation has resulted in many female entrepreneurs in South Africa not having access to financial, material, and moral support. Most female entrepreneurs in South Africa are not aware of the services provided by entrepreneur networking organisations in South Africa, such as SAWIC, SAWEN, BBWA, WIF, Women in Business, Phenomenal Women South Africa, BWA, TWIB and WOESA. In a post-modern era when such organisations are working in South Africa, the limited access to formal networks for female entrepreneurs is a primary concern.

Concerning the effectiveness of existing entrepreneurial networking for South African businesswomen, it was reasoned that although fewer barriers exist to entering the formal entrepreneurial network, most female entrepreneurs in South Africa have minimal access to these networks.

Regarding the impact of entrepreneurial networks on female entrepreneurial performance in South Africa, the study concluded that formal networks positively influence female entrepreneurial performance. Furthermore, entrepreneurship business networks and developing female entrepreneurs' dynamic capabilities can significantly improve their business performance. This conclusion is in line with prior research by Zeb and Kakakhel (2018:121-128), highlighting the role of the formal

entrepreneurial network in getting success and stressing the importance of females belonging to traditional entrepreneurial networks.

Despite the contribution made by this study, it has some limitations which provide a path for future research. Firstly, the study was limited in research design and methodology and only employed a qualitative approach to collect data. Secondly, the study was limited to eight participants and data was collected in urban areas only. Another limitation was that some participants might have been reluctant to share information about their business. Therefore, this study's results were not a general reflection of the entire South African population of female entrepreneurs.

It is recommended that future research should consider employing a mixed-method research approach, using a larger sample size to help solicit more information from participants. This will provide comprehensive and more representative results to contribute new knowledge to the existing body of entrepreneurial literature from a quantitative perspective. Future studies should expand the data collection to include female entrepreneurs from both rural and urban areas to generate findings that might be more insightful. Future research should incorporate the impact of cultural differences on networking among female entrepreneurs in South Africa.

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