

# Exploring the perception of copreneurship in the Vaal Triangle, South Africa

Mrs Cindy Nhlapo<sup>1\*</sup>, Prof Stephan Van Der Merwe<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> North-West University Business School, North-West University, Potchefstroom, South Africa, Orcid: [orcid.org/0000-0003-0544-7277](https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0544-7277)

<sup>2</sup> North-West University Business School, North-West University, Potchefstroom, South Africa, Orcid: [0000-0002-5144-0861](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5144-0861)

## Keywords

Copreneurship  
Family-owned businesses  
Role allocation  
Conflict management  
Challenges

## Abstract

The purpose of the study is to get insights from the different dynamics copreneurs have to manage in the two intertwined worlds of business and romance. The study starts with a literature review to understand copreneurship and an empirical research study, interviewing ten copreneurs using semi-structured face-to-face interviews to collect data. The study, through the six themes, identified role allocation, separating business and home issues, conflict management, the measurement of business growth, and the involvement of family members in the business revealed that copreneurship is composed of challenges and benefits. The participants cited that copreneurship gives the business a unique, difficult-to-imitate competitive advantage and also provided recommendations for success to existing and aspiring copreneurs. This study contributes to the existing literature on and practice of entrepreneurship, family businesses and copreneurship within a specific geographic context of the participants.

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Background

Family-owned businesses are prevalent worldwide and comprise a large share of assets and economic activity (Galloway *et al.*, 2021:908; El Shoubaki *et al.*, 2021:115). In South Africa, approximately 80% of all companies are family-owned (Gomba & Kele, 2016:9). Research by Franco and Piceti (2020:14) shows that family-owned companies have a competitive advantage. This advantage is based on their embedded nature due to family ties resulting in trust, familiarity and inherent commitment associated with family relations (Galloway *et al.*, 2021:909). However, regardless of size, family-owned businesses have unique complexities, issues, and problems that non-family-owned companies do not confront (Purwanto *et al.*, 2024:47).

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<sup>1\*</sup>Corresponding Author

\* E-mail address: [cindy@multineed.co.za](mailto:cindy@multineed.co.za)

<sup>2</sup> E-mail address: [Stephan.VanDerMerwe@nwu.ac.za](mailto:Stephan.VanDerMerwe@nwu.ac.za)

In addition, the ownership and management of family businesses vary. A couple's partnership is one of the widespread forms of a family-owned business, and it is regarded as distinct (El Shoubaki *et al.*, 2021:116). Researchers use varying terms to define the concept of two romantically involved people who also co-own a business. The terms include family business-owning couples, entrepreneurial couples, couple-run companies, couple business and copreneurs. The term copreneurship was coined by Barnett and Barnett (1988), and that is the term used in this paper to describe the concept of couples who co-own a business. This partnership is distinct from other business partnerships due to particular behavioural norms and expectations associated with role identities (Franco & Piceti, 2020:17)

Different bodies of literature and research streams, such as Management, Economics, Psychology and Sociology, have studied the phenomenon of copreneurship (El Shoubaki *et al.*, 2021:2). The concept of copreneurship has been a topic of interest over the years, with researchers aiming to gather empirical evidence on role allocation, the neglect of personal needs, conflict management, gender power dynamics among many other unique issues experienced by copreneurs (Rodrigues & Franco, 2021:780).

Although the literature recognises the benefits of copreneurial partnerships, substantial challenges are also mentioned. Research indicates that when a couple co-owns a business, more significant tensions may arise, such as role conflicts, resulting in conflict in both the business and the home (Purwanto *et al.*, 2024:50). Jonathan *et al.* (2014:318) propose that role allocation and decision-making can be challenging for copreneurs. For example, copreneur spouses adhere to traditional gender-role orientations - wives usually have a feminine role, and husbands have a masculine role (Jonathan *et al.*, 2014:318). According to Machek *et al.* (2015:351), spousal relationships can negatively affect companies when copreneurs fail to separate work and family commitments. Belenzon *et al.* (2016:2616) assert that family owners, more so married owners, usually employ conservative business strategies because they typically use the enterprise to generate secure income for their children. Conversely, non-family owners may be more willing to take risks and adopt growth strategies.

Other scholars believe that family members bring unhealthy conflicts to the workplace. These further state that working with family members will breed mediocrity in management and a lack of accountability (Dyer *et al.*, 2013:69).

Against this background, this study will explore the perception of copreneurship in the Vaal Triangle, South Africa, focusing on small and medium-sized businesses. This study aims to unpack the unique advantages and challenges copreneurs experience, and it also seeks to identify the strategies they employ to succeed.

## 1.2 Problem statement

Literature indicates a worldwide increase in the number of copreneurship businesses (Galloway *et al.*, 2021:908). Furthermore, Dreyer and Busch (2021:816) suggest positive benefits related to family control in copreneur companies. These benefits may include a high level of trust (compared to non-married business partners), flexibility in work schedules, similarities in career orientation (Lee *et al.*, 2023:202), and more significant knowledge spillover (compared to non-married owners) (Belenzon *et al.*, 2016:2616).

Although some researchers state that couple-run businesses are an essential social and economic phenomenon (El Shoubaki *et al.*, 2021:115), some researchers see this kind of business partnership as a potential disaster (Belenzon *et al.*, 2016:2612). **These critics of copreneurship suggest it is difficult for romantically involved individuals to separate personal and professional matters, and the blurred lines can result in conflict in business management.** This paper explores copreneurs' perceptions of copreneurships, and the researcher will make recommendations for achieving success, aiming to help current and future copreneurships.

## 1.3 Research purpose and objectives

This explorative qualitative research aimed to explore the perception of copreneurship in the Vaal Triangle by analysing copreneurship owners' experiences in gaining a deeper insight into the daily dynamics of copreneurship. Copreneurs perceptions were obtained through semi-structured interviews and thematically analysed with the assistance of Atlas.ti 22.

In achieving the research purpose, both a literature review and empirical investigation were employed based on the following research objectives:

- To conduct comprehensive literature research on the perception of copreneurship and business success
- To gather empirical data through the perceptions of a representative sample of copreneurs in the Vaal Triangle, Gauteng province.

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 discusses the findings, Section 6 outlines the managerial implications, and Section 7 provides conclusions, limitations, and avenues for future research.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Defining copreneurship

Historically, the phenomenon of couples combining their economic production in families was common, especially in sectors like farming. However, it changed during the nineteenth century as we started seeing the prevalence of separation in household careers, also called dual careers. Despite the changes in the economic fabric, studies indicate that most businesses globally are family-owned and, in many instances, are owned and managed by couples. The concept of copreneurship has been studied across different literature and research streams, including Management, Economics, Psychology, and Sociology (El Shoubaki *et al.*, 2021:116).

Researchers use varying terms to define the concept of two romantically involved people who also co-own a business. Barnett and Barnett (1988) coined the term copreneurs (El Shoubaki *et al.*, 2021:117), and Mário and Patricia (2018:16) expanded the definition to include equal management and responsibility of the business. Furthermore, Busch *et al.* (2021:66) take the definition further by adding commitment, accountability, and equal decision-making power as a characteristic of copreneurship. Copreneurship is a unique and vital link between research on family-owned businesses and entrepreneurship.

Various scholars agree that there is a need for more research on the growing concept of copreneurship as a business model (Lee *et al.*, 2023:201). According to Dyer *et al.* (2013:69), previous studies on copreneurship are primarily anecdotal, predominantly focused on the boundaries between work and family, have used cross-sectional data, or have studied the demographic characteristics of copreneurial businesses - emphasise the sustainability of such businesses. Machek *et al.* (2015:351), in their study on the profitability of copreneurial businesses, mentioned that past research focused on social support, work and family conflicts, or communication between spouses and less on studying copreneurial business performance. Furthermore, Kuschel and Lepeley (2016:183) cite that literature on copreneurship highlights four major challenges: the dual relationship, management of dual roles, preservation of the marriage, and labour division concerning gender roles. This study is not unique because its objective was also to understand how the population sample manages the intertwined worlds of personal and business life - and the effect of this management on both these domains. Although similar studies exist in other parts of the world, this study is unique because it focuses on copreneurs in the Vaal Triangle. The aim is to determine if the dynamics discovered in other parts of the world are present in this community.

Literature on the effects of family on business performance has yielded conflicting findings, with some studies indicating a positive and others a negative impact (Belazon *et al.*, 2016:2612). Furthermore,

the full effect of copreneurships is an additional debate with a wide range of conflicting opinions and views. This section discusses the positive impact of a copreneurship: the solid emotional bond, increased trust, shared goals, flexibility, reduced agency costs, and spousal support.

## **2.2 Characteristics of a copreneurial partnership**

Copreneurial organisations vary in size: from small to medium businesses to large corporations. The revenue they yield is also proportionate to the size of the company. Furthermore, couples who run these companies can have varying levels of education and skills. A couple-run family-owned business differs from other family-owned businesses. Although a life partner is considered family, they are voluntarily chosen based on personal standards. This could make them valuable business partners emotionally, socially, and psychologically (Brannon *et al.*, 2013:112). A life partner represents a strong family in- group. In addition, other family-owned businesses include individuals who share the same lineage but stay in different households and have different life goals. Conversely, copreneurs do not only share the company and their household, but they also share life goals (El Shoubaki *et al.*, 2021:119).

Copreneurs are distinct because they can flexibly perform business and household duties, and how tensions between these two domains can be transferable. Furthermore, copreneurs possess special behavioural norms and expectations linked to role identities. Power distribution and roles usually follow these gendered social norms (El Shoubaki *et al.*, 2021:119). A study done in Australia, with 20 participating couples, reported that independence and family-friendliness in copreneurial companies make it easy for couples to merge work and family domains.

Another interesting finding by Rodrigues and Franco (2021:780) was that couples who start copreneurial businesses are likely to be older, have an education, and are already running one or more successful companies. They also state that copreneurial businesses are predominantly managed by men rather than women but that women have equal decision-making authority.

## **2.3 Requirements for success in copreneurial partnerships**

Entrepreneurial identity dominates the literature on creating new business ventures, but little is known about how copreneurs mutually form a collective identity (Danes *et al.*, 2016:188). Instead, they argue that entrepreneurial identity has been understood as a concept relevant to the individual. For a copreneurial venture to be established, a copreneurial identity (involving a shared vision and investment from each partner) is required. The individuals move from the perception of being individual entrepreneurs to form a collective cognition. This collective cognition is the foundation of commitment, which results in the sustainability of the business (Danes *et al.*, 2016:188). The following section reviews various inputs required for establishing a successful copreneurship:

teamwork, leadership, authority structures, a shared dream, and communication.

### **Teamwork**

Although couples have unique challenges in a family-owned business, they also function as a team and experience team dynamics similar to other organisational settings (Farrington *et al.*, 2011:25). Therefore, teamwork and collaboration are essential for the success of a copreneurship. The input-process-output (I-P-O) model is used in organisational processes and applies to any team. According to this model, inputs result in processes, resulting in outcomes (Körner *et al.*, 2015:2). Teams are effective when they have highly skilled and competent individuals who bring diverse but complementary skills and experiences to the organisation. Individuals within a copreneurial venture need to be competent, and when they join, the skills they contribute should complement each other - enabling their business to grow.

### **Leadership**

In any organisational team, leadership is vital as it influences the team's composition and behaviour (Farrington *et al.*, 2011:28). Therefore, copreneurs should also realistically decide on how leadership will be established in the business. The leadership decision should be based on an individual's competence and skills rather than their role or position in the household. This allocation of leadership positions can be a challenge for copreneurs if not carefully implemented; it can result in conflict that can adversely affect the business. According to Farrington *et al.* (2011:28), leadership that embraces flexibility, a win-win attitude, quality over quantity, vigour, and forethought is vital for copreneurship success. Finally, trust and employee confidence are cornerstones of effective business leadership (Karakitapoğlu-Aygün & Gumusluoglu, 2013:108). In this research study, effective leadership involves the spouse/s possessing a consultative, open-minded, skilful, and visionary leadership approach.

### **Authority structures**

Those with family-owned businesses face a complex interaction between family life and business responsibilities, resulting in various governance challenges. The challenges can be related to ownership and control, performance, succession, and governance structures (Ediriweera *et al.*, 2015:40). These challenges impact business success, ownership structure decisions, and business decision-making (Pindado & Requejo, 2015:292).

The family-owned business' size and listing status determine the governance structures required for business success. According to Ediriweera *et al.* (2015:41), family businesses have two related subsystems when using a systems approach: the business and the family governance system. The business' governance subsystem involves administration and control; it comprises shareholders, a

board of directors, and top management. The family governance subsystem consists of representatives of the family, whose role is to secure and manage cohesion in the family.

Farrington *et al.* (2011:29) state that authority structures (such as boards of directors, advisory boards, and regular family meetings) are increasingly associated with family business longevity over numerous generations and business performance. In this study, authority structures refer to the copreneurship's general implementation of governance bodies, policies, and procedures. This is put in place to prevent the business from being run by individuals' emotions and viewpoints, which could result in the wrong business decisions or cause conflict between the couple.

According to Ediriweera *et al.* (2015:40), family-owned businesses not only require governance structures for the supervision and control of management, but the structures should help with cohesion. It should also drive the shared visions of the family whilst managing harmful conflict. They further state that considering the family dimension (family governance) is a crucial part of the governance structure of family-owned businesses. Furthermore, boards also play an essential role as advisors and resource providers (Pindado & Requejo, 2015:292). This role is critical for family businesses because board members can supplement deficiencies in managerial skills. However, Pindado and Requejo (2015:292) argue that independent directors may struggle to offset family control when family authority dominates independent directors, although there still are benefits to having an independent board in family-owned businesses.

### **Shared dream**

The term shared dream can be defined as a family's shared vision for the future that motivates family members to plan carefully and work hard (as a unit) to ensure that the vision is accomplished. Other scholars maintain that the voluntary involvement of the spouse/s in the copreneurship contributes to aligning business and personal goals. Farrington *et al.* (2011:29) suggest that failure to align dreams in a copreneurial venture may result in feelings of resentment, ultimately leading to marital discord. A shared dream in this study refers to the alignment of the copreneurs' dreams for the future of their business and relationship.

### **Communication**

Continual, effective communication between the couple regarding the business vision and goals is key when forming a collective entrepreneurial identity (Danes & Jang, 2013:46). However, Danes *et al.* (2016:189) argue that communication between spouses about a business venture's goals may have advantages and disadvantages. They state that, due to the nature of spousal relationships, it is impossible to determine the ideal amount of business-related communication that will result in business and marital sustainability. Although it can help some couples to share concerns about the

business, excessive communication may result in conflict for other couples. Good communication about the business between spouses creates a shared meaning that expands into the belief that investing more resources is sensible (Matzek *et al.*, 2010:64).

## **2.4 Business success in copreneurial businesses**

According to Danes *et al.* (2016:180), the jury is out on whether family businesses perform better than non-family businesses due to the variations in the definition of a family business. For example, some define family businesses by the family's degree of ownership and management, and others consider the degree of influence in business operations as the qualifying criterion. Furthermore, other scholars insist that family businesses must have family members working in the business. Lastly, it is suggested that the definition should include the potential for generational transfer to those family members preparing for succession.

According to McDonald *et al.* (2017:491), improved relationship satisfaction in the family and business should result in increased business profit, for which they provide two reasons. Firstly, relationship satisfaction can result in positive synergy where copreneurs' joint efforts are more productive than the sum of their efforts. Secondly, higher levels of relationship satisfaction enable teamwork; coordination between spouses is expected to increase business profits.

Amore *et al.* (2017:474) studied marital leadership in businesses. Their findings suggest that companies led by couples displayed higher business performance compared to businesses managed by an individual or multiple non-family leaders and companies with one or multiple family leaders. According to them, copreneurs are more likely to invest in times of uncertainty, experience low staff turnover, and have better labour efficiencies. However, their findings contradict the findings by McDonald *et al.* (2017:1); in their study on the effects of working with a spouse, they found that, on average, copreneurial ventures yielded less profit than their non-copreneurial counterparts. Belenzon *et al.* (2016:2616) also state that businesses owned by married couples employ conservative financial approaches and, thus, see more financial gains than non-married owners. Finally, having only two spouses involved in family ownership could reduce dysfunctional conflict in management (Madanoglu *et al.*, 2020:994)

Danes *et al.* (2016:180), in their study on challenges in family-owned businesses, argue that although there is some indication of family businesses performing better than non-family businesses, many studies refute this finding. Instead, they suggest that family businesses are affected by inefficiency issues because family members are employed in key management roles, thus, increasing opportunities for conflict and interfering with business performance. Additionally, nepotism (a norm in family businesses) affects business performance; it is argued that it breeds mediocrity in management and reduces



accountability (Dyer *et al.*, 2013:69).

### **3. Research Methodology**

The underlying assumptions influencing and supporting this research study were framed within the Interpretive ontology (Saunders *et al.*, 2019:133) and guided by an Inductive epistemology (Bryman *et al.*, 2014:12). As a research paradigm, according to Bryman *et al.* (2014:19), this approach encapsulates an approach where assumptions can be presented as both objectivist (rational explanations) and subjectivist (social experiences) within the specific context of the study. An inductive qualitative approach was chosen within this paradigm as the most suitable approach to achieving the study objectives.

#### **3.1 Research approach**

The inductive qualitative approach allowed the researchers to find coherent descriptions and explanations (Milles, Hubberman & Sadāna, 2014:10) based on copreneurs lived experiences within their unique personal and social context. This involved a systematic collection, organising and interpreting of the natural conversations between the interviewer and the participants based on the semi-structured interviews.

#### **3.2 Research methods**

The researcher followed a qualitative research approach which entailed face-to-face semi-structured interviews as a method for data collection, followed by the thematic data analysis procedure of Saunders *et al.* (2019:652) as the analysis method. These are discussed in more detail below under the relevant sections.

#### **3.3 Research participants and sampling**

Though the best approach, it is usually impossible for many research studies to collect data from the total population under investigation due to limited access and resources (Saunders *et al.*, 2019:292), especially in qualitative research. Instead, researchers select a sample representative of that population under study. This study focused on copreneurship businesses and limited the population to select copreneurship businesses in the Vaal Triangle. This allowed the researchers to focus on a smaller sample in providing a more in-depth exploration of the phenomena under investigation. In this case, copreneurs perceptions. This approach is typically associated with qualitative research where participants are selected purposefully from a non-probability sampling approach.

This study used a non-probability snowball sampling technique (Cooper & Schindler 2014:360). This approach allowed the researchers to use personal business networks as an initial point of entry for potential participants, followed by the snowball strategy in expanding the sample.

The sample size for the study was guided by data saturation as a guiding standard within qualitative research resulting in 17 individuals participating in ten interviews for the study. These interviews were planned in a dyadic format. Unfortunately, during the data collection process, only seven interviews were done with both spouses present, resulting in three interviews conducted with only one partner as representative of both spouses.

Though the three interviews conducted with only one spouse present resulted in a different dynamic, the perceptions shared by these three participants indicated similarities with the dyadic interviews. Initially, this raised concerns about data saturation. Data saturation was however observed throughout the data collection process and later confirmed with data analysis.

### **3.4 Data collection instrument**

As indicated, this research study utilised face-to-face interviews as a data collection method. To achieve the study's purpose and in line with the study's qualitative approach, the researchers developed a semi-structured interview schedule as a data collection tool. The semi-structured interview schedule was developed as both an interview guide and an instrument to manage the interviews to ensure adherence to the identified qualitative trustworthiness criteria. The interview schedule consisted of questions and prompts derived from the literature review on family-owned and couple-owned enterprises. The research purpose guided the formulation of the questions and prompts. The semi-structured interview schedule consisted of both open- and closed-ended questions to generate data into both factual backgrounds (e.g. How many permanent employees does your business employ?) and explorative (e.g. You have to deal with the dynamics of a business partnership but also deal with the dynamics of married couples?) insights from the participants.

### **3.5 Research procedure and ethical considerations**

Before data collection commenced, ethical clearance was obtained from the university's ethics committee (NWU 00629-22-A4). The core ethical principles of respect, scientific merit and integrity, distributive justice and beneficence were maintained throughout the research procedures. These included the enrollment and selection of participants, informed consent and ongoing respect for the participants throughout the study. During the enrollment and selection process, the participant was informed about the study purpose and participation expectations before considering their participation. As approved by (), the informed consent form was shared with those who agreed to participate. All participants signed the informed consent form before the interviews commenced. At the beginning of each interview, the participants were reminded of the ethical principles that participation is voluntary and that they may withdraw from the study at any time.

### **3.6 Data collection**

The face-to-face semi-structured interviews were conducted at a mutually agreed convenient venue between the researcher and the participants. All the participants consented for the interviews to be voice recorded to ensure the accurate transcribing of the interviews as they accord. Eight of the interviews were in English and two in South Sotho, as the participants could not express themselves freely in English. The interviews were approximately 55 minutes in duration. All ten interviews were conducted over eight weeks.

After all the interviews were completed, the transcribing process started. One of the researchers, fluent in South Sotho, transcribed and translated the two South Sotho interviews into English. A quality audit followed this by a language translator to ensure the English transcripts' accuracy.

### **3.7 Data analysis**

As previously indicated, the thematic data analysis procedure as outlined by Saunders *et al.* (2019:652) was used with the assistance of the Atlas.ti 22 software programme to analyse the qualitative data. This involves an initial process whereby the researcher/s coded the qualitative data while identifying initial themes for further analysis linked to the research question (Saunders *et al.*, 2019:651). This approach further offered the researchers a systematic yet flexible approach to data analysis (Saunders *et al.*, 2019:651), enhancing both the dependability and confirmability of the analysis process. The four elements, according to Saunders *et al.* (2019:652) approach that was followed during the analysis process were a.) becoming familiar with the collected data, b.) coding the data, c.) searching and identifying themes and recognising relationships, and d.) refining themes and testing propositions. During the data analysis process, these four elements were approached as interrelated steps while adhering to the study's paradigmatic boundaries and overall purpose. These steps are discussed in more detail below.

*Becoming familiar with data:* The researcher used the interview transcriptions to immerse herself in the data and generate summaries during the analysis process. This process assisted the researcher in identifying recurring themes and patterns in the collected data.

*Coding the data:* The researcher followed this approach during the transcription of each interview. This was done to build up the data analysis process. In addition, the researcher used this coding process to derive key themes from the interviews.

*Identifying themes and recognising relationships* in the codes as generated from the coding process: This assisted in minimising the data while focusing on the themes relevant to answering the research question (Saunders *et al.*, 2019:657). In the theme identification process, the researcher referred to the research objective, research questions, and recurring issues during the interviews.

*Refining themes and testing propositions:* Refining themes involves the rereading of the coded data, their links and relationships to refine their relevance, sufficiency, and/or duplications, as suggested by Saunders *et al.* (2019:658). In addition, the apparent study themes and sub-themes had to be supported in refining. This was done by exploring alternative explanations and literature integration. This assisted in refining the themes and sub-themes without compromising the perceptions and context from which the data was shared. Considering both the inductive and explorative nature of the study, the researcher did not formulate any propositions and thus did not engage in proposition testing during this step.

### **3.8 Trustworthiness**

Although some trustworthiness strategies have already been mentioned, the study employed the following strategies and techniques throughout the research process to ensure the scientific soundness with which the study was carried out.

*Credibility* in the study was ensured by a.) adhering and b.) reporting on the qualitative research process followed within the expected scientific standards. Furthermore, in providing the *credibility* and *transferability* of the findings, the data was shared with the participants to verify its accuracy before the data was finalised.

*Dependability* and *confirmability* were ensured through a peer debriefing process whereby two independent researchers were asked to confirm, via an audit, the records against the researcher's findings. Additionally, in enhancing the *confirmability* of the study findings, a senior and experienced qualitative researcher reviewed a.) the scientific standards with which the study was carried out and b.) the objectivity with which the research findings were presented.

## **4. Results and Findings**

### **4.1 Demographic profile of participants**

Table 1 below shows the demographic profile of participants, copreneurs compositions, and their business profiles.

**Table 1: Demographic profile of study participants**

PARTICIPANTS	AGE	EDUCATION	BUSINESS AGE/YEARS	BUSINESS LOCATION	PERMANENT STAFF	OWNERSHIP DESIGN
C1:PA1	40	National Diploma	9	Johannesburg	0	50/50
C1:PA2	41	Master's				
C2:PA3	50	Matric	30+	Evaton	20	60/40 (male majority)
C2:PA4	45	Matric				
C3:PA5	44	MBA	19	Vanderbijlpark	25	51/49 (female majority)
C3:PA6	50	National Diploma				
C4:PA7	45	Honours	13	Vanderbijlpark	8	100/0 (female-owned)
C4:PA8	50	National Diploma				
C5:PA9	36	National Diploma	15	Vaal (Palm Springs) and Soweto	120	100/0 (male-owned)
C5:PA10	51	National Diploma				
C6:PA11	37	Degree	14	Soweto	102	50/50
C7:PA12	42	Degree	9	Vereeniging	0	51/49 (female majority)
C8:PA13	42	National Diploma	20	Sasolburg	5	100/0 (female-owned)
C8:PA14	45	National Diploma				
C9:PA15	46	MBA	14	Sebokeng	160	50/50
C9:PA16	52	MBA				
C10:PA17	42	Certificate	7	Meyerton	7	51/49 (female majority)

**Source:** Researcher

## 4.2 Themes of the study

The interviews with the owners of ten copreneurial businesses regarding their perception of copreneurship in the Vaal Triangle yielded several opinions, categorised into six main themes.

Following the initial coding, the codes were categorised into three organisational levels; these included six primary themes, 19 sub-themes, and 69 categories. These codes and sub-categories are presented in Table 2 as the themes and sub-themes for this study. The following section details the empirical findings of the study.

**Table 2: Findings of the study**

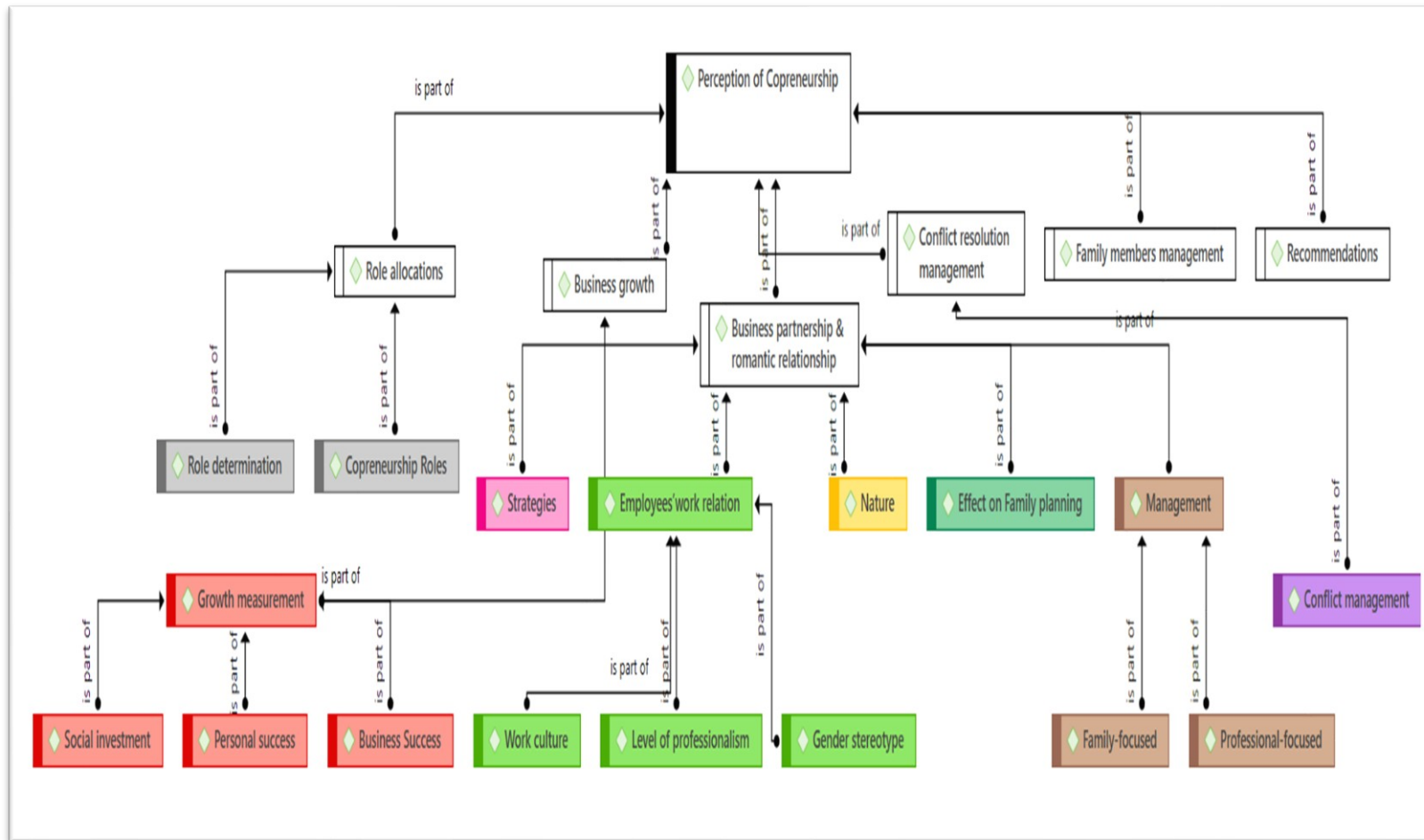
<b>THEMES</b>	<b>SUB-THEMES</b>
<b>MAIN THEME 1: ROLE ALLOCATIONS IN COPRENEURSHIP</b>	
1.1 Copreneurship roles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Management and Administration</li> <li>• Human Resources and Finance</li> <li>• Operational</li> <li>• Sales and Marketing</li> </ul>
1.2 Role determination	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Masculinity and femininity characteristics</li> <li>• Skill and knowledge</li> <li>• Work-passion</li> <li>• Personality type</li> </ul>
<b>MAIN THEME 2: BUSINESS PARTNERSHIP AND ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIP</b>	
2.1 Management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Professional-focused</li> <li>• Family-focused</li> </ul>
2.1.1 Professional-focused	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Shared vision</li> <li>• Business commitment</li> <li>• Work ethics</li> <li>• Separate personal- and work life</li> </ul>
<b>THEMES</b>	<b>SUB-THEMES</b>
2.1.2 Family-focused	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mutual understanding and agreement</li> <li>• Immediate conflict resolution</li> <li>• Communication</li> <li>• Religion</li> </ul>
2.2 Nature	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Benefits</li> <li>• Risks</li> </ul>
2.3 Employees' work relation in a copreneurship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Level of professionalism</li> <li>• Gender stereotype</li> <li>• Work culture</li> </ul>
2.3.1 Level of professionalism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fear</li> <li>• Respect and loyalty</li> <li>• Insecurity</li> </ul>
2.3.2 Gender stereotypes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of recognition</li> <li>• Preference communication</li> </ul>
2.3.3 Work culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Positive dynamism</li> <li>• Employee manipulation</li> </ul>
2.4 Strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Communication-focused</li> <li>• Multi-role engagement</li> <li>• Practice openness</li> <li>• Combine work trips and family holidays</li> <li>• Flexible work and break time schedules</li> </ul>
2.5 Effect on family planning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Family goals</li> <li>• Skill development</li> <li>• Childbearing</li> <li>• Family connections</li> <li>• Shared responsibilities</li> <li>• Quality of life</li> </ul>

<b>MAIN THEME 3: CONFLICT MANAGEMENT</b>	
3.1 Conflict management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Constructive dialogue</li> <li>• Team decision-making</li> <li>• Trust in partner's judgement</li> <li>• Understanding</li> <li>• Learning and working smart</li> <li>• Power of love</li> </ul>
<b>MAIN THEME 4: BUSINESS GROWTH</b>	
4.1 Growth measurement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Business success</li> <li>• Personal success</li> <li>• Social investment</li> </ul>
4.1.1 Business success	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Continuous projects</li> <li>• Good customer feedback</li> <li>• Achievement of yearly business objectives</li> </ul>
4.1.2 Personal success	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Material evidence</li> <li>• Creating legacy</li> </ul>
4.1.3 Social investment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Wealth creation</li> <li>• People empowerment</li> <li>• Changing lives</li> </ul>
<b>MAIN THEME 5: FAMILY MEMBERS MANAGEMENT IN COPRENEURSHIP</b>	
<b>THEMES</b>	<b>SUB-THEMES</b>
5.1 Family members management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Job dismissal</li> <li>• No preferential treatment</li> <li>• Clear job descriptions</li> <li>• Counselling</li> </ul>
<b>MAIN THEME 6: RECOMMENDATIONS</b>	
Recommendations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conduct proper risk assessment</li> <li>• Seek legal advice</li> <li>• Ensure stable marriage</li> <li>• Spirituality and religion</li> <li>• Healthy communication</li> <li>• Trust and love</li> <li>• Common goal</li> </ul>

**Source:** Researcher

Figure 1 below illustrates all the themes that emerged from this study.

**Figure 1: Themes in the study**



**Source:** Created by the researcher in ATLAS.ti



## 5.1 Discussion

### 5.1 The results of role allocation in copreneurship

The findings on role allocation in copreneurship consist of:

- Copreneurship roles, and
- Role determination.

Participants indicated that they occupy different roles in the business, and their daily responsibilities are closely related to their titles in the business. The roles include:

- Management and Administration,
- Human Resources and Finance,
- Operations,
- Sales, and
- Marketing.

In addition, the findings indicate that couples are collaborating to make the company successful. Finally, role determination findings show that, in copreneurial businesses, masculine and feminine characteristics, skills and knowledge, work passion, and personality type greatly influence how roles are allocated. When considering underlying theories on copreneurship, the influence of social identity was evident in the copreneurial businesses involved in this study. The theory also declares that an individual's concept of themselves originates from membership in a particular social group and the value of that membership (Brannon *et al.*, 2013:109; Guan & So, 2016:4). It further argues that people behave in ways that meet behavioural expectations correlated with a salient role identity (Brannon *et al.*, 2013:110). The researcher identified the influence of the social identity theory in the way masculine and feminine characteristics largely determine how couples allocate responsibilities in their businesses. Men, predominantly considered leaders in their families and society, automatically assumed a leadership role in business.

### 5.2 How copreneurs manage the business partnership and romantic relationship

Findings indicate that copreneurs apply two strategies in managing the intertwined domains of business and romantic relationship to ensure that one does not affect the other. They are:

- Professional-focused management, and
- Family-focused management.

Professional-Focused Management includes the role of shared visions, which emphasises the importance of the couple having an aligned vision to succeed in copreneurship, and to separate personal life and work. This finding is congruent with Machek *et al.* (2015:351). They suggest that the positive benefits of family control also exist in copreneurial businesses, including the synergistic effects of a shared vision for the future and shared values. This also involves the different tactics they use to create a mental and physical boundary between work and home issues. These tactics include keeping work-related activities and issues away from home and vice versa. Other strategies contained under Professional-focused management include the importance of business commitment and work

ethics. Family-focused management strategies include: Mutual understanding and agreement:

- Immediate conflict resolution,
- Communication, and
- Religion.

Following the discussion with participants on the advantages and disadvantages of copreneurship based on their experiences, the researcher formulated findings that describe the nature of copreneurship. The key findings are the risks and benefits that the participants associate with copreneurship. The benefits include mutual growth and family legacy, common vision and goal, enhanced closeness and communication, transparency, trust, fulfilment, hard work, and discipline. These findings align with Belenzon *et al.* (2016:2617), who note that married owners might demonstrate strong altruistic motives, especially when they have children. They may be motivated to work hard to provide a better life for their children. Brannon *et al.* (2013:112) also argue that copreneurs are more likely to make decisions that result in greater family and work-life satisfaction. The risks involved the financial insecurity associated with the lack of diversity in income in copreneurial families; family/child neglect, as a result of both parents being tied to business demands; disagreements on decisions clouded by personal reasons; high pressure and fatigue due to high expectations of the couple; emotional imbalances, such as neglecting to show care and affection to the spouse due to work issues; sabotaging work decisions due to personal matters and an anti-social lifestyle due to over-commitment to the business. The findings align with research by Mário and Patricia (2018:8), citing that failure to manage the separation of work and family effectively can negatively affect family life. However, El Shoubaki *et al.* (2021:133) argue that the flexibility of work-home boundaries gives copreneurs a competitive advantage in most cases.

When discussing the impact of copreneurship on employees, the findings indicate three key factors:

- Gender stereotypes,
- Level of professionalism, and
- Work culture.

Participants indicated that gender stereotypes held by employees are challenging, particularly towards female directors/owners. Employees tend to regard the male partner as superior and the wife as his supporter, rather than an equal business partner. However, other couples indicated that they receive equal respect in the business. The finding correlates with McAdam and Marlow (2013:153), who note that men usually occupy the leadership role, and the essential contribution of women is often overlooked. The role of women in copreneurial literature is generally invisible. They are seen as support structures for their entrepreneur husbands (Hirigoyen & Villeger, 2017:3). Building a positive work culture that promotes openness and a low tolerance for employee manipulation was essential in a copreneurial business.

The participants identified strategies they apply in their day-to-day operations in the copreneurship to balance their work and family relationships. They include communication-focused, multi-role

engagement, openness, combined work trips and family holidays, and flexible work and break schedules. Participants noted that these strategies assist in ensuring further balance of their unique and tricky partnerships.

When discussing the impact of copreneurship on family planning, participants indicate that the effects are both positive and negative. Participants alluded to the challenge of home financial strain, especially at the beginning of a copreneurial business, due to money being allocated towards building the business. However, participants indicated that when the business prospers, they realise a positive impact over time. Many participants mentioned that copreneurship accelerated the achievement of their family goals and promoted skills development through knowledge transfer between spouses. Furthermore, when discussing the impact of copreneurship on childbearing, participants indicated that working with their spouses enabled flexibility in deciding how and when they wanted to have children, compared to when they were employed. On the other hand, one participant mentioned that copreneurship was a challenge in childbearing due to their copreneurial venture requiring her to be physically fit. Other positive impacts on family that result from a copreneurship include shared responsibilities and improved quality of life. Another negative factor noted in the findings was the impact on family connections, which involve the couple's inability to attend to extended family commitments due to business commitments.

Overall, the findings in the discussion on balancing the domains of work and family indicate that, in the beginning, couples struggle with balance; however, with time, they find strategies that promote success in both domains.

The influence of the embeddedness theory was evident in this study. As mentioned in the literature review, the theory argues that people choose to stay at their jobs and careers primarily due to positive factors, such as organisational commitment or job satisfaction. The theory further states that individuals are entangled in their current job by various physical and psychological ties and connections (Lee *et al.*, 2014:201). In this study, it is evident that the couples are highly committed to their business success due to various ties, including financial and social factors.

### **5.3 Conflict management**

Findings on how copreneurs manage conflict indicate six strategies couples employ:

- Team decision-making,
- Constructive dialogue,
- Understanding,
- Power of love,
- Learning and working smart, and
- Trust in the partner's judgement.

### **5.4 The results on how copreneurs measure business success**

Findings on how copreneurs measure business success indicate that they regard continuous projects, the achievement of yearly business objectives, and good customer feedback as essential. Furthermore,

copreneurs mentioned that they measure personal success based on material evidence, such as the physical assets they accumulate as a couple. They also mentioned the creation of a legacy for their children as another form of personal success. The finding confirms Belenzon *et al.* (2016:2616) argument that copreneurs typically adopt conservative financial management strategies compared to non-married owners, which has implications for slower growth for copreneurial ventures. This is because copreneurs perceive the business as a legacy for their children; therefore, they tend to be sceptical toward making risky financial decisions, even if it is associated with higher growth. Finally, social investment was noted as an essential measure of success for copreneurs, including the positive social impact the copreneurship has on the community.

## **5.5 Family members management in copreneurship**

Participants in this study were divided on their views concerning family member employment. Some cited that they are entirely against employing family members due to the complexities involved in managing them. Others mentioned that they embrace family involvement in their businesses; however, they have systems to manage the dynamics associated with employing family. Those participants with family as employees mentioned using organisational policies that include clear job descriptions, no preferential treatment, counselling, and dismissals (where necessary). This finding concurs with Merwe *et al.* (2012:19), in their study on extrinsic rewards in family businesses, that the importance of performance management systems in ensuring fair performance and compensation of all employees, including family members.

## **5.6 Recommendations by copreneurs**

When asked to give recommendations to aspiring copreneurs for running a successful copreneurship, participants mentioned the importance of conducting a risk assessment and seeking legal advice on how to structure the business partnership, based on the terms of their marriage contract. In addition, they recommended the importance of a stable marriage/relationship before a couple could consider forming a business partnership; this would ensure that it can withstand the challenges that working together can pose. Participants also mentioned spirituality and religion as essential in a copreneurship. According to some participants, these principles will assist the couple in knowing how to treat each other and others. They further recommended that couples have healthy communication habits, as it is necessary for business success. In addition, participants suggested that couples ensure that their goal for the business is aligned. When assessing existing literature, this recommendation is influenced by the social identity theory. The theory is premised on the idea that an individual's concept of themselves originates from membership in a particular social group and the value of that membership (Brannon *et al.*, 2013:109; Guan & So, 2016:4).

According to the theory, when a couple has shared goals regarding family and business, it gives them a sense of belonging in the union, and it should encourage them to ensure that they succeed in attaining those goals. Finally, they mentioned love and trust for one another as fundamental to a copreneurial partnership. Another theory that applies to these recommendations is the work-life balance theory. The recommendations concern couples ensuring a healthy balance of work and family demands for success. The following section summarises the managerial implications of this research

study, as noted by the researcher.

## **6. Managerial Implications**

### **6.1 Role allocation in copreneurship**

The challenge around role allocation in copreneurship is often due to societal norms rooted in gender stereotypes. In addition, couples already occupy specific roles in the family structure and usually transfer those to the business. Therefore, the researcher recommends the following approach in allocating roles in copreneurial ventures:

- Couples should allocate roles according to each partner's skills, talents, educational qualifications, and social capital. An individual's position in the household should not automatically relegate them to a particular position in the business. They need to have demonstrated, perhaps in their career history or other activities, that they can occupy those positions.
- The founding spouse will probably have more passion for the business and would usually assume a leadership role. However, the researcher recommends that couples be open-minded about each other's unique abilities and not allow ego to cloud the decision about who should lead.
- The researcher also recommends that couples seek advice on strategically allocating roles to give the business a competitive advantage. Similar to other businesses, external market demands and government regulations must be considered when allocating business resources.

### **6.2 Managing the business partnership and romantic relationship in copreneurship**

The researcher recommends that:

- Current and aspiring copreneurs should equip themselves with literature on copreneurship to get scientific guidance on forming a successful copreneurial business. They should also seek advice from couples who are already in copreneurial businesses and get all the necessary coaching and training on interpersonal skills and how to co-exist in a healthy relationship.
- Aspiring copreneurs should be realistic about the nature of their romantic relationship and whether they can overcome the potential challenges of running a business.
- Copreneurs design and allocate home responsibilities to both partners' satisfaction. Where possible, the researcher recommends that the couple get additional support structures, such as a domestic helper or extended family, to assist with children and home responsibilities.

### **6.3 Conflict management**

The researcher further recommends that:

- Copreneurs should get to know each other's conflict-handling style and learn how to navigate around it for positive outcomes.
- Copreneurs should have business and marriage mentors to assist with mediation and guidance on rational decision-making (when required).
- Couples learn to communicate and listen to each other with understanding before coming to any

conclusions.

#### **6.4 Measuring business growth in copreneurial businesses**

Literature and empirical research have indicated that copreneurs measure business success by various metrics, such as financial growth, continuous business, accumulation of assets, and the social impact on communities. All of these measures are important and can be achieved simultaneously. The researcher recommends that existing and future copreneurs determine the best strategies to achieve business and personal growth according to their goals.

#### **6.5 Family members management in copreneurship**

Families are made up of unique people with different characters and values and should be treated as such. The findings on involving family members vary based on the individual family experiences of participants. The researcher recommends that copreneurs make decisions regarding employing family based on their experiences with each family member regarding their value system as a business and as individuals.

The researcher recommends that the key requirement for employing family should be based on the presence of required skills and talents that will take the business forward.

For those copreneurs who want to employ family, the researcher encourages the use of organisational policies to manage the behaviour of all employees. Adherence to policies, and the consequences of failing to do so, should not differ where the family is concerned.

A further recommendation is for non-family personnel to handle employee-related matters to ensure objectivity in applying organisational policies. This will also assist in distancing the copreneurs from the responsibility of dismissing family members from the business when required.

### **7. Conclusions, Limitations and Future Research**

#### **7.1 Conclusions**

The results and discussion section covers participants' opinions on copreneurship based on their lived experience. These views are mapped against existing literature on copreneurship. There are many similarities between the findings of this empirical research study and other studies in different parts of the world. However, there are also new findings that could not be correlated with the existing literature on copreneurship.

#### **7.2 Limitations of the study**

**The limitations of the study are the following:**

- Geographically, this study is restricted to the Vaal Triangle in South Africa and may not be generalisable.
- The sample size in this study (ten copreneurial businesses) is a limitation and cannot be assumed to accurately represent the entire Vaal Triangle population. Although this study will contribute to

the literature on entrepreneurship, there may be a need to conduct the same research with a larger sample.

- The limited time frame allocated for completing the research study may have restricted the number of participants and, thus, the insights gathered in this study.

### 7.3 Future research

This research study has exposed new findings on the nature of copreneurship, indicating that much more can be investigated on this unique business partnership. The following section notes potential future research on copreneurship.

The subject of copreneurship is complex and can be explored from various angles in different parts of the world based on the geographic context. Based on the knowledge gained in compiling this research study, the researcher suggests the following as potential future research topics for exploration:

- Investigate the influence of the country's entrepreneurial ecosystems on the formation rate of copreneurial ventures.
- Investigate the impact of copreneurial parents on the children's future entrepreneurial interest.
- Investigate the perception of copreneurial business ventures as clients/service providers from a customer perspective.
- Investigate the contribution of copreneurial conflict on divorce/separation rate.

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