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**Developing a Networking Structure for
Women Entrepreneurs in the MENA Region:
Formal and Informal Networking Elements**

Noora Ibrahim AlMarzooqi

Global Doctorate in Business Administration

Durham University Business School and emlyon Business School

28th May 2025

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Abstract

Women entrepreneurs face multiple issues in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, given the large number of cultural barriers, gendered expectations, reliance on mainly families for capital, poor access to venture capital and other funding options, and limited networks among other related issues. In line with this, the current study explores barriers faced by women entrepreneurs in the MENA region, outlining opportunities related to accessing formal and informal networks for better funding and other growth opportunities. The research integrates institutional theory and resource dependence theory to analyse how women entrepreneurs navigate sociocultural, institutional and financial barriers. The study further develops a networking framework to support women entrepreneurs in the MENA region by facilitating access to formal and informal networks, ultimately enhancing business growth and access to venture capital.

The study adopts a qualitative research design with an interpretivist and inductive approach to explore the challenges and opportunities faced by women entrepreneurs, specifically those who operate in Saudi Arabia, Egypt and the United Arab Emirates. The data was collected using purposive sampling and the sample was 32 participants, from which 25 were women entrepreneurs and seven were male.

The findings of the study reveal that cultural norms, economic instability, human resource constraints, regulatory frameworks, and limited technological adaptability significantly impact women entrepreneurs' success. It was also found that access to venture capital remains a major challenge due to gender biases, along with other challenges, such as lack of investor confidence, and limited formal networking opportunities. Women rely predominantly on informal networks, such as family and social circles, which provide emotional and initial business support but lack the scalability required for long-term business growth. Conversely, formal networks, though less accessible, are crucial for securing financial capital and fostering business expansion.

The study proposes a dual-channel networking strategy, integrating formal and informal networks, to create a supportive ecosystem for women entrepreneurs. By leveraging government initiatives, mentorship programmes and digital platforms, women can strengthen their networks and enhance their business prospects. The findings will contribute to entrepreneurship, gender studies and networking literature by demonstrating that integrating formal and informal networks can mitigate systemic barriers. The study also provides practical

implications for policymakers, investors and business communities to foster inclusive and resource-orientated entrepreneurial environments. Future research should explore digital networking advancements and the intersectionality of gender with other socioeconomic factors to develop more targeted support mechanisms.

Keywords: Women's entrepreneurship, networking framework, MENA region, venture capital, institutional theory, resource dependence theory, gender bias, business growth, formal and informal networks.

1 Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Research Background

In many nations, entrepreneurship has been recognised for decades as crucial to economic growth and social advancement (Neumann, 2020; Emon and Nisa, 2024). Business ownership provides a path to prosperity and influence for many underrepresented groups (Toma, Grigore and Marinescu, 2014; Wingfield and Taylor, 2016). Entrepreneurship is seen as a vital component of economic progress since it stimulates financial transactions and provides work opportunities that relieve some of the unpleasant problems that each country experiences, such as poverty and underemployment (Agarwal, Audretsch and Sarkar, 2010). Ahmad and Xavier (2012) state that developing and transitional nations, in particular, depend on small business activity to stimulate economic growth, replace state-owned firms and create employment in the absence of modernisation and technical and mechanical advancement. Today, business activity and growth are critical elements in any country's economy at both the broad and local levels. These are regarded as propelling factors in the global market and signs of monetary well-being (Toma, Grigore and Marinescu, 2014).

In recent years, women's roles in entrepreneurship have gained increasing attention due to their contributions to economic development and business innovation. Women entrepreneurs are not only playing a crucial role in the growth of firms but are also reshaping business landscapes by challenging traditional norms and expectations (Tiwari and Tiwari, 2007). Despite these advancements, entrepreneurship remains influenced by gender dynamics, which shape access to opportunities, resources and decision-making power (Langowitz and Minniti, 2007; Brush, Bruin and Welter, 2009). Gender refers to the power dynamics that determine societal norms and expectations regarding appropriate behaviours and roles for individuals based on their sex (Connell, 1998). In this regard, gender is not simply a matter of categorising individuals as male or female, but rather it pertains to the societal expectations, actions and attitudes associated with the two genders (Connell, 2020). Gender can be analysed as either a framework or a discussion. By incorporating these perspectives on gender, entrepreneurship research can be initiated from a gender-based standpoint (Ahl, 2006).

In this regard, as noted by Tiwari and Tiwari (2007), women have played a crucial role in increasing the economic performance of a nation, and Cardella, Hernández-Sánchez and Sánchez-García (2020) and Sajjad et al. (2020) also state that the population of women entrepreneurs is significantly increasing around the world. In support of this, recent statistics published by the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM, 2024) show that the percentage of

women's start-ups rose from an average of 6.1% in the period 2001–2005 to 10.4% in 2021–2023 across 30 countries participating in the GEM. In 2023, 10% of women initiated new firms, compared to 12% of men, with countries such as France, the Netherlands and Hungary seeing a more than twofold increase in women's start-up rates over the last two decades. Also, GEM (2024) reported that the proportion of established firm ownership among women in the 30 analysed countries rose from 4.2% to the current 5.9%. In recent decades, there has been a discernible increase in the societal and financial benefits that entrepreneurial endeavours confer upon individuals, with a particular emphasis on the contributions of women entrepreneurs (Rashid and Ratten, 2020). In this respect, several researchers, including Achtenhagen and Welter (2003), Acs et al. (2011), Brush et al. (2010) and Bui, Kuan and Chu (2018), have shown that it is now evident that women's entrepreneurship is essential for founding and developing firms that influence economic growth.

Therefore, women's entrepreneurship research is vital not only for increasing awareness of the significance of women in business but also for assisting lawmakers in improving their structural reforms by including the new aspect of women's entrepreneurship (Ahl, 2006; Danish and Smith, 2012; Alakaleek and Cooper, 2018). Even with the increase in women's entrepreneurship worldwide as reported by the GEM (2024), there remains a dearth of academic research about women's entrepreneurship and its connection with networking approaches, particularly within developing nations (Rashid and Ratten, 2020). The rise in women's entrepreneurship can be attributed to the heightened level of female engagement in the labour force (Langowitz and Minniti, 2007). The increase in the number of women entrepreneurs may be attributable, at least in part, to the 'glass ceiling' effect, which prevents women from moving beyond a certain corporate level (Daily, Certo and Dalton, 1999).

Few studies have shown the impact of the glass ceiling effect on the professional prospects of women entrepreneurs (Mattis, 2004; Kephart and Schumacher, 2005). This has led to a growth in the percentage of women who quit large corporations for innovative ones, either as entrepreneurs or as workers. Increasing exposure for women to management roles influences perceptions of the ability of women entrepreneurs to launch and develop their businesses effectively (Kephart and Schumacher, 2005).

The phenomenon of women engaging in entrepreneurship and undertaking business ventures, on both small and large scales, has become increasingly evident globally (Rashid and Ratten, 2020). This trend has resulted in substantial contributions to the economic growth of their respective nations. Nevertheless, women encounter challenges in various countries across

the globe in their pursuit of self-determination (Toma, Grigore and Marinescu, 2014). There are several factors that contribute to this phenomenon, including inadequate infrastructure, limited networking prospects, prevailing social norms, cultural hindrances, male-dominated societies and their influence, and a range of sociocultural and economic challenges (Abou-Moghli and Al-Abdallah, 2019; Khan, 2020; Hassan and Zaharia, 2021). Among all the challenges, funding is the most critical problem that women entrepreneurs face while building their start-ups. Just as multiple studies in past literature (Greene et al., 2001; Davila, Foster and Gupta, 2003) have outlined that these challenges did not allow women entrepreneurs to secure venture capital, a lot of the more recent research (e.g. Tinkler et al., 2015; Lins and Lutz, 2016; Brush et al., 2017; Raina, 2017; Balachandra, 2020; Henry et al., 2022) also outlines a similar issue. Women entrepreneurs face significant issues in terms of securing venture capital or angel funding. In relation to this, Schillo and Ebrahimi (2021) also outline that scholarly literature has consistently demonstrated that reduced funding for enterprises led by women is not a result of lower profitability or poor performance; rather, this phenomenon appears to be linked to gender. Several recent studies have examined the processes that result in varying outcomes for males and females. The studies conducted by Balachandra (2020) and Brush et al. (2017) demonstrate that there are perceptible disparities in the way venture capital investors evaluate proposals made by women and those made by men. Specifically, Balachandra (2020) reveal that venture capital investors tend to perceive women's proposals distinctively from those made by men. Similarly, Alsos and Ljunggren (2013) demonstrate that men and women indicate credibility to venture capital investors in different ways, such as their communication styles, professional backgrounds, emphasis placed on their personal and business achievements, and confidence levels. Finally, Raina (2017) highlights that venture capital investors tend to communicate distinctively with women compared to men. The aforementioned studies collectively indicate that face-to-face interactions with investors exert significant influence, and when coupled with the Coleman and Robb's (2009) discoveries, this is likely the primary factor contributing to the gender-based disparity in funding. The United Nations also acknowledges this issue, whereby some of its sustainable development goals (SDGs) focus on gender equality (SDG 5) as one of its important goals, which can be interlinked with another SDG, that of decent work and economic growth (SDG 8) (Estrada and Schuber, 2022). In a report by Estrada and Schuber (2022), the authors outline that women entrepreneurs receive fewer investments, yet their companies still generate high revenue.

With regard to the context, Estrada and Schuber (2022) also mention that the highest percentage (25.6%) of firms with majority women ownership are in East Asia and the Pacific region and the lowest percentage (4.3%) of firms with majority women ownership are in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. Metcalfe, Bastian and AlDajani (2022) also state that the situation for women entrepreneurs in Arab nations remains debilitating owing to several variables. In the MENA region, women are still disregarded as a source of development and competitiveness. Also, according to figures released in 2020 (Puri-Mirza, 2021), the proportion of women in executive positions was lowest in the MENA region at around 4.5% compared to the worldwide average of 15.1%. Recent statistics published by the World Economic Forum (WEF, 2024) indicate that the MENA region ranks lowest and has a high gender parity score. In addition, Figure 1 (a) shows that there is a gender gap in the MENA region compared to other regions globally.

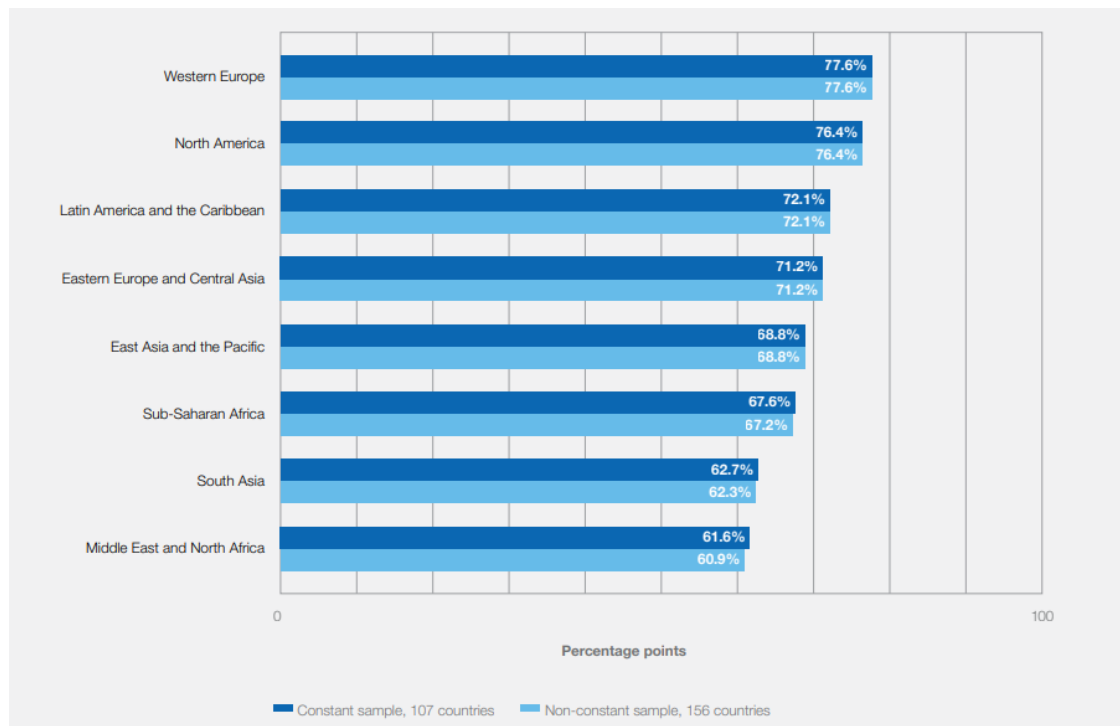


Figure 1 (a): Gender Gap by Region (2021)

(Source: WEF, 2021)

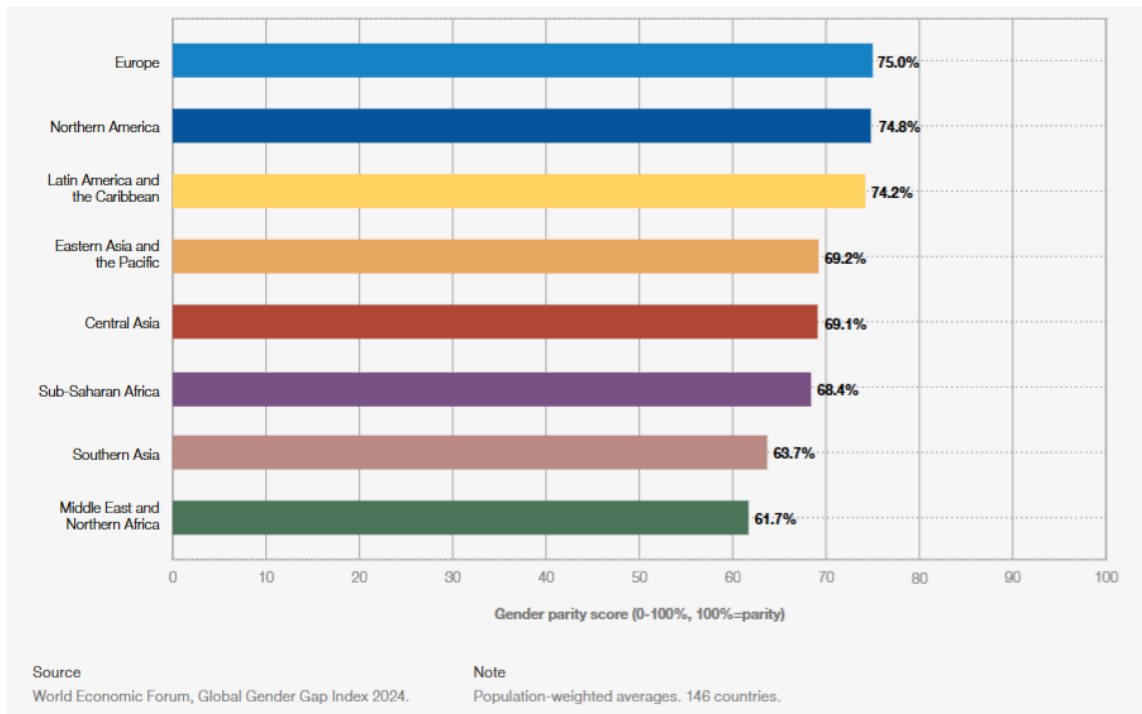


Figure 2 (b): Gender Gap by Region (2024)

(Source: WEF, 2024)

It is interesting to note that this gender gap is high in all industries in the region, which is also relevant to entrepreneurial statistics. Around the world, numbers of women entrepreneurs are significantly increasing in various regions due to increasing support from governments, increased educational opportunities, open social and cultural norms, and various other social and political standards (Metcalf, Bastian and AlDajani, 2022). However, in Figure 2, it can be observed that regions such as Asia and the MENA region have low numbers of women entrepreneurs compared to other regions (WEF, 2021; 2024).

It can also be observed that a gender gap exists significantly in the MENA region and that the region has the lowest number of women entrepreneurs compared to other regions. This negatively impacts the economies of the MENA region, representing the lack of opportunities and financial resources such as venture capital and networking opportunities for women entrepreneurs. In addition, even if the economies of the countries in the MENA region are strong, women entrepreneurs in the region experience issues in terms of networking for better opportunities in the region. Hence, the contextual focus for the current research is the MENA region.

A detailed discussion of the research context considered in the current study is carried out in the following section.

1.2 Research Context

The selected context for the current study are the countries of MENA region (collectively). The focus of the selected context is limited to a few countries of the MENA region, as discussed below.

The MENA region consists of 21 countries, according to a recent report by the World Bank (2021a), as follows: Algeria, Bahrain, Djibouti, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Malta, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), the West Bank and Gaza, and Yemen.

Of these 21 countries, three (Saudi Arabia, Egypt and the UAE) were selected for this research as they have high GDPs (World Bank, 2023) but comparatively low representations of women entrepreneurs.







| Country | Most Recent Year | Most Recent Value (Millions) |  |
|----------------------|------------------|------------------------------|---|
| Saudi Arabia | 2023 | 1,067,582.93 |  |
| United Arab Emirates | 2023 | 514,130.43 |  |
| Israel | 2023 | 513,611.10 |  |
| Iran, Islamic Rep. | 2023 | 404,625.66 |  |
| Egypt, Arab Rep. | 2023 | 396,002.50 |  |

Figure 3: GDP of MENA countries

(Source: World Bank, 2023)

Despite the high GDPs and economies of these countries in the MENA region, women entrepreneurs face a significant number of challenges. Each year, the MENA region loses \$575 billion owing to the absence of entrepreneurial engagement by women (Mounzer, 2022). The unemployment rate for women in the MENA region is 15.5% compared to 6.7% for men, which is over three times the global average (Mounzer, 2022). In the MENA region, the disparity between male and female ownership of developed firms is greater than 40%, the highest in the world (Mounzer, 2022).

The focus of the current research is to analyse the situation for women entrepreneurs in three countries in the MENA region with high GDPs, as it is important to understand that even though the countries are developed and have high GDPs, women entrepreneurs face significant challenges, including cultural norms, legal barriers and lack of access to resources. Also, the World Bank (2025) has reported that countries such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt have only 4.9% and 5.2% female participation in ownership, respectively. Hence, the current research focuses on analysing women's entrepreneurship in Saudi Arabia, Egypt and the UAE.

In the context of Saudi Arabia, Abou-Moghli and Al-Abdallah (2019) conducted a study on the state of women's entrepreneurship in Saudi Arabia and found that it is comparatively unsatisfactory compared to other countries in the region. This could have a noteworthy effect on the economic development of the MENA region. According to Abou-Moghli and Al-Abdallah's (2019) research, sociocultural and financial limitations are significant challenges encountered by women entrepreneurs in Saudi Arabia. Alkhaled's (2021) study on women's entrepreneurship in Saudi Arabia highlights several challenges faced by women entrepreneurs in the country, including the absence of female role models, gender-based disparities in the financing process and societal stigmatisation of women in business. Alkhaled (2021) posits that it is imperative to investigate whether women entrepreneurs in Saudi Arabia utilise their entrepreneurial skills to establish a foundation for their initiatives aimed at promoting economic growth and gender equality in the kingdom. Khan (2020) conducted a study in the context of Saudi Arabia that identified several notable challenges encountered by women entrepreneurs. These challenges include cultural barriers such as traditional societal roles, poor support from families, seeking approval from male guardians, modesty-related expectations and conservative environments. In addition, Khan (2020) also indicates that women entrepreneurs face issues such as limited experience, insufficient development of entrepreneurial infrastructure, inadequate knowledge transfer to practical skills, poor balance between personal and professional life, and insufficient financial capital and funding, among other similar obstacles. Khan (2020) highlights the significant disparity between the number of women who receive education and those who pursue careers in the corporate sector or engage in entrepreneurial endeavours. Abou-Moghli and Al-Abdallah (2019), Alkhaled (2021) and Khan (2020) have identified noteworthy issues related to women's entrepreneurship in Saudi Arabia. However, these authors have also underscored the government of Saudi Arabia's substantial efforts towards developing and training women entrepreneurs, recognising their significant contribution to the country's economic growth. As an example, the government has

implemented various measures in line with its Vision 2030, including the establishment of business centres for women, the implementation of training programmes such as the Tamheer Program, the enforcement of effective regulations, and the development of a network to connect women in the profession through the Qiyadyat Platform (My.gov.sa, 2020). The preceding discourse highlights the imperative to conduct research on women's entrepreneurship within the context of Saudi Arabia.

There is little difference in the characteristics of women's entrepreneurship compared to other MENA nations as women in the nation also face issues related to access to financial capital, poor networks, and social and cultural issues. For instance, Rizk, Rashed and Rizk (2019) compared male-led entrepreneurship to women's entrepreneurship and found that women-owned businesses are more home-based, do not generate high capital and are informal. Rizk, Rashed and Rizk (2019) also state that there is a significant gender gap in entrepreneurship in the country. Similarly, another study by Hassan and Zaharia (2021) indicates that women encounter comparable challenges in initiating, managing and sustaining their enterprises, irrespective of their educational attainment. The findings also suggest that the primary hindrances to women's entrepreneurship in Egypt are the sociocultural limitations that dictate women's societal roles. Hassan and Zaharia (2021) and Khurma, Mounzer and Sherman (2019) also found that gender equality among entrepreneurs is hindered by specific factors, such as short maternity leave, barely any paternity leave (if this could be prominent, women entrepreneurs could focus on building their careers even after childbirth), limited or no policies of breastfeeding breaks at work, and limited access to affordable childcare. In addition, societal norms discourage women from pursuing entrepreneurship, including expectations of primary caregiving responsibilities and limited access to professional networks (Hassan and Zaharia, 2021). Hassan and Zaharia (2021) also found that there is a significant need to put in place policies that cater to women's needs, such as training, networking and educational programmes. Furthermore, there are distinct requirements for women entrepreneurs regarding financing and loan application processes, which prompt a more in-depth examination of the associated policies and their associated ramifications (Hassan and Zaharia, 2021). However, there have been considerable advances in the education environment, particularly in countries like Egypt, which entered the top 100 for the first time in 2021; the direction of advancement is, at the very least, extremely respectable (Metcalf, Bastian and AlDajani, 2022) in terms of the implementation of various government programmes, such as those by the Technology Innovation and Entrepreneurship Centre (TIEC) to provide support to women entrepreneurs in

the information, communication and technology field (TIEC, 2019) and the National Strategy for the Empowerment of Egyptian Woman 2030 to enable women for the corporate industry (World Bank, 2023). Overall emphasis is placed on financial opportunities and accessibility to resources, which requires focus as part of the current study.

With regard to the UAE, many researchers have discussed women's entrepreneurship. For instance, Erogul, Rod and Barragan (2019) outline that the cultural norms of the UAE give rise to obstacles for Emirati women in terms of their behaviour, pursuits and social engagements, and such hindrances stem from limitations relating to their mobility and employment opportunities. In addition, Erogul, Rod and Barragan (2019) note that Arab societies and cultures, specifically in the MENA region, heavily influence work cultures based on Islamic principles. The authors note that a significant proportion of Emirati women who are entrepreneurs are prohibited from traveling abroad for work unless they are accompanied by their spouses or male relatives (Erogul, Rod and Barragan, 2019). Another study by Tahir and Baradie (2019) focuses on the same challenges, including limited access to start-up capital, gender-based discrimination, insufficient training and networking opportunities. The authors also mention that there is a significant need to foster a shift in perceptions of women and their pursuits in entrepreneurship by adopting effective networking and entrepreneurial strategies (Tahir and Baradie, 2019). Another study by Matroushi et al. (2020) states that the management and acquisition of both internal and external finances (e.g. funding) has been identified as a potential obstacle that women may encounter when attempting to initiate innovative enterprises, and the authors highlight that the identified gap in the literature necessitates an investigation into the factors impeding women entrepreneurs' entry into the corporate market. The UAE has the best score among Arab governments in terms of economic empowerment, ranking 135 out of 155 countries (Metcalf, Bastian and AlDajani, 2022). However, there are significant challenges with regard to the development of women entrepreneurs.

Overall, in recent times, when focusing on the United Nations SDGs, prospects for women to work and engage in entrepreneurship have been severely hampered. In the MENA region, the percentage of employed women has remained consistently low at an estimated 10–15% due to a variety of limitations and barriers (Metcalf, Bastian and AlDajani, 2022).

Hence, the lack of opportunities for women entrepreneurs due to the lack of networking structures, poor access to financial capital, and sociocultural norms in the MENA region are outlined in detail in the following section.

1.3 Problem Statement

As discussed in the previous section, the governments of Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Egypt are implementing various strategies to encourage and motivate women to contribute to the countries' economies (GEM, 2021). However, as per the recent 2021 statistics published by the GEM, women entrepreneurs in Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Egypt have very low participation in running and establishing business (GEM, 2021), as represented in Figure 4.

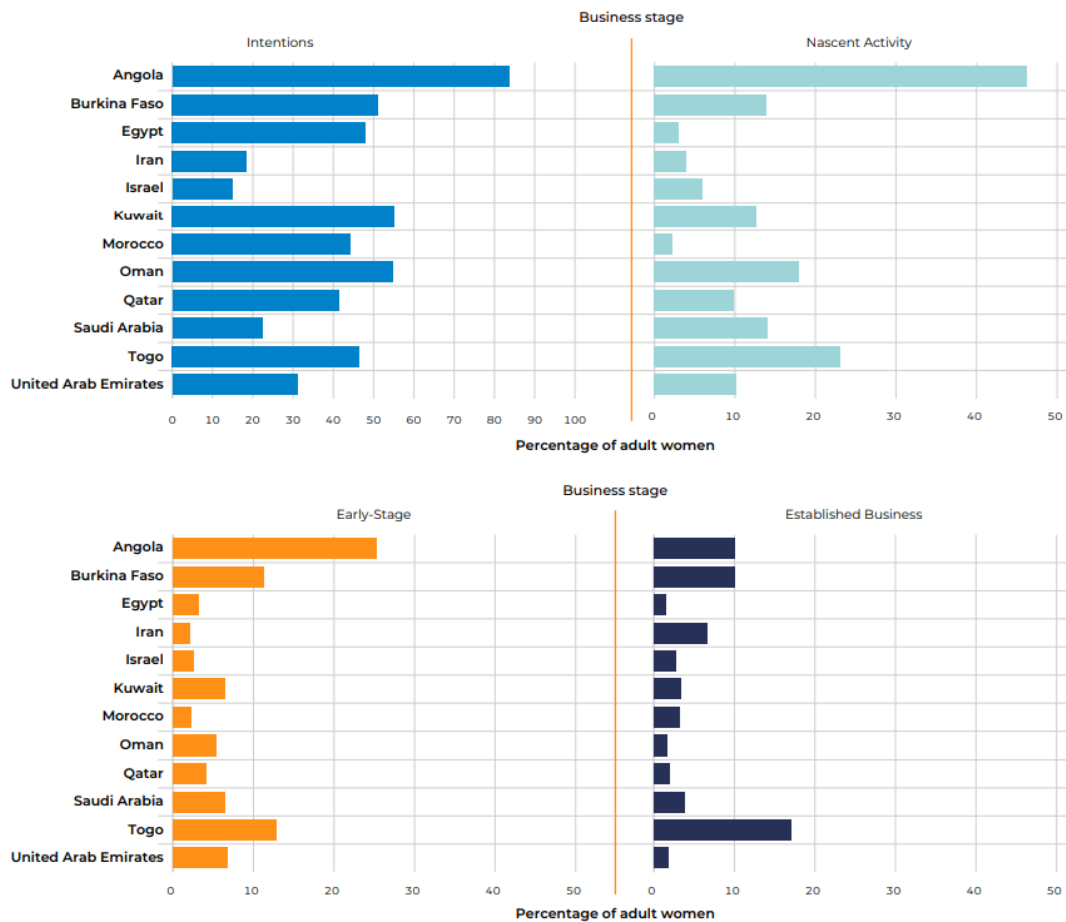


Figure 4: Statistics of women entrepreneurs in the MENA region

(Source: GEM, 2021)

From Figure 4, it can be observed that the intentions of women to become entrepreneurs in countries such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt and the UAE are quite low compared to other countries (GEM, 2021). However, women in these countries have started to build high intentions to become entrepreneurs, as it can be observed that the numbers of women in established businesses are quite low in these countries. Also, women in Saudi Arabia, Egypt and the UAE have low nascent activities and early-stage activities, which shows that the rate of women's

entrepreneurship is low, though it is growing significantly in these countries (GEM, 2021). Based on these statistics, the current research focuses on collecting the viewpoints of entrepreneurs from five countries in the MENA region, including Saudi Arabia, Egypt and the UAE.

In addition, the GEM 2021 study indicates that there are significantly higher rates of women's entrepreneurship in the early phases, which may provide hope for progress. Nevertheless, the fact that comparatively few women are transforming new firms into existing ones is a key cause for worry. Greater equality would result in more enterprises, employment and earnings for society in general, and not only for the women in these countries. In the Gulf countries, gender disparities in nascent and early-stage firms are much lower than in existing companies, with the gender gap often widening as enterprises advance through the entrepreneurship phases. But even so, women entrepreneurs in this region are typically less educated than their male counterparts (GEM, 2021). However, women with graduate degrees are much more engaged in new commercial tasks in Saudi Arabia and the UAE, which probably affects the percentages of elevated corporate activity for women in such nations (GEM, 2021). The survey also indicates that women are less likely than men to recognise an entrepreneur due to their restricted business networks, which puts them at a significant disadvantage when it comes to expanding their businesses (GEM, 2021). It can be observed that networking is a significant concern for women entrepreneurs in the MENA region because it directly impacts their ability to access crucial resources such as funding, mentorship and market opportunities. Researchers (Achor, 2018; Alakaleek and Cooper, 2018) also outline that, in many cases, business connections play a pivotal role in securing venture capital, forming strategic partnerships and gaining industry knowledge. However, due to cultural norms that restrict women's mobility and participation in male-dominated professional spaces, they often struggle to build strong business networks (Bridges et al., 2022). This lack of networking opportunities places them at a disadvantage compared to their male counterparts, who can more easily leverage social and professional ties to expand their businesses. As a result, women entrepreneurs may face difficulties in scaling their ventures, limiting their economic contributions and reinforcing gender disparities in entrepreneurship.

Multiple researchers, such as Khan (2019), note that there is a significant gender gap for women entrepreneurs in obtaining venture capital due to the social norms associated with women, such as the MENA region's social systems and beliefs and other social hierarchies and cultures, which further restrict opportunities for women entrepreneurs in the region. Also,

Laffineur et al. (2018) note that, in the MENA region, the need is a bigger motivation for women to start businesses, while women in more developed countries are more opportunity-driven. In addition, nuanced forms of discrimination or difficulties exist in gaining access to formal business networks and informal social networks for women entrepreneurs to obtain venture capital (Coleman and Robb, 2012), a subject that has not been exhaustively studied, particularly in the MENA region, which is also heavily influenced by cultural and social norms. In this context, Khan (2019) asserts that cultural barriers, biases and stereotypes limit access to official and informal networks in the MENA region.

The MENA region has experienced a discernible surge in the number of women entrepreneurs in recent times, resulting in a positive impact on the region's economic expansion and advancement. Notwithstanding their increasing prevalence, women entrepreneurs encounter noteworthy obstacles in obtaining venture capital and establishing both formal and informal networks to foster the development and expansion of their enterprises. The aforementioned obstacles can be ascribed to various elements, including societal conventions, prejudiced attitudes towards their gender, restricted availability of resources and connections, and legal and regulatory hindrances. The insufficiency of support and guidance for women entrepreneurs in the MENA region poses a significant obstacle to their capacity to surmount challenges, thereby impeding their potential and affecting their overall achievements. In addition, despite attempts to tackle these concerns, there is a dearth of a holistic networking infrastructures or paradigms that are tailored to the unique obstacles encountered by women entrepreneurs operating in the MENA region. Consequently, it is necessary to formulate a networking strategy or framework that would facilitate women entrepreneurs in establishing robust connections and obtaining essential resources and networks to acquire venture capital and expand their enterprises.

The study by Erogul, Rod and Barragan (2019) also showcases how, by engaging in entrepreneurial identity work, women can collaboratively construct entrepreneurs by organizing their relationships and networking with men. Non-engaged female entrepreneurs have been observed to engage in negotiation tactics within their relationships with men (Erogul, Rod and Barragan, 2019). This involves the adoption of various identities to effectively garner support from the males in their personal networks. Women employ philosophical discussions and networking strategies to secure support and cooperation from their male counterparts in navigating cultural stereotypes and practices, thereby facilitating their business operations (Erogul, Rod and Barragan, 2019). Also, based on the gaps highlighted by a number of

researchers in the context of Saudi Arabia, Egypt and the UAE, it can be observed that, even though there is significant research in the context of women's entrepreneurs and the related challenges to obtaining venture capital for women's start-ups, there is a lack of research that has collectively focused on the MENA region and how networking in that region can be strengthened for women entrepreneurs to overcome the challenges.

A fundamental obstacle for women entrepreneurs in the MENA area is the apparent difficulty in obtaining venture funding, which severely limits their capacity to expand their businesses. Studies demonstrate that women-led start-ups receive much lower levels of financing than male-led start-ups, which is attributable to the gender biases prevalent in investment choices and a lack of established networks for capital acquisition (Åstebro, Rafih and Serrano, 2022). The lack of confidence in women's entrepreneurial ability, together with cultural conventions that favour male-led enterprises, intensifies this problem, hindering women entrepreneurs from obtaining financial support (Paoloni and Manzo, 2023). Moreover, venture capital companies in the region often prioritise businesses historically dominated by men, thereby marginalising women entrepreneurs who are engaged in areas seen as less profitable or high-growth (Paoloni and Manzo, 2023). As a result, the lack of sufficient networking opportunities and financial resources hinders many women entrepreneurs from maintaining or growing their enterprises, consequently limiting their impact on economic development and innovation in the MENA area.

In addition, the institutional and cultural obstacles to networking constitute a significant hindrance to the success of women entrepreneurs in the area. In several MENA nations, business networking mostly depends on male-centric circles, resulting in an exclusionary atmosphere for women entrepreneurs pursuing mentoring, strategic alliances and financing prospects (Laffineur et al., 2018). Conventional gender roles and traditional cultural norms often inhibit women's involvement in informal business meetings and industry events, hence constraining their capacity to cultivate essential professional networks (Bikorimana and Nziku, 2023). Consequently, women entrepreneurs must frequently confront these challenges by employing alternative networking strategies, such as utilising familial connections or establishing women-only business groups, which may not consistently afford the same access to high-impact investors and stakeholders (Moletta et al., 2023). The structural hurdles highlight the need for a comprehensive networking architecture specifically designed to address the particular obstacles faced by women entrepreneurs in the MENA area, enabling

them to cultivate robust formal and informal networks that promote company development and access to venture capital.

1.4 Research Aim and Objectives

The current research is guided through the following objectives:

1. To identify factors that impact the activities of women entrepreneurs in the MENA region.
2. To identify challenges faced by women entrepreneurs in obtaining venture capital while developing start-ups in the MENA region.
3. To critically outline the mechanisms through which women entrepreneurs develop formal and informal networks in the MENA region.
4. To develop a networking strategy/framework for women entrepreneurs to develop strong ties using formal and informal networks and attract more venture capital in the MENA region.

In line with the above, the current research aims to develop a networking structure (framework) for women's entrepreneurship by identifying the challenges and factors that could help women entrepreneurs to develop strong ties using formal and informal networks to increase their growth in the MENA region.

Based on the aim, the following research questions have been developed:

1.5 Research Questions

The following research questions have been developed in line with the above aim and objectives:

1. What factors affect the activities of women entrepreneurs in the MENA region?
2. What are the challenges faced by women entrepreneurs in obtaining venture capital when developing start-ups and networking in the MENA region?
3. How can networking benefit women entrepreneurs in the MENA region in terms of securing venture capital and better business outcomes and growth through formal and informal networks?

1.6 Research Scope and Timing

The current research is critically situated in a unique period defined by post-COVID-19 recovery and ongoing geopolitical tensions in the MENA region. This research was conducted after 2021 and the study captures women entrepreneurs' experiences in a landscape still contending with the long-term socioeconomic aftermath of the pandemic, as well as significant

regional shifts such as the implementation of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, economic diversification strategies in the UAE, and Egypt's economic reform programmes (Abou-Moghli and Al-Abdallah, 2019; Erogul, Rod and Barragan, 2019; Hassan and Zaharia, 2021). The global economy has started to stabilise significantly, and the post-pandemic period has continued to reveal profound disparities in entrepreneurial recovery for women-led enterprises, which justifies the need for a targeted and timely inquiry into the networking dynamics of women entrepreneurs in this region (Alva, Vivas and Urcia, 2021).

One of the notable advantages of conducting the research in the post-pandemic period is the heightened visibility of structural inequalities that were exacerbated during the crisis. COVID-19 exposed and intensified pre-existing gender disparities in access to financial capital, business networks and technological infrastructure, especially in developing and transitional economies (Alva, Vivas and Urcia, 2021). In countries such as the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Egypt, women entrepreneurs reported higher rates of business closure or stagnation during lockdowns, coupled with increased caregiving responsibilities at home (GEM, 2024). The timing of the research also offered a significant context of opportunities and challenges that were explored in relation to how women re-engaged or adapted their entrepreneurial strategies, including their reliance on formal and informal networks. The research also focused on the lived experiences of women entrepreneurs who were more prevalent in the current phase than the pre-pandemic phase.

However, the scope and timing of the research also presented potential biases and risks that must be acknowledged. First, participant responses may have been influenced by a form of bias, wherein recent experiences related to COVID-19 or regional economic changes impacted how challenges were remembered and prioritised. This could have resulted in an overemphasis on short-term disruptions at the expense of longer-standing structural issues, such as patriarchal business norms or underdeveloped support ecosystems (Paoloni and Manzo, 2023). In addition, the intra-geopolitical tensions in the region, such as economic changes, market fluctuations and diplomatic realignments, may have impacted business operations in a way that is temporally specific (Shastri et al., 2022). For example, while some women entrepreneurs reported opportunities due to new government funding initiatives or market gaps, others described greater regulatory uncertainty, difficulty in accessing cross-border markets, or the withdrawal of international investors due to regional instability. These mixed effects may limit the generalisability of the findings to future periods of political or economic stability.

Another critical risk associated with the timing is the possibility of bias, wherein the post-pandemic narratives led the participants to underreport persistent structural constraints (Paoloni and Manzo, 2023). Governments in all three countries studied have implemented highly publicised women's empowerment and entrepreneurship programmes in the post-pandemic phase. Also, even though such initiatives are commendable, they may shape public discourse in ways that discourage critical reflection or inflate perceptions of progress among research participants. To mitigate this, the current research applied open-ended qualitative methods that encouraged participants to provide nuanced, context-specific narratives rather than surface-level ideas of policy effectiveness.

Nevertheless, the timing of this research also offered a valuable opportunity to capture a transitional moment in the entrepreneurial ecosystem, one in which many women are simultaneously grappling with enduring systemic barriers and experimenting with new digital, financial and collaborative models of business. Despite the visible economic growth in infrastructure, digitalisation and foreign investment across the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Egypt, the growth in women's entrepreneurship remains relatively sluggish. The reasons for this are complex and embedded in a matrix of gendered expectations, policy gaps and cultural norms. As such, the post-pandemic and intra-geopolitical period have provided an interesting point to assess how women entrepreneurs navigate a dual reality of opportunity and constraint, making this research both timely and essential for informing policy and practice going forward.

1.7 Research Contributions

The theoretical and practical contributions are discussed in the following subsections.

1.7.1 Theoretical Contributions

This study makes significant theoretical contributions to the body of knowledge on networking for women entrepreneurs, particularly in the MENA region. The focus is on examining the quality and impact of network elements, such as strength, diversity and connectedness. Accordingly, this research also offers a novel model that explains the development and effectiveness of networking frameworks for women entrepreneurs.

The data was collected from women entrepreneurs in Middle Eastern cultures, including Saudi Arabia, Egypt and the UAE, which allows the researcher to introduce new insights into the formation and evolution of women's entrepreneurial networks. It highlights how women entrepreneurs rely on both formal and informal networks, demonstrating that while informal networks provide crucial psychological and emotional support, formal networks are essential

for securing venture capital and achieving business growth. The research further identifies corporate interactions as a key criterion in assessing the strength and effectiveness of network ties.

The study extends existing theoretical perspectives by applying institutional theory and resource dependence theory (RDT) to the context of women's entrepreneurship in the MENA region.

Institutional theory provides insights into how gender norms and cultural expectations institutionalise barriers for women entrepreneurs, which limits their ability to access resources and opportunities. The focus is on examining how both formal and informal institutions influence entrepreneurial success, and this research further clarifies how women navigate institutional pressures to sustain and grow their businesses. The application of institutional theory also provides insights into the potential reasons behind the unique challenges and obstacles encountered by women entrepreneurs operating in the MENA region, which could be attributed to the institutionalisation of gender norms and cultural expectations. Through an examination of the institutional framework within which women's entrepreneurship is situated, the present study aims to elucidate the ways in which both formal and informal institutions, as well as associated networks, influenced the capacity of women entrepreneurs to obtain resources and opportunities. In addition, the study seeks to explore how women entrepreneurs navigate institutional pressures in order to achieve success.

RDT is employed to examine how women entrepreneurs in the region rely on external resources, such as funding, mentorship and business networks, for business initiation and expansion. This study reveals the specific mechanisms through which women entrepreneurs acquire and manage these resources, offering a structured understanding of their dependencies and limitations within the institutional and cultural framework of the MENA region.

In the initial phases of a company's growth, it also includes fresh content on the creation stage of women entrepreneurs' network, which aids women in obtaining venture capital. The study suggests the efficiency of corporate interactions as a criterion for determining the strength and effectiveness of network ties. It additionally expands, in a unique conceptual structure, on the way women entrepreneurs in the MENA region create their professional and informal networks. Considering that such individual links are the primary source of psychological support, women entrepreneurs profit from their informal networks, but formal networks are vital for obtaining venture capital and expanding firms in the region.

1.7.2 Practical Contributions

The practical contributions of the research include developing policies, providing insights for investors, developing networking strategies and helping women entrepreneurs to develop in the region. Drawing from the factors that are deemed to exert an influence on women entrepreneurs in the MENA region, it is possible to provide policymakers with recommendations on how to establish a more conducive ecosystem for women entrepreneurs and help them engage in effective networks. The proposed measures may encompass recommendations aimed at enhancing the accessibility of educational opportunities, vocational training, financial support and various other resources for women entrepreneurs.

The identification of networking challenges encountered by women entrepreneurs in securing venture capital could offer valuable perspectives to investors regarding the enhancement of support and investment in start-ups led by women. The research might also encompass recommendations on how to surmount prejudice and other obstacles that are impeding women entrepreneurs' acquisition of financial support in the selected countries in the MENA region.

An examination of strategies can be employed by women entrepreneurs in cultivating both formal and informal networks within the MENA region as it is possible to formulate a set of recommendations or optimal approaches for women entrepreneurs seeking to establish and capitalise on networks in a proficient manner. The research encompasses recommendations on ways to recognise prospective network collaborators, methods to establish credibility and cultivate connections, and strategies to sustain and foster network bonds over an extended period. The provision of guidance regarding the formulation of a networking plan, the evaluation of the efficacy of network ties and the utilisation of networks for the purpose of attracting venture capital and other resources may be considered.

In addition, the development of the material of the entrepreneurs' network based on venture capital, social capital and the development of additional networks with innovative stakeholders at early stages of growth in the MENA region is also described. It would be due to the innovative behaviour chosen by women entrepreneurs in early stages of growth in any organisation environment. The substantial utilisation of formal networks to gain and access to essential funds that shows in the networks of early-stage women entrepreneurs in firms in the MENA region is indicative of a restriction in their financial involvement as company owners. Women in the MENA region may find it difficult to launch a company without official connections to gain access to the necessary resources. In addition, the present study will aid

nations on the academic, financial, social and political levels and recommend modifications for the same. The aforementioned framework may potentially function as a pragmatic instrument for women entrepreneurs who aim to expand their enterprises within the MENA region.

1.8 Overview of Methods

The present study is based on the interpretivist research philosophy since it seeks to depict the human and subjective motivations and perceptions that drive social change; as such, it is valuable for understanding and interpreting women's entrepreneurship. On the basis of this theory, research is primarily interpretative, with the objective of grasping a single occurrence rather than extending it to a community (Ezzy, 2001). In addition, the current study requires the researcher to be eager and committed to the research, as well as knowledgeable of the local dialect and its interpretations and rules. The researcher gathered data from a variety of socially manufactured and rebuilt scenarios relevant to the understanding of women's entrepreneurship and its issues and potential.

In addition, an inductive research technique is suitable for this study owing to the inductive style of thinking, whereby the researcher collected and analysed raw facts prior to discovering or developing an emerging notion (McAbee, Landis and Burke, 2017). Fundamental to inductive reasoning is its capacity to broaden our understanding of the world by assuming implications that go beyond the repeating of existing theories and assumptions (McAbee, Landis and Burke, 2017). In addition, the inductive research method allowed the researcher to gather the subjective perspectives of women entrepreneurs in the MENA region and to infer information from their thoughts and knowledge, which could then be used in the study. Based on the choice of an interpretivist research philosophy and an inductive research approach, qualitative research was the most suitable research technique. To encourage societal outcomes and advantages and to explain phenomena such as women's entrepreneurship, qualitative research was appropriate since it is interpretative in character and enabled the researcher to generate meaning based on the data. The knowledge of women's thoughts and perspectives was facilitated by qualitative research, which was vital for understanding the researched subject (Easterby-Smith, Golden-Biddle and Locke, 2007).

Through qualitative research, the project seeks to address existing knowledge gaps about women entrepreneurs. Businesses in the MENA region could enhance their gender balance by introducing efforts to provide opportunities for women entrepreneurs. The results of this research will contribute to ongoing debates about methods to encourage women's entrepreneurship and offer them opportunities in competitive corporate environments. Among

the several qualitative research approaches, phenomenology is used in the present study because it focuses on examining the experiences of the participants, while other methods have a more academic tone. In addition, the author argues that phenomenology emphasises the centrality of the individual self, perceptions and human interactions. In other words, phenomenology focuses on the understanding, knowledge and experiences of others (Khan, 2014). The objective of qualitative research is primarily to emphasise the human element. This has served as the foundation for the current study, which uses a technique that facilitates the individual representations of life experiences by women entrepreneurs as participants.

This study used purposive sampling, which is a subset of non-probability sampling. Before performing a purposeful sample, the researcher had to define the sample's unique features to ensure that the population under investigation was suitable for sampling (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2009). For instance, the present study focuses on women entrepreneurs in the chosen MENA nations of Saudi Arabia, Egypt and the UAE. The women entrepreneurs had all types of entrepreneurial experience (specifically, they needed to have had experience of more than a year). This aided the researcher in comprehending the challenges these women entrepreneurs overcame to achieve success. Thirty-two interviews were conducted in the study (25 with females and seven with males). The total number of interviews was carefully chosen to allow for rich qualitative data collection while maintaining feasibility and depth of insight. The chosen number of interviews for each country ensured a meaningful representation of diverse experiences without compromising the ability to analyse common themes. Including a small number of male entrepreneurs further strengthened the study by offering a comparative gender-based perspective, shedding light on how entrepreneurship is perceived differently across genders in these regions. This approach has ensured a comprehensive yet focused exploration of the topic, capturing regional nuances while maintaining a manageable research scope.

This study gathered data using semi-structured interviews since interviews were an effective method for eliciting the perspectives of women entrepreneurs and the challenges and opportunities they faced in the competitive environment at that time. The data collection occurred at the participants' convenience and at times and places agreed upon by the participants and the researcher. In addition, a short overview of the study was sent to the individuals who were interviewed prior to the interviews. Individuals who responded to the email invitation with written permission were chosen to participate in the study. After the

research had received the permission forms, the dates and locations of the interviews were set. Before data analysis, the researcher recorded and documented the interview sessions.

1.9 Research Limitations

As the research is centred on women entrepreneurs operating in the MENA region, it is possible that the outcomes may not be generalisable to those operating in different regions or contexts. Thus, the extent to which the findings of the study can be applied to other contexts or populations may be constrained. The process of collecting and analysing data in qualitative research is largely dependent on the researcher's interpretation. However, there is the potential for the researcher's biases and perspectives to impact this process. In order to address this potential risk, the researcher must ensure transparency regarding their personal biases and undertake measures to reduce their potential influence. The present study may encounter challenges in the recruitment of a heterogeneous group of participants and in guaranteeing that the sample is a faithful reflection of the broader population of women entrepreneurs in the MENA region. Conducting qualitative research is frequently contingent on the availability of individuals and organisations who are amenable to participating in interviews or furnishing data. Accessing crucial stakeholders in the MENA region can prove to be a daunting task, especially when cultural or political impediments hinder participation. The potential limitation of a small sample size may be encountered by the researcher. However, this limitation could be addressed by expanding the sample to encompass a larger population of women entrepreneurs across the five nations comprising the MENA region. Women entrepreneurs may exhibit hesitancy in disclosing unfavourable encounters or obstacles pertaining to their enterprise, especially if they perceive the societal pressure to project a favourable self-image. The potential outcome of this scenario is the manifestation of social desirability bias, wherein respondents may develop responses that are deemed socially acceptable instead of accurately reflecting their actual experiences. The interview protocol was designed in a manner that avoided the formulation of questions that may have elicited biased responses. In addition, the researcher posed supplementary inquiries in the event of the aforementioned bias.

1.10 Thesis Outline

The thesis is divided into six chapters, which are as follows:

Chapter 1 – Introduction: This chapter covered the research background and contained information about women's entrepreneurship and its current status in the MENA region. The chapter focused on the problem statement, which outlined the motivation behind conducting this research, supported by the existing literature and statistics. The chapter also outlined the

research gap, the research aim, the research objectives and the research questions. Also, the chapter focused on the significance and rationale of the research.

Chapter 2 – Literature Review: This chapter contains a critical literature review on the important topics that should be focused on, including theoretical frameworks such as institutional theory, resource dependence theory, women’s entrepreneurship, the challenges faced by women entrepreneurs, strategies for women entrepreneurs to develop themselves and various other topics. The chapter also contains the propositions that are underpinned using a number of theories, which were tested during the research.

Chapter 3 – Research Methodology: This chapter reformulates relevant research-related aspects, including the research philosophy, approach, method and strategy. The chapter provides justification for the selection of the specific research philosophy (interpretivism), research approach (inductive), research method (qualitative) and research strategy (phenomenology). The chapter further covers the sampling strategy (purposive sampling), the research population and sample, the data collection method (interviews) and the data analysis (thematic analysis) method.

Chapter 4 – Data Findings and Analysis: This chapter contains the findings from the interviews, which are presented in the form of thematic analysis. NVivo software was used to identify themes and subthemes in the collected data.

Chapter 5 – Discussion of Findings: This chapter contains discussion of the findings from the thematic analysis, which are presented in comparison to the findings from the literature review. Also, a discussion of the findings allowed an understanding of the uniqueness of the current research.

Chapter 6 – Conclusion and Future Research: This chapter outlines a summary of the entire research and its findings, along with future recommendations. The chapter also contains the research limitations along with theoretical, practical and policy implications.

2 Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Chapter Introduction

The chapter starts with a description of the theoretical frameworks that underpin the current research and guide the study in terms of achieving the aim and objectives. Two theoretical frameworks, namely institutional theory and RDT are discussed in the context of the current research. The chapter also outlines a critical review of the literature related to women's entrepreneurship, which emerges after a critical discussion of entrepreneurship, venture capitalism and the role of gender in both of these concepts. As well as providing a brief idea about women's entrepreneurship, the literature review further outlines the factors that determine the success of women's entrepreneurship and the challenges women entrepreneurs face. The research is underpinned by institutional theory, which explains the details of formal and informal networks and how they play a significant role in women's entrepreneurship. The chapter further outlines women entrepreneurs' networks and network-related elements, such as network strength, network density, network connectedness and reachability, diversity in networks, network centrality and networking resources, all of which can help to understand the networking aspect of women's entrepreneurship.

2.2 Overview of Entrepreneurship

The process of starting, growing and managing a new business endeavour with the goal of making capital and adding value is known as entrepreneurship (Audretsch, 2012). An entrepreneur is a person who creates and manages a company, sometimes at great personal, financial and societal risk (Dollinger, 2008). A modest individual business or a huge multinational organisation are both examples of entrepreneurship. Entrepreneurs may differ in their specific methods and approaches, but they always possess the attributes of originality, risk-taking, tenacity and a can-do attitude (Dollinger, 2008). Finding a new market opportunity or need and coming up with a company concept to fill it are the first steps in the entrepreneurship process (Siegel and Renko, 2012). It may be necessary to investigate possible markets, evaluate client wants and requirements, and undertake a feasibility study to understand whether the concept can really be implemented. When an entrepreneur has settled on a direction for their company, they should write a business plan outlining their intended outcomes, methods and timelines (Audretsch, 2012). A marketing strategy, financial forecasts and a finance strategy are all standard components of such a plan. The next step for an entrepreneur is to acquire the tools necessary to start and expand their venture. This may include securing funding, hiring employees or forming partnerships with other businesses

(Siegel and Renko, 2012). They also have to deal with the myriad of legal and regulatory hurdles that come with launching a company from scratch, such as forming a legal entity, securing necessary permissions and paying all applicable taxes (Darnihamedani et al., 2018). Entrepreneurs, especially as their businesses expand, are challenged to think creatively and respond nimbly to shifting consumer preferences and industry trends (Dollinger, 2008). Developing new offerings, entering untapped areas or forming strategic alliances with complementary enterprises are all viable options. A mix of knowledge, skills and resources are necessary for successful entrepreneurship (Darnihamedani et al., 2018). Entrepreneurs need to be skilled in the analysis and evaluation of prospects, the creation of novel approaches to business problems and the management of financial, operational and marketing concerns. They need strong interpersonal skills to connect with and retain consumers, vendors and other stakeholders (Myres, Anastacia and Kele Tumo, 2017). The potential to invent something new and have a huge effect on the world makes entrepreneurship both a difficult and rewarding career choice (Darnihamedani et al., 2018). It also demands a great deal of commitment, hard work and a willingness to take risks, and not every firm will succeed. While this may be the case, entrepreneurship is still crucial to a thriving economy, and it is a source of new ideas, making it an integral part of any thriving corporate ecosystem (Myres, Anastacia and Kele Tumo, 2017).

In the past few decades, the corporate context's diversity, volatility and velocity of development have increased. Small company founders and entrepreneurs have gradually acquired increased attention as industrial development drivers (Ribeiro-Soriano, 2017). Several studies, such as those by Baumol and Strom (2007) and Valliere and Peterson (2009), have indicated that entrepreneurs are necessary for long-term financial development and success. Professionals and public officials want to promote entrepreneurship as a suitable response to the effects of the financial crisis (Samila and Sorenson, 2011). Entrepreneurship is a stepping stone to success (Valliere and Peterson, 2009). It contributes to countries' growth and wealth and enables governments to deal with the increasing intricacy of the business environment and marketplace (Welbourne and Pardo-del-Val, 2008). As a critical engine of financial revitalisation and expansion, entrepreneurs attract a great deal of focus and recognise and address issues that simultaneously create opportunity (Agarwal, Audretsch and Sarkar, 2010).

In addition, entrepreneurs, regardless of their gender or demographics, can face multiple challenges. In line with this, Elam et al. (2019) outline how access to funding, market competition, bureaucratic red tape and the high failure rate of new ventures are just a few of

the many challenges faced by entrepreneurs. Audretsch (2012) also indicates that institutional and economic factors, such as high regulatory complexity, taxation policies, legal implications, copyright issues and other policy-based aspects can affect entrepreneurs who are starting their entrepreneurial journey. Moreover, psychological factors, such as risk tolerance, resilience and the ability to navigate uncertainty, play crucial roles in entrepreneurial success (Baron, 1998).

In the context of the MENA region, entrepreneurial statistics have indicated that start-ups in the MENA region have attracted around USD\$4 billion in venture capital in recent years (2022) (Khedair, 2023). However, Aljuwaiber (2021) and ERF (2022) indicate that there are various challenges faced by entrepreneurs in the region, including tense political situations, poor market entry conditions, unemployment and other sociopolitical factors that make it worse for them. In addition, Aljuwaiber (2021) conducted a review research in the context of the MENA region and found multiple challenges linked to various types of research. For instance, the authors indicate that fiscal concerns, loan risks, employees with poor technical and administrative skills, and limited entrepreneurial skills can create challenges for SME entrepreneurs. Aljuwaiber (2021) outlines that, for young entrepreneurs, challenges include limited entrepreneurial education, having a diversified set of entrepreneurial skills and limited support from families and society. Lastly, Aljuwaiber (2021) specifies multiple issues for female entrepreneurs in the MENA region based on secondary data, finding that limited entrepreneurial experience, limited financial support, unclear regulations, limited support from families and sociocultural issues are a few of the issues faced.

The abovementioned challenges are compounded for women entrepreneurs due to their gender and its related constraints, which is explored in the following section.

2.3 Gender and Entrepreneurship

Multiple researchers (Eddleston and Powell, 2012; Brush et al., 2017; Bui, Kuan and Chu, 2018; Emon and Nisa, 2024) have focused on entrepreneurship based on the gender of the entrepreneurs. Greene and Brush (2023) outline that men and women entrepreneurs differ in many cases based on the perceived social constructions of these two genders. Strawser, Hechavarría and Passerini (2021) further outline that, unlike conventional investors, crowdfunding investors favour gender role congruity by more liberally financing women thought to embody feminine traits and men believed to display masculine traits. Nevertheless, Strawser, Hechavarría and Passerini (2021) also highlight a notable exception: the trait of assertiveness is esteemed by investors irrespective of the entrepreneur's gender. Strawser, Hechavarría and Passerini (2021) indicate that this is an extra problem for women

entrepreneurs, who are required to exhibit 'traditional' feminine traits while conveying a certain level of assertiveness. In addition, Ruiz, Ernesto and Guerrero (2023) indicate that men are more likely to engage in entrepreneurial activities compared to women. The gender gap that is established between male and female entrepreneurs can be attributed to sociocultural norms, differences in perceptions of risk and varying levels of self-efficacy among the two genders (Badghish et al., 2022). Women entrepreneurs often face significant challenges, including limited resources such as funds, poor work–life balance, gendered stereotypes and limited access to entrepreneurial networks (Abiola, Gift and Abhulimen, 2024). Men and women have distinct motivations for engaging in business. Men often pursue business for financial freedom and to accumulate wealth, whereas women are frequently motivated by necessity, flexibility and personal satisfaction (Strawser, Hechavarría and Passerini, 2021). Familial obligations and cultural norms impact women's entrepreneurial decisions, prompting them to choose ventures that provide more flexibility (Babar et al., 2023). For instance, in many societies, traditional gender roles dictate that women should prioritise caregiving and household responsibilities, limiting their ability to participate in high-growth or capital-intensive industries (Roomi and Parrott, 2008). For example, in South Asian and Middle Eastern cultures, societal expectations often discourage women from working outside the home, pushing them towards home-based or family-run businesses (Bruin, Brush and Welter, 2006). Similarly, in some African contexts, patriarchal structures restrict women's property rights and access to collateral, limiting their ability to secure business loans (Greene and Brush, 2023). These gendered norms, coupled with institutional barriers, contribute to persistent inequalities in entrepreneurship opportunities. The two genders have distinct challenges, opportunities, motivations and support among other aspects that make this field an interesting area of research. The detailed literature review of these types of entrepreneurship is presented in the following sections.

2.4 Male Entrepreneurship

Male entrepreneurship has been a crucial driver for economic development and innovation across many sectors (Van, Verheul and Roy, 2012). Historically, males have predominated in entrepreneurial endeavours owing to cultural frameworks, resource accessibility and existing commercial networks. Studies (Kwapisz, 2021; Bridges et al., 2022) demonstrate that male entrepreneurs often have enhanced access to finance, mentoring and social capital, which may lead to elevated rates of company success. Furthermore, research indicates that males are more inclined to engage in high-growth enterprises, especially within the technological and industrial industries, wherein they have to present risk-taking and

assertive scaling techniques (Cromie, 1987). Such characteristics have allowed them to grow and contribute significantly to economies globally (Gowan, Cooper and Hampton, 2013).

Nevertheless, male entrepreneurs also face significant challenges. For instance, Aldrich and Elam (1997) outline that market competition, regulatory limitations and the need for ongoing innovation present considerable challenges for male entrepreneurs. It is interesting to note that these challenges also exist for women entrepreneurs along with additional challenges, such as limited resources and gender stereotypes. The focus of this research is not to show or prove ‘who has it more difficult’ but to focus solely on women entrepreneurs to indicate the bigger picture and provide strategies for the same. Furthermore, while male entrepreneurs often possess more extensive professional networks, research indicates that they may encounter pressures to adhere to conventional business standards, thus constraining their flexibility in leadership styles and decision-making methodologies (Malmström et al., 2018). While men continue to dominate the entrepreneurial space, there is growing interest in fostering more equitable environments in which both male and female entrepreneurs can thrive.

2.5 Women’s Entrepreneurship

A woman entrepreneur can be defined as a woman who has founded a company, is fully engaged in its management, controls the company’s shares and assets and has remained in business for a minimum of 12 months (Bowen and Hisrich, 1986; Moore, 1990). In this respect, it is essential to recognise that women entrepreneurs come from diverse pre-entrepreneurial experiences, have diverse views on enterprise formation and growth, and may establish businesses of varying capacities (Gregor and Tweed, 2002). The motivation of businesses owned by women has become a powerful instrument to overcome poor employment percentages and achieve greater economic expansion, especially in business endeavours that contribute to the financial growth of societies (Neergaard, Shaw and Carter, 2005).

Several interpretations are proposed to interpret such disparities in the percentages of involvement of women entrepreneurs within economies (Neergaard, Shaw and Carter, 2005). Also, women’s engagement in entrepreneurship development is impacted by several beliefs regarding the capacity to start a successful enterprise (Brush et al., 2010; Jennings and Brush, 2013). These beliefs negatively impact women’s capacity to establish companies and extensively affect their participation in enterprise formation and expansion (Loscocco et al., 2009). Regarding the utilisation of possibilities, Katz and William (1997) also believes that economic possibilities and limits on their implementation vary among nations. For instance, research by Amoros and Bosma (2014) shows that the greatest rates of women’s financial

engagement to develop their entrepreneurship opportunities are seen in advanced countries such as the United States, where state funding for women entrepreneurs is substantial. However, in emerging economies, women still face challenges in developing and exploring entrepreneurship opportunities (Xheneti, Madden and Karki, 2019; Ogundana et al., 2021). In every economy, the social and economic backing of the population significantly impacts the amount of an individual's entrepreneurial activities (Xheneti, Madden and Karki, 2019). In this regard, Shastri et al. (2022) contend that women's entrepreneurship is a result of countries' cultural and socioeconomic systems. Consequently, there are several cultural disparities across nations in terms of the quantity and form of female entrepreneurship, where the boosting of women's financial engagement requires help from a variety of organisations, including capitalists, lenders, banks and family members (Bui, Kuan and Chu, 2018).

Indeed, society's views play a crucial role, considering that the survival of businessmen relies substantially on numerous community members (Achtenhagen and Welter, 2003). Women's entrepreneurial orientations could also influence their participation in entrepreneurship and factors that encourage women to choose this route. These drives and reasons for establishing firms vary between areas (Amorós and Bosma, 2014). In the MENA region, the need is a greater impetus for women to establish companies, while women in advanced regions are more opportunity-driven (Laffineur et al., 2018). There are also variations in women's desire to establish a company, with women having lower percentages of entrepreneurial orientation than males across areas (Laffineur et al., 2018).

There are considerable gender variations in new enterprise formation rates, and global research indicates that the proportion of women engaging in new start-ups globally remains considerably and systemically lower than the proportion of males (Minniti, 2013). According to the available evidence, women are more likely to manage job and household responsibilities, manage conflict situations and recognise time and spatial limitations when launching new businesses (Eddleston and Powell, 2012). In contrast, men are more likely to become entrepreneurs (Shelton, 2006; Minniti, 2013).

Previous studies on women's entrepreneurship have primarily compared men and women entrepreneurs, with most researchers concluding that they share commonalities in terms of socioeconomic features, psychological alignment or intentions and company procedures (Achtenhagen and Welter, 2003; Minniti, 2013). However, the emphasis of the present study is not on comparing men and women but on how women entrepreneurs are concentrating and growing themselves in a competitive business context. Researchers such as Buttner and Moore

(1997) have discussed how the unique behavioural features of women facilitate their development as entrepreneurs. For instance, studies have noted that women leave well-paying jobs to seek greater, more difficult and gratifying endeavours, with capital as a supplementary motivation (Sarri and Trihopoulou, 2005). For women's entrepreneurship development, the requirement for accomplishment, risk-taking tendencies and individual power have been highlighted as individual success factors (DeCarlo and Lyons, 1979). Solesvik, Iakovleva and Trifilova (2019) concur that most women pursue entrepreneurship because they want independence, self-fulfilment, the opportunity to develop their creativeness and complete control over their schedules and companies. In addition, the requirement to practice one's ideals without organisational restraints and to enjoy greater flexibility, independence and balance are recognised as critical factors for women entrepreneurs launching new businesses (Cromie, 1987).

There is a positive correlation between the degree of education of an entrepreneur and their chance of starting, maintaining and rebuilding their business (Danish and Smith, 2012). Research conducted by Figueroa-Armijos and Berns (2022) confirms these findings by showing that a higher level of educational qualification increases the likelihood of success as an entrepreneur for both genders. Some research has delved particularly extensively into the impact of education on women business owners, offering explanations for their performance when they have higher academic qualifications. Entrepreneurs with a higher level of education have a lower rate of loan refusal and a higher percentage of credit application approval due to their greater likelihood of possessing the knowledge and abilities necessary to launch and maintain a successful enterprise (Muravyev, Talavera and Schäfer, 2009). This notion is confirmed by research showing that women with lower levels of education may have difficulties obtaining the necessary resources to fully pursue entrepreneurial opportunities (Carrington, 2006).

The influence of families on women entrepreneurs is a prominent topic of research. According to the research, this impact may inspire or deter women entrepreneurs (Lock and Smith, 2016). Providing financial resources is the primary form of family assistance for women entrepreneurs. Researchers have observed that women's access to social and economic resources often facilitates their decision to start a business (Caputo and Dolinsky, 1998; Gowan et al., 2012). However, some studies have revealed that having a big household (seven or more members) is a necessary condition for the presence of household assets as a determining factor in a person's decision to enter entrepreneurial activities (Cetindamar et al., 2012). Emotional

support is the other form of help that families can give to women entrepreneurs in the household. A family's emotional support may be an important element for women entrepreneurs whenever foreign sources of assistance are severely constrained due to regional financial concerns and difficulties building security and financial stability (Siew and Ling, 2001). In such a setting, it may be incredibly challenging for female entrepreneurs to raise personal, interpersonal, economic and even survival assets, heightening the necessity of household emotional support for entrepreneurs (Welsh et al., 2021).

In addition, several success characteristics of women entrepreneurs in the growing economy were discovered by Handy, Kassam and Renade (2002). Women's industry growth has been influenced by elements such as self-actualisation, education, expertise and family ties (Handy, Kassam and Renade, 2002). Professional skills such as strategy, opportunity recognition, perseverance, decision-making, consideration for high standards, service agreement dedication, self-confidence, and the ability to persuade and utilise impact techniques were identified as some of the important success factors for successful women entrepreneurs (Li et al., 2020). In addition, successful women entrepreneurs often have the following characteristics, which have been shown to contribute to their achievement: support from family (Welsh et al., 2021); social networks (Hassan, Ramli and Desa, 2014); public funding (Catley and Hamilton, 1998); and a family history of the corporation instead of formal work training and an entrepreneurial family background (Ratten, Dana and Ramadani, 2017). If women entrepreneurs have good networks due to entrepreneurial family backgrounds or professional work experience, or if they already have network from previous jobs, these factors contribute significantly to their success as entrepreneurs (Ratten, Dana and Ramadani, 2017).

Other factors, such as self-motivation, might also be crucial to commercial success (Knight, 2006). Women business owners work tirelessly to operate their enterprises and benefit from various social safety nets (Knight, 2006). Women may struggle to succeed in business if they do not receive the necessary backing from society and their families (Lock and Smith, 2016). An additional trait shared by successful business owners is a strong yearning for autonomy in terms of both decision-making and the organisation of one's work (Cable and Shane, 1997). Women business owners well versed in cutting-edge innovation and technology stand to gain financially (Hampton, Gowan and Cooper, 2011). They will benefit financially and professionally from having access to cutting-edge technological information (Hampton, Gowan and Cooper, 2011). They will also be more productive in their commercial

endeavours if they publicise their online services and goods on social media platforms (Hampton, Gowan and Cooper, 2011).

Additional researchers have outlined similar success factors and characteristics. Family support, a solid interpersonal network and determination to succeed have been shown to have a favourable and substantial effect on the performance of women entrepreneurs (Setini et al., 2020). According to another study, women, entrepreneurs are driven to succeed for the following reasons: public acclaim, satisfied customers, product variety, interpersonal autonomy and confidence, and financial independence (De Clercq, Brieger and Welzel, 2021). As noted by Hampton, Gowan and Cooper (2011), governmental support, accessibility of resources, understanding of and comfort with information technology, entrepreneurship education, and professional experience are all crucial for women entrepreneurs to be successful. Women entrepreneurs have an advantage if they have access to mentors and strong support systems (Churchill et al., 1987). Women entrepreneurs also need support, including promotional, funding, technical and corporate management assistance, as stated by Roomi and Parrott (2008).

In entrepreneurship, there is a considerable gender discrepancy in the frequency of firm establishment, and men are twice as prone as women to begin businesses (Gupta et al., 2009; Howell and Nanda, 2019). This gap exists significantly in the MENA region, even though there are a few well-developed research papers on the process of women's entrepreneurship in other developed nations (Buttner and Moore, 1997; Acs et al., 2011). For instance, Statista (2020) outlines that only 25.5% of pre-seed business founders in the MENA region were women, and the remaining 74.5% were men. It can be observed that the gap that exists in terms of women becoming entrepreneurs, which is also applicable to getting venture capital because of the social norms attached to women, the MENA region's social structures and beliefs, and other social structures and cultures, which further limits the opportunities for women entrepreneurs in the region (Khan, 2019). Meunier, Krylova and Ramalho (2017) also indicate that one of the biggest gender gaps with regard to the women entrepreneurs exists in the MENA region.

To summarise, researchers have outlined the level and type of education, personal motivation, access to technology, family support, financial capital, government support and networking that can help determine the success of women entrepreneurs. In addition, it can be observed that women's entrepreneurship is highly influenced and affected by organisational standards, social and cultural norms and standards, and individual characteristics.

2.5.1 Motivations of Women Entrepreneurs

Women entrepreneurs are widely acknowledged as essential contributors to global economic progress. The motivations propelling women into entrepreneurship differ across situations and countries, often interweaving personal, cultural and economic elements. For instance, in developed and Western economies, women may be driven by the desire for independence, professional fulfilment and innovation, often leveraging strong support networks and access to venture capital (Verheul et al., 2006). In contrast, in developing or low-income countries, women often start businesses due to limited job opportunities, financial hardship or the need to support their families (Minniti, 2013). Cultural factors also play a significant role; for example, in some conservative societies, women may start home-based businesses to comply with societal expectations regarding mobility and traditional gender roles (Brian, Brush and Welter, 2010). Meanwhile, in more egalitarian societies, women entrepreneurs are more likely to enter diverse industries and pursue high-growth ventures (Ahl and Nelson, 2015). These variations illustrate how broader socioeconomic contexts shape women's entrepreneurial motivations.

Studies (Brush, 1992; Jennings and McDougald, 2007) also demonstrate that women entrepreneurs are often driven by a need for independence and adaptability in managing job and familial obligations (Brush, 1992). This autonomy is essential as it enables women to manoeuvre around conventional gender norms and attain a heightened feeling of agency over their work and lives (Jennings and McDougald, 2007). In addition, cultural expectations and discrimination within the corporate sector may compel women to pursue entrepreneurship as a strategy to surmount obstacles and gain recognition (Verheul et al., 2006). In patriarchal societies, entrepreneurship provides women with opportunities to contest gender norms and reinvent their positions in economic and social domains (GEM, 2020).

Personal satisfaction and the aspiration for self-actualisation are substantial motivators for women entrepreneurs (Gupta et al., 2020). Research indicates that women often pursue entrepreneurial ventures that resonate with their interests and beliefs, enabling them to establish enterprises that embody their own principles and ambitions (Marlow and McAdam, 2013). Moreover, economic incentives, including income generating and asset building, are essential, especially in situations in which women encounter financial instability or restricted work opportunities (Brush et al., 2006). This comprehensive view of women's entrepreneurial motives highlights the intricate interaction of personal desires, sociocultural influences and economic necessities that shape their entrepreneurial paths.

2.6 Success Factors for Women Entrepreneurs

Communities play a crucial role in fostering women entrepreneurs (Shastri et al., 2022). As was outlined in the previous sections, cultural norms and societal expectations often limit the participation of women entrepreneurs in male-dominated settings and industries. Shinnar, Giacomini and Janssen (2012) also indicate that community and family support play a very crucial role in the success of women entrepreneurs. Welsh et al. (2021) further state that community-based support systems and emotional support provided by families also allow women entrepreneurs to navigate social norms and stereotypes and maintain a work–life balance. However, Welsh et al. (2021) indicate that relying on only communities or specific groups can hinder women entrepreneurs’ growth opportunities. It is interesting to note that networking in such communities and other events also allows women entrepreneurs to establish strong connections and further explore areas that could have been limited for them previously (Aldrich and Elam, 1997; Elfring and Hulsink, 2003; Greguletz, Diehl and Kreutzer, 2018; Batjargal et al., 2019).

Networking is a very important aspect of entrepreneurial growth because it provides better access to resources, support with mentorship and investment opportunities (Pini, Brown and Ryan, 2004). Strong professional networks can also enhance business growth and facilitate knowledge exchange and market entry for women entrepreneurs (Ademola, Adegboyegun and Adegoke, 2020). A network is defined as a collection of actors linked by a collection of links, and it explains the connections someone desires to develop with different individuals (Brass et al., 2004). The network is made up of a collection of interpersonal relationships that connect the central entity to certain other entities (Yang, Keller and Zheng, 2016). This notion entails two interlocking levels of evaluation: a huge network level and a dyadic level (Gulati, Dialdin and Wang, 2017). At the dyadic level, research on entrepreneurial networks has explored the connection between two entities or pairs of entities (Gulati, Dialdin and Wang, 2017). The large network level involves the study of businesses’ network dyadic relationships (Hite and Hesterly, 2001). An analysis of the larger network structure reveals the linkages among such links at this system level, in which a central entity connects to other network entities (Yang, Keller and Zheng, 2016). Developments in the larger entrepreneurship networks occur from the accumulation of particular modifications at the dyadic level, according to Hite and Hesterly (2001). The current study focuses on the extensive networks of women entrepreneurs and the networking strategies that might assist them in establishing better relationships and networks with other stakeholders.

The process of establishing and re-establishing relationships throughout the company's growth stages is essential for acquiring the necessary resources and meeting the challenges (Eberhard and Craig, 2013). Several studies (e.g. Birley, 1985; Guire, 2002) have explored the importance of people's formal and informal relationships in the venture formation process and the types and advantages of entrepreneurs' network linkages. The current study focuses on various industry sources as well as knowledge and recommendations that may be accessible via both formal and informal networks, such as family and friends, as well as institutions, attorneys, local authorities and the institutions that guide and control small businesses and start-ups. In addition, the most significant theoretical perspectives used in network research to analyse network relations are structural notions of the resource dependence view. The concept is discussed in the following section.

2.6.1 Network-Related Elements

The network's structure is characterised by the sequence of formal and informal networks between individuals (Hoang and Antoncic, 2003). It represents the entrepreneur's hierarchical positioning within the network, which determines the breadth and depth of the attained and gained capabilities, assets and capital (Hite and Hesterly, 2001). Several structural criteria have been used in network-based research to define the existence or lack of interactions between network participants (Gulati, Dialdin and Wang, 2017). Various factors, including diversity, density, reachability, centrality and strength of ties, have been identified (Zimmer, 1986; Gowan, Cooper and Hampton, 2013) as crucial to forming formal and informal networks.

2.6.1.1 Network Strength

The network strength characteristic specifies ties among network actors (Granovetter, 1983). According to the author, entrepreneurial partnerships demand time, psychological strength, proximity and mutual contributions. Based on the network actor's conduct, weak and strong network ties are differentiated. Standard metrics of network viability include the incidence, strength and duration of member connections (Aldrich and Elam, 1997). Weak ties are characterised by low incidence, strength and duration of interaction, while strong ties are characterised by increased regularity, strength and duration of interaction (Granovetter, 1983). According to Jack (2010), the strength of ties is determined by their usefulness, trustworthiness and the types of knowledge that move across ties. In addition, previous research has identified proximity, trust, expertise, connectedness and responsibility as the primary factors influencing the strength of entrepreneur ties (Jack, 2010; Semrau and Werner, 2012). Other studies classify

network links to assess the strength of network ties. Family members and friends are important ties, but business associates and colleagues are examples of weak ties (Granovetter, 1983).

The relationship between network strength and women's entrepreneurship has garnered increasing attention in recent years. The network strength of a woman entrepreneur is the number and strength of her connections with other people or businesses (Beqo and Gehrels, 2014). This network can offer the necessary resources for the growth of any company, including financing, knowledge and investment opportunities (Markovi, 2007). As opposed to their male counterparts, women entrepreneurs frequently encounter unique obstacles when establishing and maintaining strong networks (Dianne et al., 2014). This is due to a number of factors, including gender disparity, poor accessibility to conventional business network systems and the need to balance professional and personal obligations. Despite these obstacles, research indicates that network strength is crucial to the success of women entrepreneurs. According to Greguletz, Diehl and Kreutzer (2018), women with broader and more diverse networks are more likely to establish and develop successful companies. In addition, having strong networks can aid female entrepreneurs in overcoming obstacles and gaining access to assets that would otherwise be inaccessible to them. Women with broader and more diverse networks are more likely to establish and develop successful companies (Loscocco et al., 2009). Several measures can be taken by female entrepreneurs to develop robust networks. They can, for instance, join professional organisations, participate in networking events and constantly pursue mentors and counsellors who can provide guidance and support (Kirkwood, 2009; Tynan et al., 2009). They can also utilise social media platforms to develop relationships with other business owners and their internet presence. Cooperation and teamwork are another means of constructing robust networks. Women entrepreneurs can gain access to new industries, assets and knowledge by collaborating with other companies or groups (Tynan et al., 2009). Collaborations can also assist entrepreneurs in establishing credibility and trustworthiness, which can result in additional opportunities and partnerships (Abdullah et al., 2015). In addition, robust and weaker network connections can explain the relationships within entrepreneurial women's networks.

Strong ties in the context of women's entrepreneurial networks relate to intimate connections between people with similar experiences, skills and objectives (Bastian, Wood and Ng, 2023). These relationships are marked by constant communication, mutual support and high emotional intensity. Women who adhere to the same career or peer relations, such as women's trade associations, mentorship programmes or networking events, frequently form

close bonds (Tynan et al., 2009). Women with strong connections typically offer one another emotional support, counselling and recommendations for potential business partners or customers (Mozumdar et al., 2020). On the other hand, weak ties refer to relationships between individuals who share fewer similarities but who can still provide important data and resources (Bastian, Wood and Ng, 2023). Casual relationships, recommendations from mutual acquaintances and online networks frequently form weak connections. Women with limited connections have access to a wider range of resources and information, such as new markets, industry trends and business opportunities. For female entrepreneurs, both strong and weak connections are crucial. Strong ties provide emotional support, social capital and a sense of belonging, whereas weak ties provide access to a greater variety of resources, diverse perspectives and new opportunities (Bastian, Wood and Ng, 2023). Women business owners should develop both robust and weak connections in order to construct robust and diverse networks that can facilitate their business success.

Strong ties provide intellectual, economic and technical information, as well as inexpensive, reliable knowledge (Friedkin, 1982). According to Jack, Dodd and Anderson (2004), these types of network ties are essential for fostering trust-based relationships and assisting in the resolution of mutual problems. Women entrepreneurs may use weak ties and gain exposure to additional connections by leveraging their close relationships (Jack, 2010). According to research on weak ties, they enable women entrepreneurs relocate between communities and other groups of people (Katz and Williams, 1997). Granovetter (1983) postulates that weak ties facilitate exposure to new information because they might serve as links among individuals of different groups. Other scholars have underlined the importance of weak links in reducing the risk of overreliance and increasing sensitivity to shifting market dynamics (Friedkin, 1982). Hence, it can be observed that it is important for women entrepreneurs to develop strong ties with other stakeholders in their networks, but they can sometimes leverage weak ties according to the situation and context.

2.6.1.2 Network Density

The degree to which nodes in a network are linked to one another is referred to as network density (Burt, 2019). The author mentions that the effectiveness of women business owners can be greatly influenced by the density of their professional and personal networks. This is because women's businesses often experience distinct challenges in obtaining resources, knowledge and support, which can be surmounted by having strong and helpful networks (Valerio, 2011).

The acquaintance level of networking actors is reflected by the network's layered, dense framework and structure (Yang, Keller and Zheng, 2016). Dense entrepreneurs' networks are those with strong ties, where the majority of network participants are acquainted (Hoang and Antoncic, 2003). The density of a network seems to have a significant impact on the information-generation process for women entrepreneurs (Upton, Broming and Upton, 2015). According to studies, a high-density network structure is also more inclined to be useful in terms of reducing ambiguity and volatility in trade arrangements and boosting understanding of strategic acts (Surangi, 2014). Moreover, this framework is essential for establishing and creating agreed behaviour standards among some individuals. Despite these advantages, a dense structure often generates duplicate knowledge, thereby reducing the quantity of unique data that key players obtain, especially as businesses expand (Hite and Hesterly, 2001; Elfring and Hulsink, 2003).

When compared to their male counterparts, women's businesses face unique challenges in gaining access to funding and other necessary resources (Valerio, 2011). When starting a business, women often have a harder time obtaining capital because they lack the traditional business guarantors – collateral, a long credit background and/or a network of investors (BeckerBlease and Sohl, 2007). In this context, a high network density can give female business owners access to financiers, sponsors and other financing sources. For instance, women business owners may have access to angel investor networks, venture capitalist firms or crowdsourcing platforms that can assist them in raising the capital they need for their enterprises, but they experience significant difficulty in obtaining capital from the different sources mentioned (Ganle, Afriyie and Segbefia, 2015). A high network density can also give women business owners access to expertise and information. Female business owners might not have the requisite understanding of the market, technology or sector to be successful (Sharafizad, 2018). A helpful network can help to fill this void by providing women's businesses with access to advisers and industry specialists who can give advice, input and support (Sallah and Caesar, 2020). This can be particularly helpful for female marketers who are venturing into uncharted territory or have never run their own business before.

A high network density can also help foster an atmosphere that is more welcoming to female business owners. Joint networks can encourage entrepreneurship, knowledge sharing and collaboration among business owners, which can result in the development of novel goods and services (Upton, Broming and Upton, 2015). This can boost women business owners' profiles, which in turn can help them gain the attention of potential funders, clients and

collaborators. Thus, a high network density can generate a self-reinforcing circle of success, with women business owners being more likely to thrive thanks to the presence of a helpful network, which in turn draws even more resources and opportunities (Surangi, 2014). It is essential to remember that not all networks are created alike in terms of assistance and benefits for female businesses. Women business owners may face additional challenges when trying to break into male-dominated or -exclusive networks (Greguletz, Diehl and Kreutzer, 2018). In male-dominated networks, for example, women business owners may encounter prejudice, generalisation or inequality that can restrict their chances and resources (Greguletz, Diehl and Kreutzer, 2018). Efforts to increase network density for women business owners should, therefore, prioritise the building of networks that are welcoming of all people and can assist businesses regardless of gender. As a result, the density of one's networks may be an important factor in whether or not a woman's business venture succeeds. A high network density can provide women business owners with access to tools, knowledge and support, which can help to surmount the specific challenges they encounter (Burt, 2019). A strong network can also improve conditions for women business owners by encouraging teamwork, creativity and the exchange of information (Bastian, Wood and Ng, 2023). The creation of open and varied networks that can offer equitable chances and support for all businesses should be a key component of attempts to increase network density for women entrepreneurs.

2.6.1.3 Network Connectedness and Reachability

Network reachability denotes the availability of pathways among network individuals who are not directly connected, in which some stakeholders are extremely disconnected and some require lengthy connections (Valente and Foreman, 1998). In this case, network participants may be ranked based on the number of mediators required to connect two users (Valente and Foreman, 1998). Network quality increases whenever a women entrepreneur can reach beyond her close ties and develop connections with other professional stakeholders in business networks (Hampton, Gowan and Cooper, 2011). The primary focus of the reachability network design described is facilitating accessibility to individuals with specialised knowledge and less funding and assets. The entrepreneur's network has unique hierarchical qualities, with each component representing a critical component of certain economic capabilities (Hoang and Antoncic, 2003). The network-based research findings categorise various resources acquired by entrepreneurs through their network ties. Hence, it can be observed that it is important for women entrepreneurs to increase their reachability within the networks for better outcomes and professional growth and development.

The success of female businesses depends heavily on their network connectedness and reachability (Hampton, Gowan and Cooper, 2011). Due to these variables, female business owners have easier access to the tools, knowledge and network they need to succeed. Financial accessibility is one of the biggest challenges women entrepreneurs encounter (Becker-Blease and Sohl, 2007). It can be challenging for women to launch and expand their businesses because they are less likely than their male peers to receive financing from venture investors and other forms of financing (Leitch, Welter and Henry, 2018). A powerful network, however, can help female business owners surmount this challenge by opening doors to prospective donors and other sources of financing. A woman business owner, for instance, may be capable of connecting with local financiers and obtain financing for her venture if she has strong community ties (Alakaleek and Cooper, 2018). A similarly linked female entrepreneur may be able to use social media to market her company and win over investors (Ukpere, Slabbert and Ukpere, 2014; Neumeyer et al., 2019). In addition to access to capital, network connections can also provide women's businesses with access to information, guidance and chances that they may not have otherwise. For instance, a woman entrepreneur who is part of a network of other businesswomen may be able to benefit from their knowledge and experience regarding the ups and downs of the entrepreneurial world (Neumeyer et al., 2019).

Similarly, a woman entrepreneur who is linked to other business executives may be able to obtain useful counsel and assistance on how to manage the difficulties of operating a company (Ribeiro et al., 2021). This can include guidance on how to create a powerful team, how to promote a product or service and how to handle funds. Reachability is also an essential element for women's businesses because it enables them to interact with prospective clients and collaborators outside of their local groups (Alakaleek and Cooper, 2018). Since the emergence of the internet and related technologies, female business owners have had greater access to channels for publicising and selling their products (Ukpere, Slabbert and Ukpere, 2014). For instance, Luckman (2015) outlines that a female-led business that makes and offers unique handcrafted goods could potentially reach a global audience through an online marketplace such as Etsy. Similar to this, Francesca, Paola and Paola (2017) mention that a female business owner who provides counselling services may be able to interact with prospective customers on social media and market her services. For women business owners who are seeking to build their networks and make connections with other business owners and executives, reachability can also be crucial, and nowadays it is mostly done using social media platforms (Zhou and Johnston, 2020). For instance, a female business owner who wants to

break into a new market or sector may be able to interact with other business owners online who already have expertise in that sector.

It can be understood that the chances of succeeding for women entrepreneurs are greatly enhanced by their network of connections and their reachability. Due to these variables, female business owners have easier access to the tools, knowledge and networks they need to succeed. By utilising these variables, women entrepreneurs can create powerful companies that add to the progress and wealth of their communities.

2.6.1.4 Diversity in Networks

A diverse network structure denotes the resources entrepreneurs may obtain through other participants (Weber and Kratzer, 2013). This aspect of networking is also linked to accessibility of networks. For instance, Hoang and Antoncic (2003) state that, by establishing diverse ties, entrepreneurs may access new possibilities and diversify their resources. According to theoretical and empirical studies, informal or social contacts include family, friends and business relationships (Birley, 1985). These relationships give access to finance sources, practical know-how and social and sales assistance for start-ups (Steier and Greenwood, 2000). Relationships with suppliers, consumers, competitors and specialists are crucial for acquiring market knowledge, fresh product ideas and expertise (Lamine et al., 2015). (Valente and Foreman, 1998) note that the quality of entrepreneurs' interactions vary depending the different kinds of actors in the entrepreneurial networks. Similarly, women entrepreneurs can also establish strong ties with diverse stakeholders using formal and informal networks.

Women's businesses depends heavily on network diversity (Zhou and Johnston, 2020). Women business owners who are part of large and varied networks are better able to find and take advantage of useful resources, contacts and opportunities (Ademola, Adegboyegun and Adegoke, 2020). This is due to the fact that having a more varied set of contacts in one's network can yield fruitful new insights and ideas for developing one's company. Having both men and women in a network is a crucial part of diversity. Men and women have distinct skills, abilities and views, and this variety can provide a plethora of advantages to women's businesses. In male-dominated fields or those with a preponderance of male financiers, for instance, males may have access to networks that women do not (Alakaleek and Cooper, 2018). By including males in their networks, women's businesses can obtain direct exposure to these techniques and possibilities. Women can also help other women business owners by sharing their experiences and advice. Women business owners can learn from each other's experiences and offer support as they confront the specific obstacles that only they encounter, such as

sexism and other forms of prejudice (Logan, 2014). Inspiring and assisting other women with their business ventures, they can also act as role models and advisors (Logan, 2014). Women business owners can benefit from network diversity because it increases the likelihood that they will encounter people who think differently about them because of their gender. For example, Kiefer, Heileman and Pett (2022) outline that male financiers are more inclined to engage with male-led companies, regardless of whether women-led firms have better success measures. Women business owners can increase their odds of meeting financiers who are more aware of their particular challenges and experiences by expanding their networks to include both men and women. In addition, network diversity can boost ingenuity and invention. When individuals from various fields and professions get together, they bring with them new ways of thinking and solving problems (Nordin et al., 2018). This variety can lead to new insights, inventive solutions and creativeness that can help women's businesses distinguish themselves and thrive in competing marketplaces. Networks must be diverse not only with regard to gender but also in terms of cultural diversity, which can allow women entrepreneurs to engage and collaborate with other individuals from different countries and cultural backgrounds, thereby enabling them to contribute to globalisation (Batjargal et al., 2019).

Therefore, it is essential to provide chances for female business owners to develop varied networks. This can be accomplished by offering mentoring programmes, networking opportunities and business support services that motivate women's businesses to interact with people from various backgrounds and sectors (Ganle, Afriyie and Segbefia, 2015). For instance, incubators and accelerators can give women business owners access to a wide range of trainers, advisers and financiers who can guide them through the difficulties of launching and expanding their enterprises. Women business owners benefit from having varied networks that include both men and women.

2.6.1.5 Network Centrality

A network's centrality pattern defines an individual's location within the network (Hoang and Antoncic, 2003). Within the research on entrepreneurial networks, network centrality has been quantified using 'distance between two', proximity and level of centrality (Ho and Pollack, 2014). Centrality specifies the degree to which one individual is situated between two unrelated individuals (Ho and Pollack, 2014). The fundamental idea of centrality illustrates that efficient management is achieved by demonstrating the greatest influence over the interactions between unrelated pairs of other players (Valente and Foreman, 1998). Essentially, centrality is employed to show the authority and position of the main individual. Closeness is also

determined as a crucial part of centrality in the network. Women entrepreneurs can also establish proximity and closeness to increase their reach with internal and external stakeholders for better resource accessibility to access resources such as venture capital.

The performance of women-owned companies can be greatly influenced by network centrality in the setting of female entrepreneurship (Venkatesh et al., 2017). Lack of access to networks and connections with important players is one of the biggest obstacles women businesses encounter (Ukpere, Slabbert and Ukpere, 2014). Women may have limited access to casual networks such as social groups or male-dominated industry alliances and may encounter prejudices and sexism that make it more difficult to develop relationships with prospective funders and clients (Ribeiro et al., 2021). However, studies (Neumeyer et al., 2019; Mozumdar et al., 2020) have shown that women who are able to break down these obstacles and build powerful networks can be very successful business owners. Access to essential resources such as expertise, information, financing and societal support can be made available to women's businesses through network centrality. For instance, a woman entrepreneur who is well connected within her field may have access to role models and other advisors who can provide help and advice on business strategy, as well as links to prospective funders or clients (Cho et al., 2020). Women's businesses that are well connected in their areas may also have access to essential resources, such as government schemes and nonprofit groups that can provide assistance and financing (Beqo and Gehrels, 2014).

Women business owners can gain authority and create a solid image in their respective sectors with the aid of network centrality, which also provides access to resources (Khan, 2020). Women can raise the profiles of their companies by establishing a rapport with influential figures and expanding their networks. There are several tactics that women's businesses can use to develop network centrality. Hampton, Gowan and Cooper (2011) outline that one strategy is to actively look for chances to network with people in related fields or groups. This could entail going to networking events, joining local business organisations or visiting industry-specific seminars (Bastian, Wood and Ng, 2023). Building connections with important players, such as advisors, financiers and consumers, is another tactic. Women business owners can either approach these people personally or use their current networks to make referrals and build relationships (Abdullah et al., 2015). So, women's businesses can also utilise social media and other digital tools to develop their networks and establish a powerful online profile (Ademola, Adegboyegun and Adegoke, 2020). Women can gain new followers and develop connections with prospective clients, collaborators and financiers by participating

in online communities and sharing their knowledge and experience with others (Francesca, Paola and Paola, 2017). Ultimately, network centrality is an essential element in the success of women's businesses. Women can succeed as business owners despite the specific challenges they encounter by establishing strong networks and taking advantage of their contacts. Women can advance their careers, position themselves as leaders in their fields and cement their reputations as successful business owners through deliberate network development.

It can be understood that networking is a crucial aspect for women entrepreneurs, and they face significant related challenges, as discussed in the following section.

2.7 Networking Challenges Faced by Women Entrepreneurs

A substantial body of literature covers the importance of formal and informal networks for comprehending entrepreneurship (Birley, 1985; Cope, Jack and Rose, 2007). Relationships within informal networks may supply or link entrepreneurs with the funds, prospects, knowledge, labour and other crucial contacts required to generate economic assets (Brush et al., 2002). However, women entrepreneurs are hampered in their network-building efforts owing to gender-related stereotypes, emotional problems and financial obstacles (Bui, Kuan and Chu, 2018).

In opposition to gender disparity, a substantial body of literature seeks to comprehend the 'gender divide' and presents several reasons for its occurrence (Danish and Smith, 2012). These involve assertions that the gender imbalance in entrepreneurship is linked to gender biases in formal and informal social networks (Guire, 2000). In addition, women might have limited access to formal business networks that manage crucial commercial funds and resources (Guire, 2002). Without any of these connecting relationships or linkages between networks, businesses that are run or founded by women may be shut out of connections that important for integrating the external financing of an enterprise, which might also impede their entrepreneurial opportunities for extended periods and result in unfavourable company results (Howell and Nanda, 2019). However, by allowing accessibility to formal and informal social networks, they give significant economic, interpersonal and cognitive resources and benefits (Gupta et al., 2009). According to the research (Malmström et al., 2020), women suffer substantial obstacles in obtaining information and technological, financial and other types of resources. Also, sometimes, women may even obtain less financial and technological resources than men because of the societal barriers they face on a daily basis (Malmström et al., 2020). In developing nations with limited access to technology, women entrepreneurs have fewer networking options (Hampton, Gowan and Cooper, 2011).

There is growing emphasis on the real networking activities of women entrepreneurs who are looking to obtain venture capital for their start-ups (Brush et al., 2017). Emphasis on such interactions reveals that nuanced types of discrimination or difficulties exist in gaining access to formal business networks and informal social networks (Coleman and Robb, 2012). This topic has not been investigated comprehensively, particularly in the MENA region, which is also heavily affected by cultural and social norms. For instance, women entrepreneurs who are moving into business without professional experience will primarily face many challenges in gaining venture capital because they do not have prior professional networks that they established while gaining work experience (Coleman and Robb, 2012). Also, because of stereotypes and cultural barriers, women face challenges in obtaining financial capital from their informal networks such as family and friends (Khan, 2019). Khan (2019) also indicates that there is a common perception that women lack the business acumen necessary for success, with assumptions that they are less capable in terms of financial decision-making, leadership and risk-taking compared to men. Such perceptions make it difficult for women entrepreneurs to establish connections with investors, business partners and even customers, making it more challenging for them to network with such stakeholders (Erogul, Rod and Barragan, 2019). Another prevalent stereotype is that women are naturally more risk-averse, often discouraged from pursuing high-growth ventures or entering competitive industries (Figueroa-Armijos and Berns, 2022). Society often expects them to prioritise stability over ambition, leading to fewer women engaging in sectors traditionally dominated by men, such as technology or manufacturing. Cultural barriers also do not make it easy for women entrepreneurs to thrive, especially in traditionally male-dominated societies. For instance, traditional societies, such as Asian, Middle Eastern and African force women to prioritise family and caregiving, making entrepreneurship seem like an unconventional or even unacceptable career choice (Minniti, 2013; Hassan, Ramli and Desa, 2014; Ademola, Adegboyegun and Adegoke, 2020; Sajjad et al., 2020). The restrictive norms in these cultures create significant challenges in networking.

Women are less trusted regarding their ability to become entrepreneurs compared to men (Hechavarria et al., 2019). Particularly, while earlier research demonstrated gender gaps in the establishment of firms, financing and achievement (Brush et al., 2002; Brush, Bruin and Welter, 2009; Brush et al., 2017), the current research will also examine how the lived experiences of women entrepreneurs speak to networking inequalities in the context of starting a new business and obtaining venture capital. In the MENA region, cultural hurdles, prejudices and stereotypes impede access to official and informal networks (Khan, 2019). In doing so, the current study

also sheds light on how and why women may choose to network in a certain manner in a given situation, extending previous research on gender, venture capital and entrepreneurship. In addition, concentrating on frameworks enables us to evaluate how women's capacity to participate in entrepreneurship may be constrained by institutional restrictions instead of their inability to network successfully (Alakaleek and Cooper, 2018). Emphasis on such structures may also help direct the present study in the development of strategies for women entrepreneurs backed by formal and informal networks. In addition, women's gender-segregated informal social networks lacked business-savvy people, placing them in a structurally disadvantageous position from which to increase their venture capital (Gompers et al., 2022).

Women entrepreneurs see contacts as more personal and long term, while men, as the research suggests, view networking in a more contractual, pragmatic and short-term manner (Guzman and Kacperczyk, 2019). Thus, women's conceptions of and reliance on informal networks differ from the prevailing assumption that informal networks are useful in optimizing one's value (Williams and Vorley, 2014). Yet, instead of questioning the concept's underlying ideas, the majority of researchers urge women to adopt an approach that men use (which is more transactional and not personal) for better business outcomes (Ahl, 2006). As a result, how well these social networking practices reinforce inequality along gendered characteristics is frequently disregarded when women are provided access to guidance (Ahl, 2006).

The above discussion sheds light on critical networking challenges faced by women entrepreneurs, and it is a significant concern in the MENA region due to poor infrastructures, cultural barriers, high levels of gender disparity, gender bias and stereotyping in some of the emerging MENA countries. Also, limited opportunities for women entrepreneurs in the emerging economies of the MENA region can hinder their personal and economic growth, which in turn affects the broader economy. While various studies have examined factors influencing women's entrepreneurial success, gaps remain in understanding how broader structural and systemic forces shape their experiences. In particular, existing research highlights the importance of networking as a crucial determinant of success for women entrepreneurs in the MENA region. However, there is a need to explore the underlying mechanisms that enable or constrain networking opportunities for women. Institutional factors, such as regulatory frameworks, cultural expectations and access to financial resources, play a significant role in shaping these opportunities. Given the complex interplay of these factors, institutional theory provides a valuable lens through which to analyse the structural challenges

and enablers of women's entrepreneurship. The following section presents a detailed discussion of institutional theory and its relevance to networking and women's entrepreneurial success.

2.8 Institutional Theory

Entrepreneurship does not exist in isolation. In fact, it is deeply embedded within the norms, values and regulations of institutions that shape economic and social interactions (Bruton, Ahlstrom and Li, 2010). The purpose of institutional theory is to provide an explanation for why certain social institutions and processes originate, continue and evolve through time (Amenta and Ramsey, 2010). The theory was developed in the field of sociology but has found use in management, politics and economics. The central tenet of institutional theory is that institutions, including businesses, governments and social networks, are products of the broader societal, cultural and historical environments in which they exist, which in turn produce rules, standards, ideals, regulations and constraints (Amenta and Ramsey, 2010). Fundamental to institutional theory is the idea that, for an institution or system to be successful, it must act in ways that are consistent with the norms of its setting (Dequech, 2009). For instance, in the context of entrepreneurship, institutional entrepreneurship is a relationship between institutional theory and entrepreneurship (David, Tolbert and Boghossian, 2019). New businesses develop due to the efforts of institutional entrepreneurs, who are the people and groups who build or alter existing institutions to better accommodate innovation. To make the business climate more welcoming, an entrepreneur can, for instance, advocate for a loosening of applicable rules or a raising of industry standards (Eijdenberg et al., 2019).

Furthermore, Beckert (2010) outlines that this is due to the fact that regulators, consumers and other organisations within the institutional context all utilise the system's commonly held ideas, norms and practices to evaluate the effectiveness of companies and the legitimacy of systems. Isomorphism, or the propensity for institutions to evolve toward greater similarity over time, is another factor highlighted by institutional theory. There are three ways in which this can take place: coercive, mimetic and normative isomorphism (Frumkin and Galaskiewicz, 2004). Coercive isomorphism happens when institutions are compelled to implement the processes of the organisational framework as a result of regulatory requirements, or even other forms of pressure (Frumkin and Galaskiewicz, 2004). In entrepreneurship, this can be seen when businesses are forced to adopt certain practices to comply with government regulations or industry standards. Mimetic isomorphism happens when institutions embrace the techniques of other successful institutions in their sector (Frumkin and Galaskiewicz, 2004). For entrepreneurs, this often means imitating the strategies and models of leading firms or

competitors to achieve similar success. Normative isomorphism happens when institutions embrace the strategies of the institutional environment due to their belief that these procedures are the 'norms' of the field (Frumkin and Galaskiewicz, 2004). Entrepreneurs may adopt these norms as part of the broader industry standards or professional practices, believing they enhances their legitimacy and success.

Institutional theory is concerned with proper rules, legislation, unwritten ideals and assumed behavioural norms that influence business and personal behaviours (Scott, 1987; Amenta and Ramsey, 2010). Institutional factors, both official and informal, may encourage or restrict conduct. Scott (1987) classifies them according to three pillars: cognitive, normative and regulatory. The first dimension, the cognitive pillar, represents the conceptual basis of people's assessments of a particular scenario (Scott, 1987). It refers to the perceptions of entrepreneurs of possibilities, information and abilities (Baron, 1998). The second dimension, the normative pillar, relates to corporate orientation and assesses the extent to which the population of a region supports entrepreneurship (Sine and David, 2010). It consists of societal ideals and conventions associated with business, providing general principles that individuals deliberately adhere to (Scott, 1987). The third component, the regulatory pillar, consists of government regulations and initiatives that impact entrepreneurship. Regulatory influences encourage or restrict the establishment of new initiatives by impacting the risks people face when launching new firms and determining the availability of necessary resources (Busenitz, Gómez and Spencer, 2000). Institutional theory also offers a framework from which analyse firm formation in connection to laws and norms that favourably or adversely impact economic growth (Trevino, Thomas and Cullen, 2008).

There are a number of directions that research into institutions and systems might go in light of institutional theory. To begin, it implies that researchers must take into account the larger social, economic and historical framework in which companies function rather than studying them in isolation from their institutional environments (Sine and David, 2010). Second, it implies that cultural and normative variables are as much a part of the shaping process of systems and organisations as are logical and technical considerations. As per Struckell et al. (2022), the requirement to comply with the institutional context while still innovating and adapting means that change in organisations and systems is often gradual and incremental.

Institutional theory is being used to clarify the formation of novel business models, including social entrepreneurship and hybrid organisations with for-profit and nonprofit aims

(Scott, 1987). When trying to make sense of the many interconnected social processes that produce institutions and systems, institutional theory remains a crucial theoretical framework. For instance, the field of entrepreneurship and institutional theory are significantly related to each other (David, Tolbert and Boghossian, 2019). In recent years, there has been a lot of cross-disciplinary research between institutional theory and entrepreneurship. Entrepreneurship is focused on the practice of founding and building new enterprises, whereas institutional theory is focused with how formal and informal institutions impact personal and institutional behaviour.

Also, formal and informal institutions can foster or stifle entrepreneurial activity by underpinning institutional theory (Romero, 2019). For instance, studies have shown that nations with robust legal structures and property rights have more entrepreneurs because such individuals can more easily gain access to funding and safeguard their creations against infringement (Romero, 2019). Also, institutional theory may shed light on how entrepreneurs might make legitimate claims via formal networks. Some entrepreneurs, in an effort to seem more credible to potential backers and clients, may actively seek out partnerships with more established entities, while others will work to gain relevant certifications or accreditations.

Furthermore, the convergence of entrepreneurship study and institutional theory offers chances to improve knowledge of the phenomenon of female entrepreneurship and paves the way for future study (Bruton, Ahlstrom and Li, 2010). Organisations should always be included in the research on entrepreneurship since they shape and reflect the developmental component of entrepreneurial behaviour (Bruton, Ahlstrom and Li, 2010). Any company choice is a response to the organisational context. Alternatively, with a crucial role in a diverse society, entrepreneurship is continuously attempting to transform institutions (Brush, Bruin and Welter, 2009). Also, research has stressed the relevance of formal institutions, such as policy decisions (Romero, 2019), educational establishments (Serrano, Román and Romero, 2019) and financial systems, to describe women's entrepreneurial activity (Langevang et al., 2015). Other research has concentrated on informal institutions, such as cultural rules, anticipated skills and presumed possibilities (Sørensen, 2007). Similarly, the primary objective of the present study is to comprehend how the roles and identities of women entrepreneurs are ambiguous, how arguments and organisations are contradictory or numerous and how networks extend various entities, all of which make the connection between operational practices, networks and organisations. Equally crucial is the process by which an institutional context produces the meanings and consequences of network structures and cooperative relationships.

Entrepreneurship may also be tied to official and informal relationships or networks inside and outside institutions.

Even though institutional theory is significantly linked to entrepreneurship and networking, it has certain limitations that must be considered. One of the main criticisms of the theory is its overemphasis on structure and stability (Aksom and Tymchenko, 2020), which can overlook the dynamic and evolving nature of organisations and their environments. Critics argue that institutional theory often focuses too much on the influence of formal rules, norms and regulations, sometimes neglecting the role of individual agency and the potential for change and innovation within institutions (Willmott, 2015). This can lead to a deterministic view, whereby institutions are seen as rigid structures that constrain behaviour, rather than recognising the potential for actors within the system to challenge, adapt and redefine these structures over time. Another criticism is the limited attention given to power dynamics within institutional contexts. While institutional theory acknowledges the role of external pressures on organisations, it often does not delve deeply into how power relations influence the creation and maintenance of institutional norms and practices (Meyer and Höllerer, 2014). As a result, the theory may fail to capture how dominant groups or actors within a particular institutional setting can manipulate or control these norms to serve their interests. This oversight can make institutional theory less effective in explaining inequalities or the strategic use of institutional practices for personal or organisational gain.

It is important to understand that institutional theory helps to explain how organisations and individuals conform to societal norms and regulations, yet this process often depends on the networks within which they operate. Both formal and informal networks play a crucial role in facilitating the exchange of resources, knowledge and legitimacy, which are essential for navigating the institutional environment (Krackhardt and Stern, 1988; Williams and Vorley, 2014). These networks help entrepreneurs understand the expectations and norms of their sector, providing them with the social capital needed to align with institutional requirements. The following section explores how both formal and informal networks are vital for entrepreneurs in establishing credibility and access to critical resources, ultimately shaping their success within institutional frameworks.

2.8.1 Formal and Informal Networks

Formal and informal relationships or networks may exist among stakeholders inside an entrepreneurial network (Birley, 1985). Formal networks mean that the appropriate level of collaboration, conformity and interorganisational cooperation is achieved via an institutional

agreement or contract (Hall and O'Toole, 2004). In addition, formal relationships ensure the conduct of stakeholders since they include punishments and consequences for poor effectiveness (Williams and Vorley, 2014). Formal relationships based on a signed agreement offer permanence and a reduced (Parker, 2008). Formal networks primarily relate to an interorganisational level of evaluation since networks and relations are based on legal contracts that occur among the stakeholders (Parker, 2008).

According to Guire (2002), informal relationships take into account the social and cultural background of a contact, in addition to the fact that the execution and implementation of responsibilities are the result of parties' shared interests. This informal accord is based on shared anticipation of good results, equality, trust and confidence, which seems to be a more powerful interactional mechanism than legal responsibilities or explicit uses of power and influence (Guire, 2002).

Despite the prevalence of formal networks, informal relations play a crucial role in fostering long-term engagement; the intricacy of legislative channels and the tremendous dynamic of relationships make it challenging to create and sustain formal ties (Cross, Nohria and Parker, 2002). Assured by trustworthiness and security, informal contacts reveal a more adaptable technique for establishing relationships (Cross, Nohria and Parker, 2002). Informal ties are frequently the outcome of a woman's constant interactions, which happen on an individual scale in most situations (Krackhardt and Stern, 1988). In an entrepreneurial setting, social connections may lead to the manipulation of stakeholders, which can become a challenge within an entrepreneurial activity (Krackhardt and Stern, 1988).

By examining the concept of women's entrepreneurship from an interactional viewpoint, it can be argued that it has an idealistic emphasis in which formal networks, including context-specific and geographical components such as laws, customs and political systems, are rarely acknowledged in relation to women entrepreneurs (Ahl, 2006). Also, as per the discussion in the section on networking challenges, it was outlined that women entrepreneurs face a significant number of challenges in establishing formal networks compared to informal networks due to poor access to financial capital, business environment, gender bias, stereotyping and other corporate and interpersonal factors (Hall and O'Toole, 2004).

In terms of informal networks, women entrepreneurs' initial business networks consists of family and friends (Krackhardt and Stern, 1988). They choose informal networks over formal organisational units (affiliations, business groups, industry alliances, funding

organisations and other such corporate agencies), mostly owing to the traditionally and culturally extremely patriarchal gender characteristics of the former (Guire, 2000). Similarly, individuals from immediate families, as well as from other informal networks, constitute the majority of the social capital of women entrepreneurs (Cross, Nohria and Parker, 2002).

Ahl (2006) remarks that, by lacking specific consideration of gendered power dynamics, research on entrepreneurship reinforces the notion that solutions for the perceived failings of women entrepreneurs lie with the person rather than at the societal or systemic level. As a result, studies such as those conducted by Alakaleek and Cooper (2018), Hampton, Gowan and Cooper (2011), Howell and Nanda (2019) and Katz and Williams (1997) place the responsibility on women and argue that, in order to achieve professional success, women should make changes to themselves, such as improving their networking abilities.

From the above discussion, it can be observed that formal and informal networks both play a significant role in the development and growth of women entrepreneurs. The preceding sections have also provided substantial information on how women entrepreneurs can benefit from networking in formal networks such as those that involve government agencies, third-party investors and venture capitalists, banks and other commercial organisations. Also, a great deal of emphasis has been placed on how informal (social) networks such as interpersonal contacts with industry stakeholders and support from relatives and friends can benefit women entrepreneurs in obtaining venture capital to develop start-ups. Networking elements, such as strength, density, reachability, diversity and centrality of networks, hold equal significance to network types (formal and informal networks) because of their characteristics, which are outlined in the following section.

2.8.2 Institutional Theory and Women's Entrepreneurship

All entrepreneurial activities and entrepreneurship-related elements are conceptually rooted in various institutions (political, cultural, religious or social) that impact people's beliefs, conventions and motivations (Bruton, Ahlstrom and Yeh, 2004; Minniti, 2013). Systemic changes and transformations may generate possibilities for aspiring entrepreneurs by defining and deciding possibilities and eliminating or decreasing obstacles to industry entrance and departure and can thus have a beneficial effect on innovative management and leadership (Fogel, 2001; Sine and David, 2010). Brush, Bruin and Welter (2009) initiated a gender-aware structure of entrepreneurship that accounted for particular situational considerations as significant aspects of women's entrepreneurial behaviour, and this was contrary to the comprehensive perspective of entrepreneurial activities, which are

primarily in the context of the male perspective or are neutral in terms of gender (Shinnar, Giacomini and Janssen, 2012). This was a critical step in widening the knowledge of women's entrepreneurship in the current research since women can bring complex elements to career choices while balancing household and economic obligations (Rehman and Roomi, 2012).

In many communities, women are generally predominantly characterised by their household responsibilities, which are connected to their caring responsibilities, such as raising children, looking after their parents, spouses or parents-in-law, and other household responsibilities (Kamberidou, 2020). In some contexts, even though women are working and have professional responsibilities, they still have to undertake household responsibilities even though they work the same or have longer work shifts compared to their fathers or husbands (male partners) (Achtenhagen and Welter, 2003). However, women entrepreneurs can further develop balance in their personal and professional lives and achieve success if they focus on developing ties among the entrepreneurial networks they can develop in formal and informal institutions (Rehman and Roomi, 2012). Following this line of inquiry, the present study focuses on developing women entrepreneurs through formal and informal networks that can help them achieve high performance, which may be explained using institutional theory.

Béland (2009) defines institutions as the basis of socioeconomic existence, comprised of formal and informal regulations, supervision and compliance processes, and structures of significance that characterise the background in which people, businesses, workforce entities and other institutions communicate and collaborate. Institutional theory is an especially applicable framework for analysing the outside settings influencing women's entrepreneurial activities (Brush, Bruin and Welter, 2009).

There are three kinds of pillars discussed as a part of institutional theory: the regulatory pillar, the normative pillar and the cognitive pillar (Amenta and Ramsey, 2010). The three pillars are significant elements of a society's institutional structure and they further play a crucial role in fostering effective entrepreneurship development (Trevino, Thomas and Cullen, 2008). During the last twenty years, studies on entrepreneurship have relied on the three pillars of institutional theory and reinforced the claim that structural inequalities in institutions further contribute to nationwide variances in the establishment of entrepreneurial environments (Phillips and Tracey, 2007; Bruton, Ahlstrom and Li, 2010; Tolbert, David and Sine, 2010). In the setting of women's entrepreneurship, structured and formal regulatory institutions can generate commercial activities that can support entrepreneurship, such as assisting women in developing formal networks, influencing the scope toward which women's entrepreneurship

can grow and influencing the kinds of companies wherein women can interact (Bruton, Ahlstrom and Li, 2010). Informal types of institutions that work on normative and cognitive pillars can substantially affect entrepreneurs' views of prospects (Williams and Vorley, 2014). Based on this well-established line of inquiry, the present study applies institutional theory to investigate the structures that restrict and enhance women's entrepreneurial involvement.

Regulatory institutions embody the rational actor behaviour concept, which further relates to the official application, implementation and adoption of rules, rules, regulations and consequences that influence the conduct of individuals in companies and societies (Busenitz, Gómez and Spencer, 2000). Regulatory institutions at the administrative level focus on and work on workplace regulations, supervising incentive programmes; at the government level, they focus on laws, regulations, monitoring policies and sanctions operations, further providing a structure for law enforcement organisations and authorities (Agostino et al., 2020). These regulatory institutions can influence the validity and acknowledgement of entrepreneurship, according to the findings of a body of research (Agostino et al., 2020).

Serrano, Román and Romero (2019) further show that overly regulated nations will have fewer new businesses and slower growth as they do not have to experiment with the regulatory elements that can drive their economies. Along with countries with rigid regulations, countries with uncertain regulatory frameworks, ambiguity in the legislative structure, loss of intellectual property rights, poor governance and unreliable prosecution of legislation will then significantly raise the cost of entrepreneurship, which can have an impact on the activities of entrepreneurs (Serrano, Román and Romero, 2019). In the context of women's entrepreneurship, Langevang et al. (2015) demonstrate that the absence of official assistance in the form of policies and laws and administrative obstacles impede women's entrepreneurial activities. So, if women entrepreneurs receive support from regulatory institutions, they can succeed in their entrepreneurial activities (Langevang et al., 2015).

Although regulatory institutions are associated with institutional adherence to standards and regulations, the basic beliefs of entrepreneurship-related norms are the informal and unseen regulations, which are uncodified beliefs and norms maintained by people and companies (Spencer and Gómez, 2004). Furthermore, such norms stated via the normative pillar impact the comparative interpersonal attractiveness of entrepreneurial activities and entrepreneurship as a chosen profession. Sine and David (2010) present evidence that entrepreneurship-related motivation is closely related to the normative institutional framework of a nation or state. In addition, the normative institutional context determines the possibility of an individual

becoming an entrepreneur (Li et al., 2021). According to Sørensen (2007), the common social relationships, bureaucracies and organisations establish norms, which in turn influence entrepreneurship. Being entirely concerned with what constitutes societal value, such normative organisations produce publicly acceptable beliefs and conduct that people are obligated to adopt (Li et al., 2021). It has been shown that the social desirability of entrepreneurial professions varies among nations (especially for women); some nations enable and encourage entrepreneurship, whereas others prohibit it by making it more complicated to undertake (Danis and Shipilov, 2002; Yukhanaev et al., 2015). Furthermore, studies have shown that the amount of respectability, esteem and appreciation afforded to women's entrepreneurship is predictive of their engagement in innovative venture operations (Langevang et al., 2015).

Entrepreneurial cognitions represent the actuality of the situation and the cognitive structures associated with humans' preconceptions of one's capacity that can be determined through the threshold of anticipated achievement and self-efficacy, which is trust in their personal abilities to begin a business to engage in economic ventures effectively (Baron, 1998). As per Qian and Jung (2017), entrepreneurship potential may be validated by a person's opinion of their expertise and the abilities necessary to start a new firm. People's evaluations of their capacity to detect possibilities and overall self-efficacy towards innovative action are significantly associated with increasing the degree of entrepreneurial activity, according to studies on entrepreneurship (Minniti, 2013). Researchers, such as Cetindamar et al. (2012) and Welsh et al. (2021) have outlined that personal motivation and support from family are success factors for women entrepreneurs. These elements are related to the cognitive function of institutional theory.

Furthermore, social capital, along with social networks, has been highlighted as a significant factor in the identification and development of business possibilities (Knight, 2006; Qian and Jung, 2017). Furthermore, research has demonstrated that the existence or absence of entrepreneurial connections and networks and their capacity to stimulate and sustain a framework for business activities are highly essential to institutional arrangements (Ahmad and Xavier, 2012). Entrepreneurial women, particularly in emerging nations, have inadequate and limited business networks, limited role models in the form of successful women entrepreneurs, limited training and education on entrepreneurial skills and employment facilities, and poor accessibility to technical support, such as corporate development facilities and knowledge of business expansion (Halkias et al., 2011). In addition, they encounter the difficulty of gaining

access to and managing funds and exterior funding sources, which causes them to see the situations as difficult and themselves as unsuited to entrepreneurship (Bui, Kuan and Chu, 2018).

Scholars have also shown how institutions and networks mutually reinforce one another (Brinton and Nee, 2001; Powell and Oberg, 2017). They create the circumstances for each other's success. Brinton and Nee (2001) based their interpretation of this co-evolving connection on a fundamental dualism between the interaction of networks and institutions. This dichotomy is fuelled by the contextual and frequently spontaneous performances of highly constrained, but still purposeful, institutional and personal entities throughout time (Powell and Oberg, 2017). Similarly, the current study's primary goal is to comprehend how the roles and identities of women entrepreneurs are unclear, how arguments and organisations are contradictory or numerous, and how networks extend various entities, all of which make the connection between operational practices, networks and organisations. Equally important is the procedure by which an institutional setting brings about the connotations and consequences of network structures and cooperative connections. Also, formal and informal ties or networks within and outside institutions can be interlinked with entrepreneurship. It is important to explore how poor networking restricts women entrepreneurs from achieving success.

2.9 Resource Dependence Theory

Entrepreneurship requires access to a range of critical resources, including financial capital, human talent, social networks and market opportunities (Pfeffer and Salancik, 1978). The ability to secure these resources can determine the success or failure of a business, particularly for entrepreneurs who often face structural barriers in obtaining them. It is important to explore ways in which these aspects can be explored from a resource-based perspective.

Resource dependence theory (RDT) provides a useful framework for this research as it posits that firms consciously respond to the requirements of key resource providers (Pfeffer and Salancik, 1978). RDT also indicates that companies are capable of attempting to manage their reliance on various stakeholders by using techniques that accommodate the influence resource providers possess over firms (Pfeffer and Salancik, 1978). Organisations' reliance on and engagement with the surrounding environment is the subject of RDT (Pfeffer and Salancik, 1978). In the early 1970s, Pfeffer and Salancik developed RDT as a solution to the rising complexity of contemporary organisations and the growing appreciation of the external environment's significance. RDT starts with the premise that organisations can't operate

without the resources provided by their external environment and that the allocation of those resources has a major bearing on their actions and results. In addition to capital, raw materials and technology, other resources might include people, knowledge and contacts (Pfeffer and Salancik, 1978). Furthermore, Davis and Cobb (2010) mention that RDT suggests that, depending on the extent to which an organisation is reliant on a certain resource, a company should 1) reduce its reliance on outside resources by making greater use of in-house assets, 2) engage in buying or merging with its suppliers or distributors – known as vertical integration, or 3) enter new markets or introduces new products – referred to as diversification. Companies can also increase their reliance on external resources by fostering and sustaining productive partnerships with suppliers, customers and other external stakeholders (Biermann and Harsch, 2017). Building a trustworthy network of connections that can be used for mutual gain is one way to do this.

RDT emphasises the significance of one's level of authority and influence while acquiring resources (Biermann and Harsch, 2017). It is easier for organisations to obtain the resources they need if they have a high level of power and influence in their interactions with external partners, whereas organisations with lower levels of power and influence may have difficulty doing so. The theory also states that a company's reliance on a particular resource might provide both advantages and disadvantages. On the one hand, businesses' need to find novel approaches to acquiring and deploying external resources may spark creativity, teamwork and education (Sofie et al., 2017). However, companies' increased reliance on external partners makes them more susceptible to shocks in the external environment, which may increase the risks and vulnerabilities associated with resource dependencies. RDT is a helpful paradigm for comprehending the intertwined nature of companies and their external surroundings, as well as the impact that resource dependencies have on the actions and outcomes of businesses (Biermann and Harsch, 2017). Researchers and practitioners may gain a deeper understanding of what drives organisational success and failure in today's dynamic and linked business world if they focus on resource dependencies and the tactics companies employ to manage them.

The theory also suggests that firms can gain management of vital resources, thereby reducing their reliance on other individuals (Sofie et al., 2017). Also, enterprises can obtain control of essential resources that external companies need, so expanding their reliance on the main company (Coviello and Cox, 2006). Secondary stakeholders on whom a company may be reliant for assets can provide any person or organisation on whom the firm depends for the

necessary resources (Coviello and Cox, 2006). In addition, resource providers could be financiers, customers, rivals or other institutions in a corporation's surrounding environment (Hung, 2006). The resource dependency rationale for the process in which networks might assist firms in maintaining their resource dependencies is essentially that women entrepreneurs create network links with enterprises that hold essential resources and similar reliant enterprises (Nowiński and Rialp, 2016). These measures are performed in an effort to diminish the relative strength of the companies upon which the primary company depends (Nowiński and Rialp, 2016). As was previously mentioned, the study of networks within an institutional environment is predicated mostly on assumptions drawn from RDT. Also, in gaining resources, the woman entrepreneur is the central actor who depends on the assets of other actors in the global context (Manolova et al., 2007). In order to appreciate the early stages of a company's entrepreneurial activity, it is necessary to analyse the entrepreneur's behaviour in accumulating and arranging the necessary resources (Semrau and Werner, 2012). The present research develops the argument that women entrepreneurs' network links increase throughout the early stages of firm development and that they use network ties to talk to different resource reliances at each level of the company's current advancement strategy when attempting to obtain venture capital.

2.9.1 Resource-Dependence View

It is challenging for a start-up to rely only on corporate assets for development, and it is sometimes uncertain what materials and resources will be required. Thus, it is essential to establish valuable connections and create outside relationships such as those outside their small social and professional circles (Elfring and Hulsink, 2003; 2007). A start-up's vitality, development and resource capacity are highly dependent on its entrepreneurs' capacity to build and manage formal and informal networks (Birley, 1985). The resources received via entrepreneurial relationships are frequently acquired as a group as opposed to alone. The initial layer of resources consists of elements that are widely known, such as economic resources, social resources, knowledge and potential identification, new consumers and channels and globalisation (Coviello, 2006). The next layer is wider than the initial one and relates to human capital, which gives connectivity to additional assets (Coviello and Cox, 2006). In addition, network relationships make organisations susceptible to unanticipated developments in the market, for example, if one player in the network chooses to leave and stop fulfilling their responsibilities, which might have negative effects on the start-up (Hung, 2006). Such weaknesses may also lead to free-riding issues based on the assumptions of mutual trade and relationship duties (McDougall, Shane and Oviatt, 1994).

Nowiński and Rialp (2016) outline that, when start-ups grow, their networking increases in scope, scale and proximity to other entities in the large network, which assists them in gaining market awareness. Also, a rise in proximity occurs as a result of the varying skills and capital requirements of growing start-ups. Similarly, Coviello and Cox (2006) believe that there are three distinct activities for acquiring resources that correlate to the main phases of the entrepreneurship process. The authors outline that the three phases are conception, commercialisation and growth. The first activity is mobilisation, which entails accessibility to or the capacity to use a commodity without ownership and risk transfer (Coviello and Cox, 2006). The second action is an acquisition, which involves acquiring or incorporating resources via networking at risk (Coviello and Cox, 2006). Lastly, the third activity for leveraging a resource is referred to as growth and is characterised by a circumstance in which network contacts do not immediately offer a resource but rather stimulate resource creation and serve as accelerators for growth and expansion (Coviello and Cox, 2006).

Coviello and Cox (2006) further posit that in these phases, resources are created via networking actions and their patterns will vary based on the economic scenario described by the three activities. In the first phase, which is referred to as the conceptual phase, the resources are received via networking relationships and exhibited by operational competencies and skills, as well as technology capacities acquired through mobilisation (Coviello and Cox, 2006). The commercialisation phase is characterised by the procurement of competent social capital via network connections to enable future development and the purchase of public finance (Coviello and Cox, 2006). When a start-up enters the last phase, which is the growth phase, it reaffirms the requirement for venture capital for commercialisation and expanding consumer networks. More human and venture capital is created via a company's entrepreneur's network, and it is more prominent within the company itself (Coviello and Cox, 2006).

When developing the components of entrepreneurial networking, it is essential to comprehend their influence on new companies and experimentally evaluate the efficacy of resource procurement and distribution (Hung, 2006). Duration and regularity of contact with current and new collaborators are acknowledged as the most crucial factors in network growth and maintenance (Hung, 2006). The extent of interconnectivity, the accessibility of formal and informal networks, the entrepreneurial spirit in leveraging social interactions, the capability to assign duties between many network actors, the provision of strong connections and the designation of a member in the network are some of the additional factors that are involved

when entrepreneurs acquire resources through the networking process and by establishing and leveraging networks (Hoang and Antoncic, 2003).

In addition, RDT is based on an explanation that describes how the business's requirement to obtain information sources will influence the behaviour of a start-up firm (Pfeffer and Salancik, 1978). The authors further state that this notion posits that a company's requirement for materials and resources leaves it reliant on foreign resource suppliers. Therefore, the start-up's survival depends on receiving assets from multiple players in the external market context, such as government public funds, venture capitalists, banks or other such industry players (Sofie et al., 2017). Also, early-stage companies often lack adequate internal assets to ensure their effective appearance and expansion (Davila, Foster and Gupta, 2003). Therefore, relying on external players' resources is a good strategy for entrepreneurs. This dependency occurs when the start-up or the entrepreneur lacks internal control over all of the circumstances required again to accomplish an activity (Pfeffer and Salancik, 1978).

In addition, Pfeffer and Salancik (1978) discovered that managing internal interactions offers several advantages to the organisation. The authors mention that it is possible to gather knowledge on another organisation's operations, such as expenses, pricing and organisational intent. Pfeffer and Salancik (1978) also outline that acquiring access to fresh data on an associated company is possible. Furthermore, an efficient foundation for securing the cooperation of externally significant players may be established and these connections can assist businesses in establishing their authenticity. Using the resource dependency view, Sofie et al. (2017) discovered indications of the significance of social networks in handling unpredictability for businesses. In establishing contact between people, they say that 'the more a person gets entangled in the social networks of the other person such that crossovers in social contacts and other professional contacts, the more reliable and foreseeable their connection will be' (Pfeffer and Salancik, 1978). Similarly, it is primarily greatly applicable to women's entrepreneurship, given the challenges women face in obtaining resources such as venture capital from internal and external sources.

The current study constructs the reasoning that women entrepreneurs' network ties grow during the initial stages of a firm's growth and that they utilise network ties to discuss distinct resource dependency at every phase of the company's current advancement method while beginning their business and obtaining venture capital. In acquiring resources, the female entrepreneur serves as the major central actor who relies on the assets of other players in the global setting (Manolova et al., 2007). Therefore, an analysis of the entrepreneur's behaviour

in gathering and organising the necessary resources is needed to comprehend the company's current entrepreneurial activity in the early phases of its development (Semrau and Werner, 2012). As noted in the preceding section, organisational scholars believe that the organisation strives to cultivate links with people who hold the necessary assets and that it is crucial for them to create formal and informal networks depending on the nature of their interactions with the individuals in the large network (Pfeffer and Salancik, 1978). In this context, entrepreneurship researchers have highlighted the importance of formal and informal networks, particularly in developing and growing new businesses (Williams and Vorley, 2014). Entrepreneurs in the early stages of business development may employ ego networks to handle shifting resource requirements (Semrau and Werner, 2012). Consequently, the present study emphasises the significance of formal and informal network connections for women entrepreneurs in the MENA region to access and obtain essential resources (venture capital) from other players during the early phases of growth. The above discussion has also explained that, to obtain resources (venture capital), it is important to focus on formal and informal networks.

2.10 Venture Capitalism and Entrepreneurship

Entrepreneurship is a business with rising profits; however, other factors drive entrepreneurship (Ribeiro-Soriano, 2017). Many researchers, such as Samila and Sorenson (2011), Tian (2011) and Keuschnigg and Nielsen (2003), have outlined that venture capital is one of the important aspects that drive entrepreneurship as it allows entrepreneurs to grow and develop their start-ups.

Venture capital is a popular kind of financing that has been shown to be an effective method for encouraging the formation and expansion of new businesses (Hellmann and Puri, 2000). Venture capital is used not only to make investments in companies' stocks but also to deliver value-added solutions for the progress of companies and to look for decent profits on those investments (Hellmann and Puri, 2000). In a broad sense, the value-added solutions of venture capital involve not just a set of managerial advisory services, such as business operations, high-level manpower substitutes and post-financing, which are supplied by venture capitalists but also help businesses with their business financing expertise and interpersonal connections to conquer obstacles, build organisational worth and offer additional assistance (de Bettignies and Brander, 2007). Numerous articles, such as those by Gompers and Lerner (2006), Engel and Keilbach (2007) and Hellmann and Puri (2002), have empirically examined the influence of venture capital aspects on firm-level performance, demonstrating that venture

capitalism enables start-ups to flourish financially and assist in regional socioeconomic development.

The purpose of venture capital funding is to back young companies with strong growth rates that have the potential to become economically significant (Bertoni, Colombo and Grilli, 2011). Similarly, Lerner and Nanda (2020) mention that venture capitalists invest capital in start-ups in return for a share in those firms and, in most cases, play a vital role in the companies' development and expansion. Since it may be difficult for many new businesses to obtain finance from traditional sources, venture capital plays a crucial part in the entrepreneurial process. Bewayo (2010) also mentions that many start-ups do not have enough of a history or assets to qualify for bank loans, and they may not be profitable enough to interest institutional investors. Seed, early-stage and growth-stage enterprises are the usual targets of venture capital investment. Potential industry disruptors may be working on groundbreaking new goods or technology, expanding into untapped markets or pursuing other creative company methods. Typically, venture investors will put capital into a company if it has a capable leadership team, a promising business model and a proven strategy for turning a profit (Bertoni, Colombo and Grilli, 2011). To assist business owners, develop their ventures and get through the difficulties inherent in a company's infancy, these organisations may also provide guidance, mentorship and chances to connect with other start-ups. In order to keep their investors happy and secure more capital, entrepreneurs who seek venture capital funding must be willing to collaborate closely with their investors (MacMillan, Kulow and Khoylan, 2022). Venture capitalists have high standards for the businesses in which they invest, and they may demand frequent updates on the companies' growth, financial predictions and other data. Even though venture capital is a great way for new businesses to get off the ground, it is not without its share of dangers and downsides. When seeking venture capital investment, entrepreneurs should be aware that they may be asked to give up some control of the firm and be expected to show rapid expansion and financial success (Gu, Qian and Lu, 2018). As a corollary, venture capital organisations may be quite picky about the companies they sponsor, making it difficult for many businesses to obtain financing.

Also, entrepreneurs and venture capitalists may learn much from one another (De Clercq et al., 2006). For example, the authors outline that, if business owners are already involved in the industry, for example, if they are investors, workers, middlemen such as legal professionals and network operators or the broader financial industry, then they are likely to be informed about the entrepreneurship method as well as what techniques, funding, assistance and exit

processes it necessitates, allowing the entrepreneurs to seek financial support and expand in the marketplace. Conventional venture capitalists specialising in the early financing stage, such as start-up financing and initial growth wealth, are frequently required to work with skilled but unfamiliar business owners (Timmons and Bygrave, 1986). In addition to providing funding, the capacity of the venture capitalist to convey crucial expertise and skills may be crucial to the company's performance or perhaps even longevity (Cable and Shane, 1997).

From a company's standpoint, the capacity to deliver value-added services is a more crucial selection factor than its readiness to finance the company (Mike, 1998). In this regard, MacMillan, Kulow and Khoylian (2022) mention that operations attracting the maximum level of venture capitalists' participation and empowering them to ascertain their selection requirements are those representing a sounding panel for entrepreneurs, assisting companies in obtaining additional means of raising capital, interacting with the investment company, assessing financial surveillance results, supervising operating efficiency and assisting companies in fitting their investment criteria (Cable and Shane, 1997; Cope, Cave and Eccles, 2004). Thus, it can be concluded that venture capital encourages entrepreneurial activity, particularly during the growth and development of new enterprises.

In the context of venture capital, research shows that interpersonal relationships within the sector may aid in gaining entry to the business and obtaining positive perceptions and financing choices from venture capitalists (Cable and Shane, 1997). In the first round of strategic planning evaluation, interpersonal networks may give funders extra knowledge and trust in the entrepreneurs and the venture's potential (Cable and Shane, 1997). Having a connection who can advocate for the entrepreneur may boost the venture capitalist's trust in the entrepreneur's abilities and prospects, hence reducing the amount of ambiguity in the financing choice (Cope, Cave and Eccles, 2004).

However, the relationship between venture capitalism and entrepreneurship shows a significant difference when it comes to the gender of the entrepreneur. A discussion regarding how the relationship differs based on the gender of the entrepreneur is presented in the following section.

2.10.1 Gender, Venture Capitalism and Entrepreneurship

Venture capitalists have a crucial influence on the financial success of companies founded and managed by men or women (Greene et al., 2001). One issue that arises in connection with the function of venture capitalists is the gendered divide that occurs within the

context of their contribution to start-up businesses (Malmström, Johansson and Wincent, 2017). While women's job roles and career opportunities vary from men's in various sectors (Goldin et al., 2017), the gender gap is particularly pronounced in venture capital-backed entrepreneurship (Brush et al., 2017). According to Levine and Rubinstein (2017), just 28% of the self-employed are female. Furthermore, recent statistics by Bittner and Lau (2021) show that in 2019, 2.8% of venture capital flowed to women-led companies; by 2020, that percentage dropped to 2.3%, which was already low and further reduced. These statistics show that there is a huge gender disparity that exists in terms of backing firms that women entrepreneurs lead. A growing body of literature, including studies by Becker-Blease and Sohl (2007), Gompers et al. (2022), Malmström et al. (2018) and Brush et al. (2017), provide evidence of the disparity that may point to gender disparities when venture capitalists provide funding to entrepreneurs.

Women face multiple additional barriers that make it more difficult for them to access venture financing for entrepreneurship (Levine and Rubinstein, 2017). This is especially true in countries such as the United States, where the bulk of venture capital is located in a small number of locations and where males have traditionally predominated in the venture capital business (Levine and Rubinstein, 2017). According to studies, male-led firms are more likely to acquire investment than female-led ones, even if the proposals are exactly the same. This is a major issue in the venture capital sector and is sometimes referred to as the gender financing gap (Raina, 2017). In reality, research has found that just a tiny percentage of venture capital is allocated each year to firms run by women. For a variety of reasons, women may have a harder time securing start-up financing. Investing professionals' latent prejudices may be to blame (Raina, 2017). Since the majority of venture capitalists are male, it is possible that they are more inclined to support other males, since research shows that people tend to prefer persons who are similar to themselves (Tinkler et al., 2015). Women are underrepresented in the start-up environment, making it more challenging for them to make connections and access resources.

Women may additionally suffer subtler types of bigotry and discrimination on top of these structural obstacles. For instance, Tinkler et al. (2015) mention that investors may ask different questions of female and non-binary business owners than they do of male business owners, particularly questions that place a greater emphasis on risk and possible drawbacks. It might be more challenging for women and non-binary people to portray their enterprises in a good way, which can result in lower values and less favourable conditions. Several programmes have been started in recent years to help female business owners obtain the capital they need

to succeed in the face of the gender funding gap (Lins and Lutz, 2016). Among the most successful methods has been the development of accelerators and incubators that target the needs of entrepreneurs from underrepresented groups. Women company owners may have access to capital, coaching and other resources via these programmes, allowing them to establish strong companies and break through some of the hurdles they may encounter in the conventional venture capital market (Lins and Lutz, 2016).

The lack of venture capital funding for women entrepreneurs has been attributed to three main causes. One of them is structural barriers, or the nature of the institutional venture capital environment (Bygrave, 1992), which does not allow them to overcome these structures to achieve successful outcomes. The second reason is human capital, or the accumulated knowledge and skills of the individuals at the helm of entrepreneurial firms (Becker, 1964). The third is strategic choice, or the options entrepreneurs face when deciding how to expand their businesses (Churchill and Lewis, 1983). There have been several studies since then looking at women business owners and other forms of finance, but very few looking specifically at venture capital (Jennings and Brush, 2013). The majority of research that compares male and female entrepreneurs suggests that women often need less capital to get going (Alsos, Isaksen and Ljunggren, 2006; Coleman and Robb, 2012). There is evidence that female entrepreneurs are less likely to use external funding equity and that, when they do, they tend to raise less capital (Coleman and Robb, 2012). In this regard, Roomi, Harrison and Beaumont-Kerridge (2009) have found that women, in particular in the venture capital sector, are less likely to build wealth than males because they lack the same opportunities to amass and invest in social capital. There is a significant gender gap in the amount of private investment received by female entrepreneurs compared to their male counterparts; however, this gap has narrowed as more information has become available, notably on government financing opportunities (Gicheva and Link, 2013). Other studies demonstrate that women in rural or economically depressed regions have a harder time securing venture capital due to differences in race and ethnicity (Rubin 2010). Investors prefer pitches delivered by males, even when the substance of the pitch is the same, according to research on men and women pitching that included three studies testing the impact of gender (Brooks et al. 2014). Furthermore, physical beauty matters for men but not for women (Brooks et al. 2014). More precisely, a second study of venture presentations reaches different conclusions, finding that the gender of the entrepreneur does not affect investor preference for the company but that

gender does, with systemic prejudices against women and ability in business being linked to men.

There is a consensus among researchers of venture capital financing for start-ups that women entrepreneurs encounter specific prejudices based on their gender while making pitches. The research has been shockingly consistent in finding that venture capitalists are biased against the female gender, whether it be in the types of negative questions that are asked by venture capitalists after pitching or the negative opinions venture capitalists have in general of women entrepreneurs (Kanze et al., 2018). Women are equally likely as males to launch businesses in sectors such as high technology and biotech, according to a recent study (Brush et al., 2017). However, it seems that there is a large gap in the number of male and female venture capital investors, which may be causing difficulties for women entrepreneurs. As a general rule, it is considered that women entrepreneurs are more likely to prioritise work–life balance when creating their businesses, and so the term ‘lifestyle enterprise’ has become synonymous with female entrepreneurs (Jennings and McDougald, 2007). Scholars, in the meantime, have pointed out how conflicts between job and family life hamper development and put a damper on women entrepreneurs’ options (Cooper and Dunkleberg, 1986). It is often considered that women who establish businesses do so for reasons relating to their families, which is therefore assumed to limit their chances of success (Powell and Eddleston, 2013). Since women are socialised to prioritise community and family above careers, the assumption remains that female business owners are not interested in making a profit (Koenig et al., 2011). Yet, women who are looking to expand their businesses by pitching to investors are often seen as displaying male characteristics (Carli, 2010). Research on women business owners and their motivations for starting companies has shown some interesting differences between the aspirations of male and female entrepreneurs. Female entrepreneurs are just as eager as their male counterparts to obtain venture capital investment. Given the evidence that venture capitalists favour ‘masculine’ founders, businesses catering to women may see renewed attention from male investors (Malmström, et al., 2017; Balachandra et al., 2019). Male entrepreneurs more closely conform to the socially constructed stereotype of the successful entrepreneur and may be conferred higher status for the venture because they are more likely to be the ones to have played a significant role in a firm’s successful performance (Gupta et al., 2018). This raises the fascinating possibility that, with a man in the entrepreneur’s seat, male investors may be persuaded to overlook their inherent prejudices against businesses catering to women. As a result of their lower performance expectations for female-focused

products/services, male investors may consider initiatives that target women's markets as having limited growth potential (Tyebjee and Bruno, 1984).

The gender of the entrepreneur and the level of interest shown by investors have hitherto been the only focus of venture capital decision-making literature (Brush et al., 2017; Malmström, et al., 2017; Balachandra et al., 2019). However, a new mechanism for gender bias in venture capital financing may be found by looking beyond the gender of the particular person and instead examining contextual norms produced by gender imbalances in the venture capital business. Given that women are more likely to establish businesses with a focus on serving women, women entrepreneurs may have a harder time getting the attention of the predominantly male decision-makers who control the bulk of venture capital investment. The financing process is supposedly a reasonable economic procedure based on financial performance factors, since venture capitalists defend their decisions with market analyses and industry-specific knowledge (Franke et al., 2006). Male venture capitalists place a higher importance on the male gender than the female gender when making investment decisions, both in terms of the venture's target market and its management. There is a bias towards male founding teams being more competent (Foschi et al., 1994).

So, there have also been initiatives to educate investors about unconscious prejudice and to encourage more inclusive investing practices, in addition to these programmes. For instance, several venture capital firms now mandate that no less than a certain proportion of their portfolio businesses should be run by women (Meles et al., 2021). This has the potential to expand opportunities for underrepresented groups and contribute to greater diversity in the sector. One effective strategy has been to actively recruit more women into the investment industry to lessen the effects of unconscious prejudice and make the start-up ecosystem more welcoming to everyone, thereby increasing diversity in terms of the individuals making funding choices (Meles et al., 2021).

Some investigations have compared male and female entrepreneurs and the results have continuously shown that women prefer to start with lower levels of start-up finance (Coleman and Robb, 2012; Leitch, Welter and Henry, 2018). Women entrepreneurs are much less prone to leverage additional capital assets (Bruin, Brush and Welter, 2006). Whenever they do, they collect smaller capital (Coleman and Robb, 2012; Hechavarria et al., 2019). Women entrepreneurs are substantially less likely to attract capital enterprise, although the disparity is much less obvious when additional details, particularly government financing knowledge, are accessible (Hechavarria et al., 2019).

Women entrepreneurs face difficulties in raising funds because they are more likely to be responsible for caring for children and maintaining the household than men, creating a severe discord between their professional and personal responsibilities (Guzman and Kacperczyk, 2019). As a first point, venture capitalists may be more prone to unfavourable preconceptions regarding women and biased assumptions might significantly hinder women when trying to obtain finance (Guzman and Kacperczyk, 2019). Given that women are underrepresented in the start-up environment, every case of a women entrepreneur in a high-growth business is likely to stand out and prompt speculation about the owner's general suitability or competency. To put it another way, women are often seen as less qualified or less genuine entrepreneurs because they are so out of the norm in the business world (Gorbatai et al., 2019).

Additional inclinations to underfund female start-ups may result from investors' inclinations for similar gender, resemblance and in-group selection, based on the notion that people seek to interact socially with those who share prominent sociodemographic features (Pherson, Smith-Lovin and Cook, 2001). Given that venture capitalists are largely men (BeckerBlease and Sohl, 2007; Bittner and Lau, 2021; Gompers et al., 2022), resemblance attachment, interpersonal attraction and in-group prejudices will result in a larger extent of interpersonal and group communication or increased likeability and interest (Goldberg, 2005) among male venture capitalists and male entrepreneurs and vice versa, thereby growing the likelihood of ambitious financing in male-led start-up companies (Malmström et al., 2020). Consequently, irrespective of the real effectiveness of women-led start-ups, the misconceptions affiliated with entrepreneurial activities and priorities for interpersonal attraction will produce supplemental differences among start-ups led by men and women entrepreneurs, resulting in lower percentages of venture capital offers for women entrepreneurs (Malmström et al., 2020).

In addition, the debate shows that networks play a crucial role in securing venture capital for women when they confront uncertainties in obtaining it (Alakaleek and Cooper, 2018). It is common knowledge that social and personal relationships and reliable recommendations are key, if not major, acquisition-generating tools for many of the most successful venture capitalists. Substantial adverse selection among entrepreneurs and venture capitalists may explain the dependence on social contacts and networks (Lim and Cu, 2012). However, a large dependence on reputable recommendations may also favour those with closer ties to capitalists (Thies et al., 2019). Since most venture capitalists are men, interpersonal attraction in socialising might have a severe negative effect on women if entrepreneurs cannot

communicate with venture capitalists of their gender without a recommendation (Gompers et al., 2022).

Women face a number of obstacles that might make it more difficult for them to acquire venture capital for entrepreneurship, and this is just one example of how gender plays a key part in the process overall. It is likely that the gender financing gap may be narrowed or removed altogether with ongoing effort, and there are now a number of efforts under work to address these challenges and promote diverse founders (Lins and Lutz, 2016). It is possible to create an environment in which all entrepreneurs, regardless of gender, have access to the resources and support they need to turn their ideas into successful businesses and in which investors can recognise and invest in the best ideas, regardless of who is presenting them, by creating a start-up ecosystem that is more inclusive and equitable (Myres, Anastacia and Kele Tumo, 2017). Diversifying the start-up community and closing the gender financing gap would boost innovation and economic development for everyone.

Regarding the above discussion, structures and institutions can play a significant role in encouraging or limiting women entrepreneurs' opportunities while developing and growing their start-ups. Also, it can be observed that women entrepreneurs are facing many challenges regarding entrepreneurship and funding and other related elements. It is significant to provide a brief and critical discussion of women's entrepreneurship to understand its characteristics and success factors, which is presented in the following section. Also, a better and more detailed understanding of women's entrepreneurship would help and guide in the development of a strategy for women entrepreneurs to obtain venture capital while developing and growing start-ups.

2.11 Professional Networking and Venture Capital

2.11.1 Role of Networks in Securing Venture Capital

The term 'venture capital' refers to a specific form of funding that is typically given to new businesses with a high probability of success (Hegeman and Sørheim, 2021). Venture capital can provide the required financing to get start-ups off the ground and growing (Bertoni, Colombo and Grilli, 2011). However, obtaining start-up capital can be a difficult and cutthroat procedure (Hegeman and Sørheim, 2021). Start-ups can improve their chances of receiving venture capital funding by taking advantage of their networks. The process of obtaining venture capital can benefit greatly from the use of networks (Gu, Luo and Liu, 2019). Contacts to prospective investors are important and companies can use their personal and professional networks to find connections to venture funders and angel investors (Gu, Luo and Liu, 2019).

Start-ups can meet prospective funders and build relationships at networking events, seminars and incubator programmes. It is often said that the individuals behind a concept are just as important as the idea itself when it comes to funding (Meles et al., 2021). Having a solid network and a proven track record of successful relationship building with donors can be significant advantages when trying to raise capital (Tinkler et al., 2015). Social evidence is another way that networks can influence the venture capital funding process. Start-ups with ties to well-known figures in their field or established business owners can increase their trustworthiness in the eyes of potential investors (Xiao, 2020). The recommendations of well-respected people or groups can be useful in generating investment trust, and having a network that can vouch for the quality of the company and its team can be a significant benefit, as investors are often looking for powerful teams with a demonstrated track record of success (Wang et al., 2022). A potent instrument for obtaining start-up funding is referrals. An investor's interest in a company can be piqued by a recommendation from someone in their network. When compared to more conventional methods of persuasion, referrals can help to quickly gain the trust of the target audience (Venkatesh et al., 2017). A start-up's product or service can also be validated by networks. Investors are more likely to back a start-up that has a solid network of customers, partners, or industry experts who can attest to the quality of the start-up's product or service. Buyers want to know that there is a market for the offering and that the company has a strategy for expansion. A start-up's strategy can be fine-tuned to better satisfy the requirements of its target consumers with the assistance of networks, which can offer insightful information about market demand (Cho et al., 2020). Hence, networks play a crucial part in obtaining venture capital financing. Entrepreneurs should take advantage of their existing personal and professional networks to create relationships, build credibility, acquire new customers and prove their products' viability in the markets (Nordin et al., 2018). In the cutthroat world of venture capital funding, having a solid network can be a game-changer. Start-ups can improve their odds of successfully raising venture capital by establishing and maintaining fruitful connections with investors, consumers and specialists in their field.

2.11.2 Networking of Women Entrepreneurs

Multiple studies on the management of women-owned companies have stressed the significance of networks to the development of private companies (Aldrich and Elam, 1997; Alakaleek and Cooper, 2018). It has been proposed that the methods by which men and women construct and utilise their connections and networks impact the overall efficiency of the administrative function (Aldrich and Elam, 1997). This might entail the capacity to acquire and

sustain economic assistance and excellent ties with venture capitalists to obtain venture capital (Birley, 1985). This viewpoint is highly influenced by research on entrepreneurship networking, which has demonstrated that the success of a corporation is strongly proportional to the quantity and strength of external ties among the company and its environment. Insufficient study has been conducted on the effect of gender on the networking activity of women entrepreneurs, and the matter remains controversial (Birley, 1985). Due to the continuous disagreement over the relative influence of networking activities on the performance of small businesses in general and female-owned businesses specifically, studies have yet to even formulate a sufficient starting premise for research (Brush et al., 2010). This debate has emerged largely due to inconsistent advice in the research literature, which has independently examined the effect of gender in networking.

Female entrepreneurs must network extensively and therefore should give networking a higher priority than male entrepreneurs (Rosa and Hamilton, 1994). However, an earlier study by Aldrich and Elam (1997) indicates that women have a lower degree of networking than males, which is a concern for their early-stage development. Despite the need for more research in this area, an understanding has evolved of certain elements of the networking problem as a result of the many studies that have examined gender differences in networking activities. Women are more likely to have networks consisting solely of another women (Aldrich and Elam, 1997). Multiple entities bring information and capital into a societal space, and they do this mostly through networking (Churchill et al., 1987). They play an important part in the entrepreneurial process by expediting the provision of critical resources to start-ups and the distribution of information about such enterprises. It is expected that participating in networking practices would make obtaining venture capital easier (Howell and Nanda, 2019). Researchers have shown that males often have more business experience compared to women prior to founding a company, despite having comparable academic qualifications (Howell and Nanda, 2019). This may be because male company owners are much more likely to network via official channels, such as organisations of trade and commerce, while female business owners depend more on informal networks, such as word-of-mouth, family and acquaintances (Williams and Vorley, 2014).

Women entrepreneurs can participate in both official and casual networks to develop their companies, receive exposure to new ideas and access tools that can help them grow and thrive (Davis, 2012). Official networks are those that are ordered and regulated, such as professional groups, industry-specific organisations, or unions of trade (Rosenbaum, 2017).

These networks provide women's businesses with access to industry-specific information, mentoring and training opportunities (Davis, 2012). As opposed to their official counterparts, informal networks are usually more spontaneous and relationship-based (Rosenbaum, 2017). Online communities and social media organisations are just two of the many ways to expand a network (Ukpere, Slabbert and Ukpere, 2014). Informal networks are a great resource for women business owners and they can be found in a variety of settings, including in-person get-togethers, membership in neighbourhood organisations and internet discussion forums (Spring, 2009). Women business owners have a special chance to network, learn about their clients' wants and needs and gain access to new markets and ideas through informal networks (Leitch, Welter and Henry, 2018). It is crucial for women business owners to approach networking with a specific objective in mind, whether they participate in official or casual networks. Networking can be time-consuming, so it is essential to establish particular objectives and results that they expect to accomplish through their networking efforts (Nordin et al., 2018). This might include developing connections with prospective clients or collaborators, seeking out guidance or counsel from seasoned businesses or simply extending their knowledge and comprehension of their field. By tackling networking with a clear goal, women entrepreneurs can make the most of their time and effort and eventually achieve better success in their companies (Surangi, 2014).

The networking challenges of women entrepreneurs require more research, although it is reasonable to conclude that networks are essential to entrepreneurship. Consequently, studies of networks and economic operations cannot ignore the involvement of formal and informal networks, which are interwoven with gender to varying extents that can impact accessibility to venture capital while developing start-ups.

2.11.3 Women Entrepreneurial Networks for Increased Venture Capital

The relation between the entrepreneur's network and the company's network, particularly in the initial advancement stages of a company, reveals a second dichotomy in the tier of assessment within entrepreneurs' network-based research (Hite and Hesterly, 2001). In actuality, network participants and their behaviours are frequently viewed as interconnected (Aldrich and Elam, 1997). In addition, in human engagement, people often have mixed incentives and, as a result, operate in methods that are challenging to characterise from the perspective of simple self-interest, as they seek numerous financial and interpersonal ends concurrently in their interactions (Brass et al., 2004). Given that the entrepreneur operates on behalf of their own business or as a representative of the firm, particularly during the emerging

phase, this is not notably unexpected (Churchill et al., 1987). Consequently, the entrepreneur frequently utilises their interpersonal relationships to gain the required assets for the establishment and development of a profitable business (Granovetter, 1983). This relationship and convergence between the entrepreneur's network and the firm's network are proved by several entrepreneurial studies, which have discovered that the commercial environment is heavily centred on the entrepreneur's activities (Jack, 2010).

Consistent with prior research (Coviello, 2006; Coviello and Cox, 2006) on the entrepreneurship network, the present study emphasises the analysis of the networks of female entrepreneurs at different levels as they continue to develop their firms by themselves. During entrepreneurship activities, this research explores women entrepreneurs' engagement in the network of interactions in their surrounding factors (Hassan, Ramli and Desa, 2014). In a study on start-up companies, Birley (1985) suggests that the network is based on primary justifications, such as an enterprising company, which is necessary to acquire assets from foreign factors, and entrepreneurs often obtain these assets via their social contacts.

According to studies on women in business, financial resources for women entrepreneurs come mostly from official and informal investors (Ho and Pollack, 2014). Venture capital is an example of a formal resource, whereas founder financing from close friends and family is more typical of the information resources that make up entrepreneurship (Malmström, Johansson and Wincent, 2017). For female entrepreneurs just getting started, it is crucial to realise that informal financing sources provide the bulk of their first capital (Malmström et al., 2020). However, as these women work to expand their businesses, they will need access to more formal funding sources, such as venture capital (Brush et al., 2004).

Among the most crucial aspects is how these women rely on specific investment structures for recommendations to potential investors for their businesses, as well as using existing professional networks to gain access to investors. Women business entrepreneurs have a difficult time connecting. Women's business ambitions may greatly benefit from networking, if done correctly and with a proper plan.

2.11.4 Barriers for Women Entrepreneurs to Obtain Venture Capital

Various factors play a crucial role for women entrepreneurs to obtain venture capital. For example, Nasir, Iqbal and Akhtar (2019) conducted their research in context of Pakistan and identified that political considerations play a significant role for women entrepreneurs' access to venture capital. States can adopt policies and initiatives that promote female

entrepreneurship in the business environment, such as scholarships, loans and tax benefits (Ahmad, 2011). However, Hasan and Saeed (2016) outline that, even though such policies exist, governmental considerations can also work against women entrepreneurs, as government policies and laws may restrict their access to financing or make it more difficult to start and expand their companies. It is not only political elements; Hasan and Saeed (2016) outline that the ability of women businesses to acquire venture capital may be enhanced or hampered by legal restrictions. Rules around entrepreneurship and gender bias can restrict women entrepreneurs' ability to start and expand their companies (Cho et al., 2020). In addition, a dearth of formal security can make it harder for women business owners to obtain financing or safeguard their personal property (Alakaleek and Cooper, 2018). One of the major concerns related to obtaining venture capital is the economic aspect related to funding, market conditions and other economic aspects for women entrepreneurs (Orser, Riding and Manley, 2006; Muravyev, Talavera and Schäfer, 2009). While economic development and advantageous market circumstances can provide chances for women's businesses to access venture capital, economic downturns or market changes can make it more challenging for them to obtain financing (Muravyev, Talavera and Schäfer, 2009). In addition, because investors may favour companies they consider to be less prone to loss, economic inequities and biases can make it more difficult for women entrepreneurs to obtain financing (Leitch, Welter and Henry, 2018). As outlined before, informal networks primarily supported by the evidence of social media can also help women entrepreneurs to obtain venture capital. In this regard, mentioned that By opening up new avenues for financing and invention, technological developments can have an effect on how easily women's businesses can obtain venture capital. For instance, new methods of crowdsourcing and digital donations have been made possible by technological developments, making it easier for women to access capital (Roig-Tierno et al., 2015; Alva, Vivas and Urcia, 2021). However, women business owners may face additional obstacles due to technological factors. This is especially true for those who may not have ready access to cutting-edge technologies or who may not have extensive professional networks in the tech sector (Sundermeier, Wessel and Davidson, 2018; Raman et al., 2022). Even though women are up to date with technological developments and knowledge, social norms and factors can play a significant role for them to obtain venture capital. As outlined by Setini et al. (2020) and Shastri et al. (2022), women founders' chances of securing venture funding can be significantly impacted by a variety of social and societal variables, including but not limited to gender norms and traditional views towards women in business. Investors may view women founders as less capable or eager due to stereotypes and prejudices, which can affect their ability to obtain

financing (Gu, Qian and Lu, 2018). Women may also encounter societal obstacles that prevent them from accessing the networks and tools necessary to launch a thriving company. One major societal element that effects women businesses' access to financing is gender bias (Malmström et al., 2020). These prejudices are widespread and can lead to investors viewing women entrepreneurs as less capable, eager or creative than their male peers (Malmström et al., 2020). This impression can influence their ability to obtain financing, as investors may be less likely to engage with women-led companies or may give smaller investment sums. Perceptions can also have a self-fulfilling prophesy effect because they can make women business owners feel less secure or less willing to take chances (Mattis, 2004). Women's access to start-up funding may also be impacted by cultural views towards female businesses. Women may find it more difficult to access networks, tools or other resources that are crucial to their success in some societies or sectors where there is a history of underrepresentation (Cho et al., 2020). In such situations, investors may have restricted exposure to women-driven companies and may be more inclined to engage in businesses headed by males. In addition, women may encounter societal obstacles that prevent them from gaining access to resources and network opportunities (Malmström et al., 2018). For instance, in some societies, women may be under social pressure to put their families first or may be restricted in their movement or access to resources. Lack of a female presence in the business environment is another important social element that can affect women founders' access to venture capital (Neergaard, Shaw and Carter, 2005). Women company owners may find it difficult to launch their ventures and raise capital because they lack access to role models and networks. This dearth of visibility can also generate an impression that women entrepreneurs are a rare group, making it more difficult for them to obtain financing and assistance. It can be observed that there are various factors that do not allow women entrepreneurs easy access to venture capital.

In addition, in the context of the current research, few studies (Laffineur et al., 2018; Puri-Mirza, 2021) have explored how women entrepreneurs face barriers, such as financial barriers, cultural barriers, societal norms and restrictive legal frameworks. Despite significant strides in women's participation in entrepreneurship, women in the MENA countries often encounter gender-based discrimination, both in accessing funding and in gaining the necessary business skills and mentorship. However, much of the existing research has primarily focused on barriers such as financing and legal constraints along with cultural barriers, with less attention given to structural barriers related to networking (Puri-Mirza, 2021). This gap is particularly important, as networking plays a critical role in entrepreneurial success, providing

access to resources, knowledge and opportunities. In many MENA countries, women entrepreneurs face challenges in forming professional networks due to cultural and societal norms that restrict their mobility and interactions in male-dominated business environments. The current research aims to address this gap by exploring how networking, or the lack thereof, impacts the success of women entrepreneurs in the region, highlighting the need for a deeper understanding of structural barriers that influence their business growth.

2.11.5 Overcoming Barriers for Women Entrepreneurs to Obtain Venture Capital

One of the most crucial ways for women entrepreneurs to access venture capital is to participate in networking events. Nowadays, significant growth has been observed in women-only networking events that can be leveraged by women entrepreneurs to obtain venture capital or make relationships with the other entrepreneurs to gain access to various contacts.

There is a connection between women-only network events and advantages in gaining access to start-up funding, both of which can help advance gender equality and variety in the business world (Achor, 2018). In the first place, women-only networking events can provide a welcoming environment in which they can meet other women who are going through the same struggles and experiences (Pini, Brown and Ryan, 2004). Women may feel unwelcome or invisible in more conventional business environments, which can limit their ability to network and forge connections (Forret and Dougherty, 2004). Women-only networking events provide a forum for women to share their experiences, trade resources and find guidance and support (Achor, 2018). The gender disparity in venture capital access can also be addressed through network events for women. Women-led companies are less likely to obtain venture capital financing than male-led businesses (Hasan and Saeed, 2016). Women entrepreneurs may find it easier to connect with female investors at women-only networking events (Pini, Brown and Ryan, 2004). These investors may be more sympathetic to the unique challenges that women entrepreneurs face. This can help to balance the playing field and provide more chances for women to obtain the financing they need to develop their companies. Women-only network events can also help dismantle sexism in the venture capital sector (McAdam, Harrison and Leitch, 2019). Women-only networking events can help to combat these prejudices and boost the exposure and growth of female-led companies by giving women the chance to interact with female financiers (Hein, Kreutzer and Diehl, 2021). This can eventually add to a more varied and open corporate environment. Women-only networking events can lead to the development of a feeling of community and strength among women (Hein, Kreutzer and Diehl, 2021). Women who attend these events have a better chance of developing meaningful connections

with other attendees and developing strong networks of support that can be invaluable as they face the many obstacles that come with being in business.

2.12 Chapter Summary

Emerging from a critical examination of entrepreneurship, venture capitalism and the role of gender in entrepreneurship and venture capitalism, this chapter offered a critical evaluation of the literature relating to women entrepreneurs. This chapter outlined more than just introducing the concept of women's entrepreneurship; it also described the elements that influence women's business success and the entrepreneurs they must overcome. In addition, institutional theory serves as the study's theoretical underpinning, providing insight into the specifics of women's use of formal and informal networks, both of which contribute significantly to the success of their businesses. It also describes the various types of networks that women business owners have, along with other elements of networks that are relevant to this topic (such as network strength, network density, network connectedness and reachability, diversity in networks and network centrality).

Also, the critical review has helped to develop an understanding of how critical networking is for women entrepreneurs if they need access to venture capital and run their businesses. Also, development of a networking framework can develop strong network-related elements that can help women entrepreneurs in the MENA region. The network elements, such as developing strong ties and dense structures, increasing network reach, creating diverse networks and increasing closeness in terms of centrality can be integrated into a networking structure for women entrepreneurs in the MENA region.

3 Chapter 3: Research Methodology

3.1 Chapter Introduction

The principal aim of this study is to develop a network (framework) dedicated to women's entrepreneurship, which would facilitate the establishment of formal and informal networks for women entrepreneurs in the MENA region. The present research is guided by institutional theory, which elucidates the correlation between women entrepreneurs and networking and its association with a networking framework to establish formal and informal networks in the MENA region, aligning with the stated aim. The present research is also informed by resource dependence theory (RDT), which offers insights into the strategies employed by women entrepreneurs in the MENA region to secure venture capital and mobilise resources for their start-up ventures. The present chapter is dedicated to identifying suitable research methods to help develop the study in line with appropriate research assumptions and paradigms based on the research goals and objectives. Furthermore, the chapter expounds upon the justification for opting for an inductive research approach, research methodology and sampling methodology. Furthermore, the present chapter also explains the population sample and sampling technique, along with the methodologies employed for data collection and analysis. The chapter culminates by discussing the trustworthiness of the collected data and the research outcomes, as well as the ethical implications that must be considered.

To achieve effective study outcomes, ensuring that the research questions, prime aim and objectives are appropriately valued is imperative (Lo, Rey-Martí and Botella-Carrubi, 2020). The research methodology is the key factor in establishing a suitable research framework for collecting and analysing data (Lo, Rey-Martí and Botella-Carrubi, 2020). According to Wilson and Creswell (1996), diverse research methodologies, particularly those stemming from distinct paradigms, focus on distinct aspects of reality, thereby facilitating a more comprehensive understanding of a given subject. As per Twycross (2004), the research methodology pertains to the comprehensive strategy a researcher adopts to conduct their investigation. The research method delineates the precise measures and strategies employed to gather and scrutinise data and how the outcomes will be construed (Rouleau et al., 2019). However, the selection of a research methodology is contingent upon the research inquiry and the characteristics of the data being gathered (Rouleau et al., 2019). According to Leavy (2022), the field of research encompasses three distinct research methodologies: qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods. The chosen method is selected by the individual researcher based on the requirements of their study.

According to Hennink, Hutter and Bailey (2020), qualitative research is a methodology that centres on exploring and comprehending the experiences and viewpoints of the participants. Qualitative research is a methodology that involves gathering data that is non-numerical, such as observations, images or words, and subsequently analysing it to identify patterns and themes (Taylor, Bogdan and DeVault, 2015). Quantitative research is a systematic approach to inquiry that emphasises collecting and analysing numerical data to test hypotheses and establish causal relationships (Apuke, 2017). This particular form of research method entails gathering information via surveys, experiments or other systematic approaches to test hypothesis and derive findings. Statistical methodologies are then employed to analyse the data (Jamshed, 2014; Brannen, 2017). Terrell (2012) indicates that mixed-methods research is a research approach that integrates components of both qualitative and quantitative research methodologies. Mixed methods research is frequently employed in cases where the research inquiry is intricate and necessitates a comprehensive understanding of multiple perspectives (Morse, 2016; Schoonenboom and Johnson, 2017). The current research has employed only the qualitative research method, and the justification for this is provided with supporting arguments in the following sections.

3.2 Research Assumptions

According to Hathaway (1995), the preconceived notions that shape a researcher's approach to their research are commonly referred to as their assumptions. Orlikowski and Baroudi (1991) further explain that research assumptions are frequently accepted without scrutiny, despite their possible implications for a research project's design, implementation and analysis. However, to ensure the credibility and reliability of the research outcomes, researchers must be mindful of and acknowledge the underlying assumptions in their research (Mosakowski and Earley, 2000). To elaborate, a solid comprehension of the fundamental assumptions of one's research is imperative for scholars as it enables them to establish a strong theoretical basis for their study (Al-Ababneh, 2020). Goertz and Mahoney (2012) explain that two main research assumptions commonly used by researchers in their studies that help them design their research process and establish a theoretical basis for their research are ontology and epistemology.

According to Hathcoat, Meixner and Nicholas (2019), ontology is a discipline that focuses on the essential nature of reality or existence. Scotland (2012) adds that ontology is an academic discipline that explores the fundamental essence of our beliefs regarding the nature of existence and the determinants that shape the reality of the natural world. According to

Cassar and Bezzina (2015), ontology investigates the fundamental nature of being and the approaches employed to apprehend it. Notably, the development of research questions and the identification of suitable methodologies in any study are impacted by the study's preconceived assumptions regarding the nature of reality (Al-Ababneh, 2020). The ontological assumptions of this research are rooted in social constructivism, which suggests that reality is socially constructed rather than objectively fixed. Networking and entrepreneurship are viewed as dynamic and shaped by individual experiences of male entrepreneurs and women entrepreneurs, cultural influences and institutional structures. The study assumes that multiple realities exist, meaning that each entrepreneur perceives and navigates networking differently based on their gender, background and social environment. This perspective acknowledges that women's entrepreneurial experiences are shaped by societal norms and interactions, making networking a subjective and evolving process rather than a universally defined structure.

Epistemology, on the other hand, studies the origins and acquisition of knowledge (Jessor, Colby and Shweder, 1996). Schommer (1994) defines epistemology as the philosophical study of the origin and evolution of knowledge over time. According to Steup and Neta (2005), epistemology refers to the theoretical foundation and underlying assumptions of data collecting and interpretation. However, researchers must be aware of the study's epistemological assumptions to assess its reliability and validity and ensure that its subjective belief is properly aligned with the desired outcome (Johnson and Duberley, 2000). For example, the current research may have used epistemological assumptions to examine the connotations and importance of networking strategy for women entrepreneurs in the MENA region and interpret knowledge about women's entrepreneurship as subjective and based on individual experiences and perspectives.

However, with an in-depth understanding of the underlying research assumptions and their characteristics, the discussion of assumptions guided the research framework, methodology and data collection approach. The study utilises these assumptions as a means of data collection from individuals based on their experiences (men and women entrepreneurs in the MENA region and their strategies for networking to achieve growth). This approach provided the researcher with detailed insights into the various factors that impact women's entrepreneurship, ultimately guiding the selection of an appropriate research paradigm.

3.3 Research Paradigm

Research paradigms refer to the fundamental theories or perspectives that serve as the basis for a study (Krauss, 2015). The composition of a researcher's preconceptions regarding

the research problem, assumptions concerning the data and ideals about the acquisition and processing of data constitute an integral aspect of the research methodology (Rahi, 2017). An appropriate research paradigm is crucial in developing a cohesive and clear theoretical structure for a research question. The selection of a research paradigm is contingent upon various factors, including the inherent attributes of the research question, the contextual framework and the theoretical and philosophical orientations of the researcher (Mackenzie and Knipe, 2006).

The three commonly used research paradigms include positivism, interpretivism and critical theory (Ryan, 2018). According to Smith, Booth and Zalewski (1996), the theory of positivism is characterised by its dedication to objectivity, empirical evidence and the application of the scientific method. In contrast, the theory of interpretivism prioritises the subjective interpretation of phenomena, the process of logic-making and the role of social construction in shaping reality (Chowdhury, 2014). Lastly, the critical theory paradigm is based on the fundamental principles of social justice, emancipation and the critical analysis of power structures (Strydom, 2011).

Given the subjectivity of current research regarding epistemology, the theory of interpretivism stands out as the most suitable theoretical framework. The theory of interpretivism posits the recognition of the complex and ever-changing nature of the social sphere and that significance is contingent on context and culture (Pham, 2018). Consequently, the theory of interpretivism seeks a comprehensive understanding of individuals' and societies' viewpoints, perspectives and experiences by investigating the context in which they are situated (Pham, 2018). In addition, the theory of interpretivism is especially effective when investigating complex social phenomena that are not easily amenable to measurement or quantification (Nickerson, 2022). A possible critique of the interpretivist method is its inherent subjectivity, since results are often shaped by the researcher's interpretations, complicating the assurance of objectivity and replicability. Moreover, generalisability is constrained since interpretivist research emphasises comprehensive, context-specific insights above wide-ranging, generally applicable findings. Another objection is the possibility of researcher bias, since the researcher's viewpoints and biases may influence data collection and interpretation. Moreover, interpretivism is devoid of established validation procedures, complicating the establishment of dependability and the consistency of conclusions in contrast to positivist approaches that depend on observable and quantifiable data.

Moreover, scholars who adhere to the theory of interpretivism for their research employ qualitative research techniques to gather qualitative data, including verbal expressions, visual

representations and narratives, which encompass various methodologies, such as conducting interviews, organising focus groups, making observations and analysing documents (O'Donoghue, 2006). The methods employed in data collection yield highly detailed information and facilitate a detailed comprehension of the research participants' perspectives and experiences, which presents valuable insights into varied experiences and perspectives within a community or group and in the revelation of intricate social processes that influence these experiences (O'Donoghue, 2006).

However, based on these understandings, the interpretivism paradigm was deemed the most suitable approach in the present study as it prioritises the significance of comprehending the meanings and experiences of individuals and communities within their respective contexts. The research aims to establish a networking framework for women entrepreneurs operating in the MENA region based on detailed perspectives collected from men and women entrepreneurs. This necessitates a detailed comprehension of the social and cultural determinants that influence the encounters and perspectives of women entrepreneurs. The use of the interpretivism paradigm facilitates acknowledging the intricate and ever-changing nature of social phenomena by highlighting the active role of individuals in constructing and interpreting their experiences, which are influenced by their personal values, beliefs and cultural heritage. Furthermore, the paradigm enables the researcher to explore the subjective experiences and perceptions of women and male entrepreneurs in the MENA region and comprehend the environment in which they operate, to meet the aims and objectives of the current research.

Furthermore, it is imperative to expound upon the research approach in addition to the theory of interpretivism as the research paradigm that supports the study's assumptions.

3.4 Research Approach

The process of drawing logical inferences from the research findings and drawing conclusions from those inferences is known as the research approach (Bulte et al., 2006). Inductive and deductive are the two primary research approaches researchers utilise regularly (Gregory and Muntermann, 2011).

According to Pandey (2019), the deductive research approach is a process that begins with a general theory or hypothesis and then proceeds to verify individual predictions or hypotheses by collecting and analysing evidence. This approach calls for the formulation of a theoretical framework or hypothesis, which is subsequently put through a series of empirical

tests to establish its integrity or potential for falsifiability (Pandey, 2019). On the other hand, adopting an inductive research approach entails a different process that begins with particular observations or evidence and then generates comprehensive concepts or hypotheses based on them (Thomas, 2006). This approach differs from deductive research since it begins with specific observations or evidence. The initial step in conducting research is data collection, which entails making observations that are then examined to look for repeatable patterns or trends (Wang, 2008). Alternatively, if the researcher chooses to conduct their investigation using an inductive approach, they can construct a theoretical framework or hypothesis to validate their findings by basing it on the patterns they notice (Woo, O'Boyle and Spector, 2017).

It is important to note that both inductive and deductive research approaches have positive and negative aspects to consider. The deductive research approach is reliable for assessing theories and hypotheses because it enables the researcher to validate or disprove a theory or hypothesis using empirical evidence (Singmann and Klauer, 2011). This makes the deductive research approach valuable for evaluating theories and hypotheses. Because it enables statistical analysis, the application of this method demonstrates the benefits it offers when it comes to constructing and evaluating mathematical models and hypotheses (Singmann and Klauer, 2011). The viability of the deductive research approach may be constrained, depending on the validity of the theory or hypothesis that is being investigated, as well as the quality of the evidence that has been collected (Brisson and Markovits, 2020). On the other hand, conducting research using an inductive approach is considered advantageous because it generates novel ideas and hypotheses supported by facts (Walliman, 2021). The inductive research approach makes it easier for the researcher to quickly recognise patterns and trends within the data, which may be difficult to recognise using other methods (Walliman, 2021). Furthermore, it is important to state that the inductive research approach is particularly suitable for qualitative studies (Hennink, Hutter and Bailey, 2020). With the help of the inductive research approach, the researcher attempts to construct innovative theories or hypotheses grounded on empirical facts (Bougie and Sekaran, 2019). This is because the inductive research approach allows the researcher to make inferences based on the data collected (Bougie and Sekaran, 2019).

The use of an inductive research technique was beneficial for this study, facilitating the examination of women entrepreneurs' networking experiences in the MENA area without the constraints of established theoretical frameworks. Given that networking in entrepreneurship

is influenced by social, cultural and institutional aspects, an inductive technique allowed the researcher to discern developing patterns and themes directly from the participants' experiences instead of evaluating preconceived assumptions. This methodology was appropriate for the qualitative character of the research, as it enabled a comprehensive understanding of how women navigate both formal and informal networks and how these interactions impact their entrepreneurial success.

Nevertheless, despite its advantages, the inductive technique has certain limits. A primary difficulty is subjectivity and possible researcher bias, since data interpretation depends on the researcher's capacity to discern patterns and derive meaning. Furthermore, results from inductive research may exhibit limited generalisability, since they are based on particular participant experiences and cultural settings, complicating the application of conclusions across other geographies or entrepreneurial ecosystems (Walliman, 2021). A further restriction is that the method may be time-intensive and intricate, necessitating meticulous data analysis to guarantee that discoveries are rooted in the participants' viewpoints rather than the researchers' preconceptions.

Due to the lack of previously published material on women entrepreneurs in the MENA region and the absence of well-established theoretical frameworks to direct academic research, the purpose of the present investigation is to address this void in the existing knowledge. Consequently, it was essential to use an inductive research approach to analyse the experiences of women entrepreneurs in the community and construct a theoretical framework that is solidly rooted in reality. In addition, using an inductive approach made it easier to develop a framework tailored to the specific environment in which women entrepreneurs in the MENA area operate while maintaining sensitivity to the unique experiences and points of view these male and female entrepreneurs bring. Because of the diverse cultural, economic and social conditions present in the region, the significance of this subject becomes even more essential. These conditions can influence women entrepreneurs' participation in networking activities and build strong connections.

In addition, the inductive research approach has made it easier to recognise patterns and trends within the data, which may not have been easily discernible through the systematic gathering and analysis of real-world material relating to the experiences of women entrepreneurs working within the MENA area. It has assisted in identifying the significant themes and characteristics that play an important role in successfully encouraging successful networking and growth within this group (O'Kane, Smith and Lerman, 2019).

3.5 Research Method

It is imperative to acknowledge that the selection of a research methodology is contingent upon the research inquiry and the characteristics of the data being gathered (Almalki, 2016). There are primarily three types of research methods that are considered in a research study: qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2009).

Quantitative research gathers and analyses numerical data to evaluate hypotheses and establish causal connections (Rouleau et al., 2019). Creswell (2014) also states that quantitative research is characterised by its emphasis on numerical measurement and statistical analysis to test hypotheses and examine relationships among predefined variables. Quantitative research is generally rooted in a positivist epistemology, and it typically relies on structured instruments, such as standardised questionnaires or surveys, which are administered to large samples in order to ensure representativeness and generalisability (Bloomfield and Fisher, 2019). Researchers working within this paradigm operationalise constructs through precise metrics, apply inferential techniques (for example, regression analysis or structural equation modelling) and seek to establish causal or correlational patterns that can be extrapolated to broader populations (Creswell, 2014). With regard to the current research, quantitative research is not applicable, because the focus of the current research was to explore the ‘how’ aspect rather than the ‘what’ aspect of women’s entrepreneurship. This is also in line with the idea of the current research that needed to explore the cultural barriers, networking challenges, opportunities and the ability to establish trust and navigate other strategies, which is not possible to explore in detail through quantitative research. Gender-based discrimination can be socially sensitive, and in close-ended questionnaires, such as surveys, respondents may underreport or sanitise their experiences, thereby masking key challenges (Creswell, 2014). Pre-formulated survey questions could not have focused in detail on various cultural norms, regulatory barriers, challenges in growing businesses, challenges in establishing businesses and many other findings that are highly context-specific and can only be explored through the subjective views of participants.

Qualitative research is centred on the investigation and comprehension of the viewpoints and encounters of the subjects (Östlund et al., 2011). Denzin and Lincoln (2011) further indicate that qualitative research is an interpretive, naturalistic approach meant to grasp how people build and attribute meaning to their social experiences. Unlike quantitative approaches, which aim to measure variables and verify hypotheses using numerical data, qualitative tactics give priority to deep, contextualised knowledge of participants’ viewpoints and the processes

supporting their actions (Creswell, 2014). Qualitative research usually collects data via document analysis, participant observation, focus groups and semi-structured or unstructured interviews. The qualitative research method allows the researcher to analyse rich and narrative data to explore patterns, themes and emergent theories, reflecting the actual lived reality of the population being explored in the research (Charmaz, 2014). Qualitative research is highly applicable to the current research, as it aims to explore complicated, socially embedded events and ways in which women entrepreneurs in the MENA region build formal and informal networks. Also, it allows the researcher to capture nuanced motivations, cultural norms and relational dynamics that structured instruments might overlook.

The third type of research method, mixed-methods research, is an approach that integrates both qualitative and quantitative research methods to obtain a comprehensive understanding of a particular phenomenon (Rouleau et al., 2019). Mixed research methods can be conducted by following either a sequential explanatory model, wherein quantitative results validate the findings of the qualitative phase or a convergent parallel model, in which both strands are gathered concurrently and then combined at the interpretation stage (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 2003; Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004). While qualitative insights provide the contextual richness required to clarify fundamental processes, advocates of mixed methods say that numerical data may spot general patterns and linkages. This approach might seem relevant to the study, but it is not applicable to the objectives of the research. Because the core aim is to theorise the mechanisms by which women entrepreneurs in the MENA region develop and mobilise networks, allocating substantial effort to quantitative measurement would have limited the concentrated qualitative inquiry needed to generate a nuanced, practitioner-relevant framework.

However, considering the existing literature, the qualitative research methodology was deemed the most suitable option as it adopts an exploratory and inductive approach that prioritises comprehension and interpretation of social phenomena (Brown, 2019). Utilising a qualitative methodology facilitates a thorough understanding of the experiences, challenges and prospects encountered by women entrepreneurs in the area, potentially fostering the establishment of a comprehensive and effective networking infrastructure. Furthermore, the utilisation of the qualitative approach facilitates an in-depth comprehension of the cultural, social and economic determinants that influence the entrepreneurial activities of women in the region (Brown, 2019). This methodology has facilitated the incorporation of diverse perspectives and voices, a crucial aspect of women's entrepreneurship. This is especially

relevant given the considerable variation in women entrepreneurs' experiences and challenges, which can be attributed to their respective social, cultural and economic contexts. It can be asserted that qualitative research was the optimal approach for the present investigation, as it facilitated the researcher's acquisition of a thorough and intricate comprehension of the encounters, obstacles and prospects encountered by women entrepreneurs in the MENA region from the perspectives of male and female entrepreneurs themselves. This knowledge can subsequently be used to construct a comprehensive and efficient networking framework.

In addition, it is crucial to determine the duration of the study by indicating its time horizon (Bigoni et al., 2015). The term 'time horizon' refers to the duration of a study and, depending on the duration of the investigation, it can be classified as either longitudinal or cross-sectional (Bigoni et al., 2015). Researchers conduct longitudinal studies when data is collected over an extended period and additional observations are required at specific intervals (Basu and Maciejewski, 2019). Cross-sectional research is conducted when data is collected simultaneously or over a limited period (Wang and Cheng, 2020). This investigation is classified as a cross-sectional study because it entails the collection of participant responses during a specific time frame and subsequent analysis. Also, the research is cross-sectional because the focus is on examining and exploring the experiences and challenges faced by women entrepreneurs at a specific point in time, without tracking changes over a prolonged period. The focus is specifically on what issues and opportunities there are for women entrepreneurs currently in the MENA region, as the issues and other aspects can significantly change over time. This approach allows for a detailed understanding of the existing conditions and gaps in the entrepreneurial landscape for women.

3.6 Research Strategy

According to Oliva (2019), qualitative research does not always involve measurements or observations, and it considers the study's methodology and subject matter. By focusing on individual experiences rather than making broad generalisations, qualitative research offers a more in-depth understanding of the events being studied (Macdonald et al., 2011). The goal of exploratory qualitative research is to achieve a greater depth of comprehension regarding certain instances that pertain to a particular subject (Macdonald et al., 2011). A researcher may employ case studies, ethnography, grounded theory and phenomenology as qualitative research methods in their investigation (Jamali, 2018). An in-depth analysis of a particular occurrence or set of circumstances is what is involved in a case study (Posavac, 2015). Studying a certain culture or social group's beliefs, ideals and practices through the lens of ethnography is a

subfield of sociology known as ethnography (Atkinson, 2018). In addition, grounded theory aims to formulate a theory by carefully analysing the empirical evidence and facts obtained (Okta, 2012). Phenomenology, on the other hand, is focused on researching and interpreting individuals' subjective experiences with regard to certain occurrences (Neubauer, Witkop and Varpio, 2019).

Of all of these different qualitative research strategies, the researcher chose interviews as the most efficient data-gathering mode for the present study. In qualitative research, interviews are a common method that entail speaking with participants one-on-one or in groups to learn about their experiences, beliefs and attitudes (Natow, 2019). The interviews can be structured, semi-structured or unstructured, depending on the questions and aims of the study (Wolgemuth et al., 2014). Interviews with a semi-structured format are frequently utilised in research because these interviews permit open and exploratory discourse, which enables participants to narrate their experiences in a manner that is both comprehensive and extensive (Blandford, 2013). The interviewee can bring up interesting or pertinent topics by using predetermined questions used in semi-structured interviews to lead the discourse (Blandford, 2013). Unstructured interviews, on the other hand, offer greater flexibility than structured interviews since they allow the researcher and participants to have more open and honest conversations (Berry, 2011). This is because a predetermined list of questions does not constrain the interviewer during an unstructured interview (Berry, 2011).

However, for the present research, semi-structured interviews were utilised to gain insight into the perspectives and experiences of women entrepreneurs in the MENA region. Since the study aims to evaluate their perspectives on the importance of professional development, including networking and the adoption of professional practices, compared to unstructured interviews, the use of semi-structured interviews provides a more organised approach (Berry, 2011). This strategy allowed the researcher to explore themes while allowing the participants to express their opinions freely. It also enabled the researcher to gain insight into the participants' experiences and perspectives. The protocol used for conducting interviews is presented in Appendix B.

This study's research method consisted of semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions regarding women's entrepreneurship, networking methods and career advancement in the MENA region. Because of this tactic, the researcher was able to dig deeper into the responses and conduct a more in-depth analysis of the data to draw attention to the obstacles

that stand in the way of the expansion of women-owned businesses in the MENA region and formulate a plan to overcome these obstacles.

3.7 Population, Sample and Sampling

The term ‘sampling technique’ is often used in academic research to refer to the many approaches used to pick a subset of the population for data collecting. This is because it is impractical to gather data from the entirety of the population (Taherdoost, 2016). Probability and non-probability sampling designs are the two most prevalent sampling methods used when establishing a sample method for collecting data (Langer, 2017). Non-probability sampling can be distinguished from probability sampling by placing less emphasis on randomness, which often necessitates placing constraints on the demographic makeup of the population (Lohr, 2021). The probability sampling design includes random, cluster and stratified sampling. It is necessary to use these approaches to guarantee that the sample chosen for a research study is representative of the population that is the focus of the study (Etikan and Bala, 2017). Considering that this research involves specific participants who fit the criteria and not choosing the sample at random, probability sampling and its strategies were not adopted in this research.

As a consequence of this, the current research can be linked to the non-probability sampling procedures that are typically utilised in scientific investigations. Convenience, quota and purposive sampling are the distinct non-probability sampling methods that must be understood before continuing (Setia, 2016). It is vital to have this knowledge before moving forward. One defining characteristic of these sampling approaches is that they are not random. Convenience sampling is a widely used strategy because it is easy to recruit participants, and because those participants are readily available (Wolf et al., 2016). In addition, quota sampling allows the researcher to create predetermined quotas or proportions for various sample characteristics, such as age, gender, occupation, education and income. These quotas and proportions can be used to select a representative population sample (Wolf et al., 2016). The purpose of quota sampling is to ensure that a sample is representative of the population from which it is drawn by attempting to match the characteristics of the sample to those of the population (Nanjundeswaraswamy and Divakar, 2021). On the other hand, the researcher can acquire data through purposive sampling, which involves selecting individuals who satisfy certain preset study criteria. This makes it easier for the researcher to acquire the data needed to answer the study questions and accomplish the goals (Nanjundeswaraswamy and Divakar, 2021).

Participants for the study were selected by purposive sampling, enabling the researcher to choose people based on predetermined criteria that corresponded with the study's aims. Purposive sampling was especially appropriate for this study as it facilitated the inclusion of persons with determined entrepreneurial experience, which was that they should have had experience of more than a year, hence allowing for the acquisition of comprehensive, in-depth views. This approach is well-established in qualitative research for its capacity to gather varied viewpoints from participants who possess significant insights on the subjects under investigation (Campbell et al., 2020).

The research included a total of 32 entrepreneurs, both male and female, to enhance the establishment of strong ties within official and informal networks. The sample included 25 women entrepreneurs (WE1–WE25) and seven male entrepreneurs (ME1–ME7), since the research largely focused on women's networking experiences and techniques. The deliberate inclusion of male entrepreneurs aimed to gain insights into their experiences regarding networking methods, career advancement assistance and their interactions within the entrepreneurial ecosystem. As indicated before, these entrepreneurs were targeted from areas, such as the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Egypt. These markets have growing numbers of women-led companies in the MENA region, but the population is highly underrepresented.

The research concentrates on developing a networking structure for women entrepreneurs in the MENA area, with participants chosen from the three main countries of Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Egypt. The World Economic Forum's 2024 Global Gender Gap Report further identifies the MENA region as the lowest-ranking in terms of economic participation and opportunity, underscoring a persistent and systemic underrepresentation of women in leadership and enterprise. These nations were selected for their unique but interrelated entrepreneurial ecosystems, reflecting various phases of economic growth and legislative measures that promote women's entrepreneurship.

Saudi Arabia was chosen for its continuing change under Vision 2030, which actively fosters female entrepreneurship. In Saudi Arabia, despite Vision 2030's ambitious agenda to diversify the economy and empower women through initiatives such as Tamheer and the Qiyadyat platform, sociocultural barriers and financial constraints continue to impede many would-be entrepreneurs (Abou-Moghli and Al-Abdallah, 2019; Alkhaled, 2021; Khan, 2020).

Egypt, the most populous nation in the Arab world, provides insight into the obstacles and possibilities encountered by women within a complex and dynamic economic landscape.

Egypt also demonstrates a longstanding tradition of women's small-business activity but suffers from informal operational models, limited capital inflows and enduring gender-role expectations that restrict growth beyond microenterprise (Khurma, Mounzer and Sherman, 2019; Rizk, Rashed and Rizk, 2019; Hassan and Zaharia, 2021). Both contexts exhibit low nascent and established entrepreneurial rates among women.

The UAE, with a robust start-up ecosystem, offers lessons from a more developed entrepreneurial context. The UAE was chosen for its leading role in regional entrepreneurship and also because its policy environment has produced a highly heterogeneous pool of women-led enterprises spanning fintech, creative industries and social innovation (Erogul, Rod and Barragan, 2019; Tahir and Baradie, 2019; Matroushi et al., 2020; Metcalfe, Bastian and AlDajani, 2022). Thematic saturation also occurred later in the UAE sample than in Saudi Arabia or Egypt, reflecting the greater diversity of industry-specific networking practices and the need to capture a broader spectrum of experiences.

Out of the 25 women entrepreneurs, 15 were from the UAE, six from Saudi Arabia and four from Egypt. Out of the seven male entrepreneurs, three were from the UAE, three from Saudi Arabia and one from Egypt. The larger number of UAE participants reflects both the country's mature entrepreneurial ecosystem and its proactive policies to support women founders. Over the past decade, federal initiatives and free-zone programmes are focused on lowering the entry barriers and fostering formal networking opportunities, resulting in a higher concentration of active women-led ventures and easier researcher access (Moletta et al., 2023). In contrast, Saudi Arabia, while rapidly expanding its financing infrastructure under Vision 2030, still presents more nascent networks and greater logistical hurdles for data collection, leading to a somewhat smaller, but thematically rich, sample of four entrepreneurs. Egypt, despite having a long history of small-business activity, has traditionally offered less streamlined institutional support for women founders, particularly outside Cairo's core incubators, which accounts for the four interviews conducted there. The current research mirrored the uneven development of regional ecosystems, and this purposive distribution ensures that the resulting framework captures both best-practice contexts and emerging markets.

In addition, in the UAE, data saturation was reached more gradually than in Saudi Arabia and Egypt because the women entrepreneurs in the UAE and their sample represented a particularly wide array of industries, ranging from fintech and e-commerce to marketing, finance, creative arts and social enterprises, and each sector yielded its own set of nuanced

experiences, challenges and networking strategies. By contrast, participants in Saudi Arabia and Egypt, though thematically rich, were more clustered in sectors such as technology and retail services, so thematic redundancy appeared sooner in those contexts. This country-specific, purposive skew in interview counts is consistent with the approach taken by Hagaman and Wutich (2017), who, in a multisite cross-cultural qualitative study, deliberately conducted a higher number of interviews in settings with greater heterogeneity until thematic saturation was achieved, demonstrating that uneven participant distribution based on contextual diversity is both defensible and methodologically sound (Hagaman and Wutich, 2017).

Furthermore, the sample size of 32 participants also aligns with Hagaman and Wutich (2017), wherein the authors indicated a range of 20–40 participants is highly suitable for such multi-contextual studies. Similarly, Guest, Bunce and Johnson (2006) demonstrate that in-depth interview studies often reach thematic saturation by the twelfth to fifteenth interview. Clarke and Braun (2017) also note that 20–30 interviews typically suffice for a focused thematic analysis. The current research sample size was in line with the thresholds indicated by multiple researchers, and the researcher also ensured that no new substantive themes emerged in the final rounds of data collection.

Purposive sampling secured participants whose ventures span key sectors, including technology, finance and social enterprise, and whose experiences illuminate both formal and informal network formation. Concentrating exclusively on the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Egypt was deliberate because these three jurisdictions exhibit distinct regulatory frameworks, financing ecosystems and cultural norms around gender in business. By focusing the sample on these loci, the study achieved depth through multiple cases within each country and variation due to cross-case analysis of how differing levels of ecosystem maturity could contribute to the networking of the women entrepreneurs.

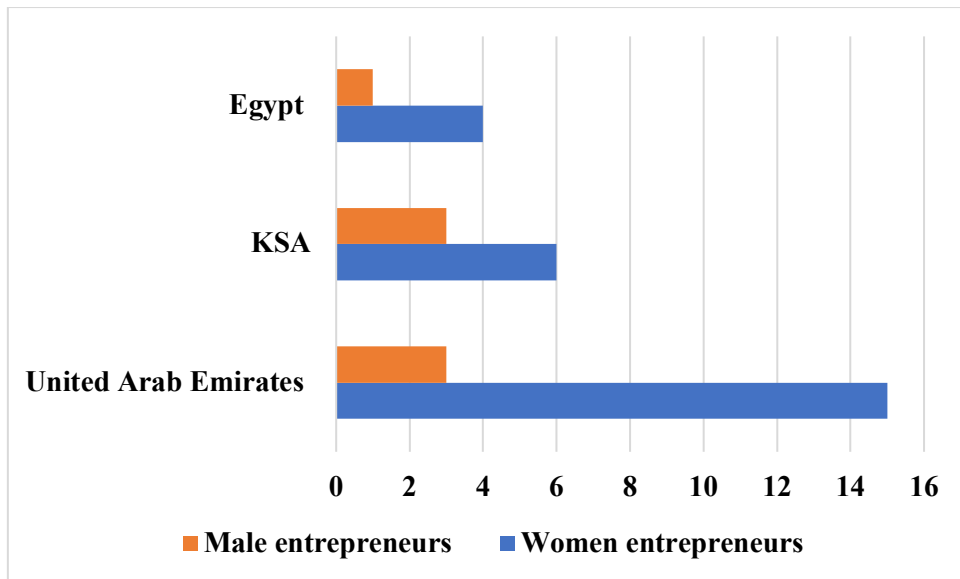


Figure 5: Sample Distribution for Current Research

(Source: author.)

In justifying sample size and distribution, it is important to underscore that qualitative inquiry values depth and contextual richness over statistical representativeness. While a larger quantitative survey could have sampled hundreds of entrepreneurs, it would have sacrificed the thick description necessary to map the nuanced processes of trust building, reciprocity and cultural negotiation that underpin network formation. The study also established a balance between comprehensiveness and the depth required to develop a grounded networking framework for women entrepreneurs in the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Egypt, by adhering to purposive sampling focused on the three most pertinent MENA markets and by achieving data saturation well within the sample collected.

The participant selection process also took into account essential demographic characteristics, such as age and entrepreneurial experience. The study focused on women entrepreneurs who had been actively running their businesses for at least one year, ensuring that the participants had sufficient experience navigating the entrepreneurial landscape and developing professional networks. This criterion guaranteed that the gathered data represented substantive ideas rather than viewpoints from nascent entrepreneurs who may not have developed substantial networks. Concerning the interview technique, each interview was structured to run between 45 and 60 minutes, enabling a comprehensive examination of networking experiences, obstacles and methods. This timeframe was considered suitable to obtain comprehensive narratives while being manageable for busy businesspeople. The absence of organisational leaders from entrepreneurial networks in the sample was offset by

the experiences of entrepreneurs who engaged with these networks. The research emphasised primary narratives of networking from active entrepreneurs, since they directly interact with both formal and informal networks, offering a more individualised viewpoint on their efficacy.

The profiles of the participants presented in the following table outlines a summary of essential demographics of the participants and their businesses, such as their ages, education, entrepreneurial experience and companies' industry, number of employees, annual revenue and location. The table indicates that the participants from this research were from different sectors with unique skills and capabilities. The participants included women entrepreneurs (WE1–WE25) and male entrepreneurs (ME1–ME7), from a variety of firm sizes, industries and geographic regions.

Table 1: Participant Profiles

| Participant ID | Age | Education | Company Age | Industry | Number of Employees | Annual Revenue | Location (Country) |
|----------------------------|-----|------------------------|-------------|----------------------------------|---------------------|------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Women Entrepreneurs | | | | | | | |
| WE1 | 49 | Bachelor's degree | 12 years | E-commerce | 500 | No response | Dubai, UAE |
| WE2 | 34 | Master's degree | 4 years | Fashion | 10 | ~\$1 million | Abu Dhabi, UAE |
| WE3 | 42 | PhD | 8 years | Technology | 50 | ~\$5 million | Riyadh, Saudi Arabia |
| WE4 | 28 | Bachelor's degree | 2 years | Wellness | 15 | ~\$500,000 | Egypt |
| WE5 | 35 | Master's degree | 6 years | Fashion | 25 | ~\$1.2 million | Dubai, UAE |
| WE6 | 42 | Master's degree | 3 years | Media & Corporate Training | No info | No info | Abu Dhabi, UAE |
| WE7 | 52 | Professional doctorate | 12 years | Management Consultancy, ESG | 4 | ~\$500,000 | Dubai, UAE |
| WE8 | 48 | Double master's degree | 6 years | HR Consulting & Executive Search | 4 | ~\$500,000 | Bahrain, UAE |
| WE9 | 45 | LLB degree | 8 years | Legal | 2 | ~AED 1.5 million | Abu Dhabi, UAE |
| WE10 | 52 | PhD | 8 years | Healthcare & Technology | 110 | ~\$800,000 | Egypt |
| WE11 | 57 | Executive Education | 16 years | Design & Apparel Manufacturing | 50 | ~\$40 million | Bangladesh, Hong Kong, India, UAE |

| | | | | | | | |
|--------------------|----|-----------------------|--------------|-----------------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------|---------------------------|
| WE12 | 52 | MBA | 5 years | Corporate Finance | 12 | ~\$7 million | UAE |
| WE13 | 56 | Master's degree | 7 years | EdTech | 3 | No info | UAE |
| WE14 | 38 | Master's degree | 4+ years | Healthcare | No info | Expected this year | Abu Dhabi, UAE |
| WE15 | 26 | Bachelor's degree | 2 years | Retail | 2 | ~\$10,000 | Jeddah, Saudi Arabia |
| WE16 | 43 | MBA | 4 years | Food & Beverage | 3 | ~\$300,000 | Saudi Arabia |
| WE17 | 37 | Bachelor's degree | 5 years | Marketing & Public Relations | 2 | No info | UAE |
| WE18 | 49 | Master's degree | 11 years | Consultancy | 5 | No info | Ras Al Khaimah, UAE |
| WE19 | 44 | Master's degree | 11 years | Manufacturing | 22 | ~\$7 million | Dubai & Ajman, UAE |
| WE20 | 55 | Master's degree | 7 years | Art & Culture | 1 employee, 6 volunteers | No info | Dubai, UAE |
| WE21 | 45 | MBA | 6 years | Healthcare & Wellness | 15 | ~\$500,000 | Cairo, Egypt |
| WE22 | 38 | Bachelor's degree | 3 years | Retail | 5 | ~\$200,000 | Alexandria, Egypt |
| WE23 | 40 | MBA | 5 years | E-commerce | 8 | ~\$300,000 | Riyadh, Saudi Arabia |
| WE24 | 35 | Bachelor's degree | 3 years | Health Tech | 4 | ~\$150,000 | Jeddah, Saudi Arabia |
| WE25 | 50 | PhD in Business Admin | 10 years | Manufacturing | 50 | ~\$2 million | Dammam, Saudi Arabia |
| Male Entrepreneurs | | | | | | | |
| ME1 | 36 | Bachelor's degree | 8 years | Media, F&B, Investment | 35 | Not provided | UAE |
| ME2 | 56 | Bachelor's degree | 3 years | Consulting & Advisory Services | Not provided | Not provided | Saudi Arabia |
| ME3 | 50 | MBA | 24 years | Consultancy | 15 | ~\$2 million | Saudi Arabia |
| ME4 | 45 | Master's degree | Since 10 y/o | Fintech, Health Tech, Hospitality | 3 | ~\$1 million | Dubai, Stockholm, Abidjan |
| ME5 | 48 | Doctorate in Business | 11 years | Technology | 28 | Confidential | Egypt, UAE |
| ME6 | 37 | Postgraduate studies | 5 years | Tech & Fashion | 25 | Not provided | UAE |
| ME7 | 39 | Master's degree | 2 years | Proptech industry | 8 | Not provided | Saudi Arabia |

3.8 Pilot Study

As defined by Eldridge et al. (2016), a pilot study is an early study used to examine the feasibility and effectiveness of a proposed research approach or intervention. A reduced-scale iteration of a survey or questionnaire is distributed to a statistically meaningful portion of the population under consideration (Eldridge et al., 2016). Before full adoption, a pilot study can uncover and correct faults with the study's methodology or data collection (In, 2017). Feedback from pilot participants can help correct any shortcomings with the study instrument, such as confusing questions or instructions (In, 2017). Furthermore, conducting a pilot study can assess the feasibility of recruiting and retaining subjects and the time and materials required to carry out the research. The results of the pilot study can also be used to calculate statistical power, which refers to the likelihood of detecting a statistically significant effect in the population (Davis et al., 2013). A pilot study can improve accuracy and applicability, making them essential to research studies (Davis et al., 2013).

As a result of recognising the importance of a pilot study, the researcher conducted one after developing the interview guide for the current research. The pilot study goal was to evaluate the effectiveness of the preconstructed questionnaire in eliciting responses that would result in useful study conclusions. Given the significance of this preliminary investigation, the researcher conducted interviews with a group of five entrepreneurs from the MENA region, consisting of two male and three female participants. Based on the pilot interviews, the questions delivered the expected themes and results that were in line with the objectives of the study. Hence, no changes were made to the interview protocol.

3.9 Data Collection Method

The term 'data collection method' refers to collecting information or data from diverse sources for research or analysis purposes (Alshenqeeti, 2014). Numerous factors, including the nature of the research question, the preferred data format, the breadth of available resources and the characteristics of the target demographic, influence the determination of an appropriate data collection method (Alshenqeeti, 2014). In various studies, collecting data encompasses various methods, including administering questionnaires, conducting face-to-face interviews, making phone calls and utilising online forums (Sutton and Austin, 2015). Since the present study attempts to construct a networking framework for women's entrepreneurship, using formal and informal networks through interviews was identified as a potential strategy for enhancing the growth of women entrepreneurs in the MENA region by fostering strong connections. The data collection focused on entrepreneurs of both genders operating within the

MENA region. The selection of participants for the reviews was based on their level of entrepreneurial experience in the MENA region and their expertise. Given the researcher's objective of addressing the gap in the current literature, the study aimed to conduct interviews with experienced entrepreneurs in the MENA region to enhance comprehension of entrepreneurship and the diverse strategies employed in the region to foster career advancement. Consequently, the sole criterion for conducting the interviews was that the interviewees were entrepreneurs with at least five years of experience. The researcher selected in-person or virtual interviews based on convenience, as determined by the inclusion criteria and the intention to conduct interviews. It was assumed that each interview would take 45–60 minutes to complete with each participant. It is noteworthy that semi-structured interviews are deemed crucial as they facilitate a comprehensive comprehension and evaluation of the participant's viewpoint, thereby aiding in accomplishing the research's goals and objectives.

3.10 Data Analysis Method

The primary objective of data analysis is to transform raw qualitative data into meaningful insights, enabling pattern recognition, trend identification and a deeper understanding of the research questions (Ott & Longnecker, 2015). The choice of data analysis methods is influenced by the research approach and the nature of the collected data. Given that this study employed qualitative research techniques through semi-structured interviews, thematic analysis was selected as the most appropriate approach (Smith, 2015). Thematic analysis is a widely used method in qualitative research that involves identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within the data (Willig & Rogers, 2017). This process enables researchers to systematically categorise information and align findings with the study's research questions and objectives.

Braun and Clarke (2012) outline a six-phase approach to thematic analysis, ensuring a systematic and rigorous examination of qualitative data. The present study followed this structured framework to analyse the interview data, ensuring consistency and reliability.

Table 2: Thematic Analysis Steps (guided from Braun and Clarke, 2012)

| Phases | Description | Application in Current Study |
|---------------------------|---|---|
| Familiarisation with data | Reading and re-reading transcripts to gain an overall understanding of the content. | Interviews were transcribed verbatim and reviewed multiple times to ensure familiarity. Key phrases and ideas were noted. |

| | | |
|----------------------------|--|--|
| Generating initial codes | Systematic coding of relevant data segments by identifying key words and patterns. | Important terms and ideas related to the topic (female entrepreneurs challenges, factors, networking, etc.) were coded systematically. |
| Searching for themes | Grouping similar codes to form broader themes that reflect underlying patterns. | Related codes were combined into sub-themes and overarching themes were identified. |
| Reviewing themes | Evaluating themes for coherence and alignment with the research objectives. | Themes were cross-checked with the dataset to ensure consistency and representativeness. |
| Defining and naming themes | Refining themes and providing clear definitions for each theme. | Each theme was labelled and described, linking it to research questions and literature. |
| Producing the report | Finalising themes and presenting findings with evidence from the data. | Thematic map was developed to illustrate key findings. |

Following the thematic analysis framework, several key themes emerged from the data, shedding light on the networking experiences of women entrepreneurs in the MENA region, which are represented in the following thematic map.

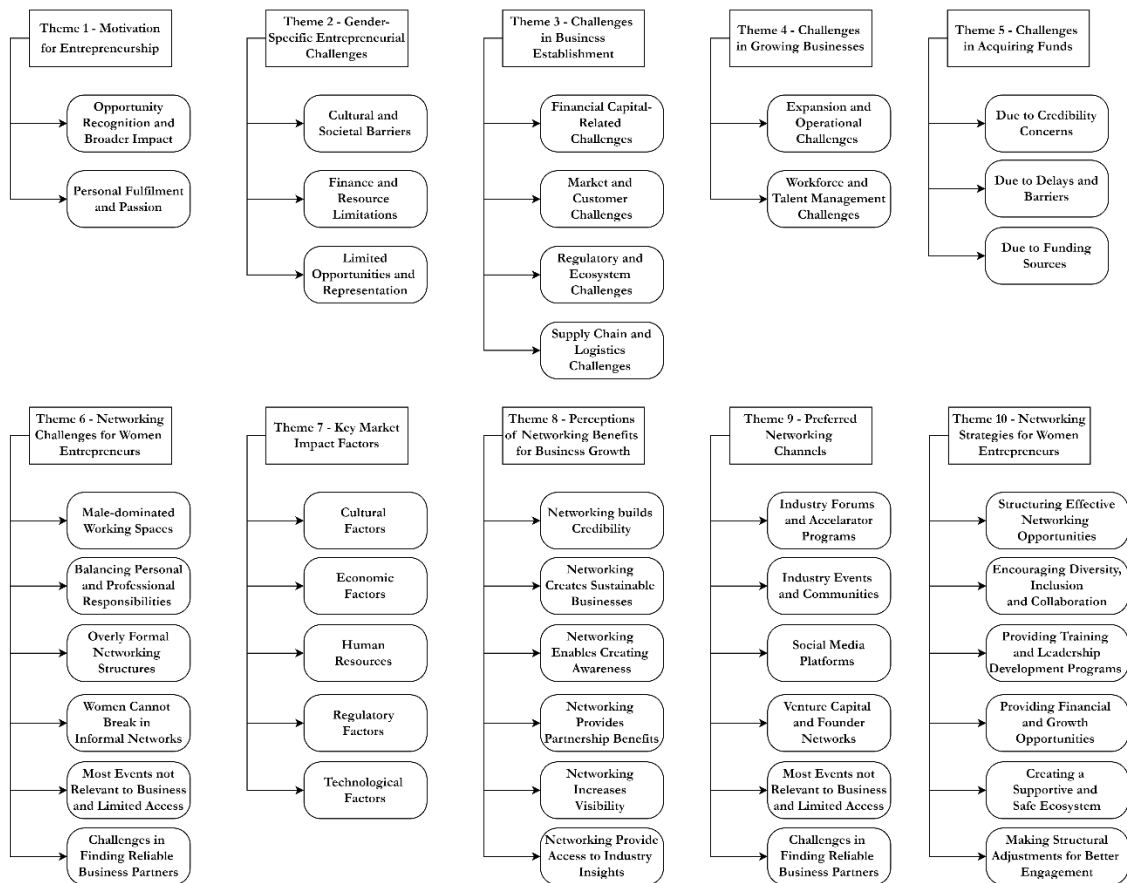


Figure 6: Thematic Map

3.11 Trustworthiness

The concept of trustworthiness is significant in the field of research because it relates to the authenticity, dependability, relevance and verifiability of the research outcomes (Mohajan, 2017). Utilising these variables is essential for ensuring that the research methodology is carried out systematically and accurately, thereby producing valid and reliable results. The maintenance of research methodology reliability is of the utmost importance, especially in qualitative research, due to the influence of researchers' interpretations and biases on the outcomes (Zohrabi, 2013).

Establishing reliability and validity in the research process is crucial for assessing the quality of research and the efficacy of a methodology, technique or test in measuring a specific construct (Cypress, 2017). The concept of reliability refers to the degree to which a given methodology consistently evaluates a particular phenomenon. However, establishing measurement reliability is contingent on consistently achieving identical outcomes under identical conditions and methods (Cypress, 2017). The concept of reliability refers to the consistency with which outcomes can be replicated over time, by a variety of evaluators and

within the examination itself. Despite the duplicability of trustworthy measurements, their integrity cannot always be guaranteed (Taherdoost, 2016b).

In contrast, validity refers to the degree to which a particular research method precisely evaluates the intended construct. Since the purpose of the present study is to investigate the concept of various aspects of women entrepreneurs and strategy networks inherent to both the material and social domains (Lakshmi and Mohideen, 2013). The study employed a rigorous approach to trustworthiness to investigate the factors that contribute to accurate representation of the collected data based on the understanding that trustworthiness will contribute to a greater comprehension of the significance of precision in accurately depicting the characteristics, qualities and variations in both the material and social domains (Lakshmi and Mohideen, 2013). As the presence of a significant level of reliability indicates the precision and validity of a particular quantification, the maintenance of the data collection's reliability and validity is of the utmost importance to researchers, necessitating the assurance of the absence of bias during the research process (Hayashi, Abib and Hoppen, 2019). Furthermore, the phenomenon of researcher bias is well documented in the field of research and can be attributed to the researcher's individual requirements and perspectives. This bias can have a substantial effect on the outcome of the study, as it can affect the interpretation of the data and the conclusions that are drawn (Hayashi, Abib and Hoppen, 2019).

Furthermore, according to Smith and Noble (2014), participant bias is another prevalent phenomenon resulting from the behaviour of research participants. This bias can also have a significant impact on the research's outcome, as it may influence the reliability and validity of the collected data. Therefore, researchers must be aware of these biases and take the necessary steps to mitigate their impact on their research (Smith and Noble, 2014). To mitigate potential sources of bias, it is the researcher's responsibility to effectively guide participants towards responses consistent with the interview transcripts while avoiding queries that may elicit biased responses (Smith and Noble, 2014). To establish the trustworthiness of this research, the researcher chose to evaluate the data's reliability and validity.

In order to ensure the reliability and validity of the study, the researcher refrained from engaging in any form of data manipulation. Cross-validation analysis was performed on the obtained results and existing literature to determine the data's reliability. In the domain of research, it is of the utmost importance to take reliability and validity into account when selecting methodologies, designing studies and presenting findings.

3.12 Ethical Considerations

The current study has considered ethical considerations following the ethical guidelines of the university. The present study evaluated the factors that impact the activities of women entrepreneurs in the MENA region, with a focus on the networking challenges faced by women entrepreneurs to obtain venture capital while developing start-ups in the MENA region and the benefits of networking for obtaining venture capital and better business outcomes and growth through formal and informal channels. Therefore, to meet the aims and objectives of the current study through the adopted methodology, the researcher took great care to maintain the confidentiality of both the research and the participants.

The research subject was presented impartially, with due consideration given to cultural and societal differentiations. The present investigation examined the validity and reliability of the employed research methodologies while simultaneously considering the protection of the confidential data acquired during the interview process. The present study concerns the exploration of qualitative research, characterised by its conversational nature and ability to elicit introspective data from participants. Thus, the researcher protected the subjects' anonymity and refrained from transmitting personally identifiable data to external entities. The distribution of transcripts was conducted to verify the precision of the data, and no personally identifiable information was disclosed in any written or oral communication intended for public consumption. Before the commencement of data collection, the participants were duly informed of the nature and scope of the study, and they provided their informed consent as presented in the consent form in Appendix A.

Furthermore, the institutional ethics committee provided the necessary ethical approval in accordance with established protocols and guidelines. Before conducting the interviews, the researcher obtained formal approval from the committee. The interview protocol was meticulously designed to specify all the terms and conditions of participation in the study. The academic institution's ethical committee approved the present investigation following a thorough evaluation of the ethical concerns involved in the study.

3.13 Chapter Summary

To conclude, the theory of interpretivism was chosen for the study based on the researcher's ontological and epistemological perspectives. This provided the researcher with an in-depth comprehension of women's entrepreneurship in the MENA region, strategic networking and expansion maintenance. The chapter presented a discussion on using an inductive research approach to facilitated a deeper understanding of the topic. In addition, the

rationale behind selecting a qualitative research method and a purposive sampling design was also outlined in the chapter. The discussion related to the use of interviews to collect data and the application of thematic analysis to analyse this was covered in the chapter. The chapter lastly shed light on the provided guidelines for conducting reliable and ethical qualitative research.

4 Chapter 4: Data Analysis and Findings

4.1 Chapter Introduction

Thematic analysis was conducted to analyse the data collected through interviews in the research. The results obtained allowed the researcher to establish connections within themes and subthemes and also with the previous literature. A thematic map was created to graphically illustrate the connections between the primary themes and sub-themes for both male and female participants, as represented in the Figure 5. All of the themes and subthemes are discussed in the following sections.

4.2 Theme 1 – Motivation of Entrepreneurship

4.2.1 Opportunity Recognition and Broader Impact

The findings highlight how women entrepreneurs identify and respond to gaps in their respective markets by tailoring their offerings to the specific needs of their communities, which is in line with findings of Davis (2012), Khan (2020a) and Li et al. (2020), who also indicate that when women entrepreneurs have the opportunity to make a broader impact, they pursue entrepreneurship significantly. Many participants recognised that existing services and products fail to adequately serve local consumers due to a lack of cultural relevance, accessibility or innovation. In response, they have established businesses that directly address these issues, ensuring that their solutions are not only practical but also meaningful within the local context. For example, WE2 noted the absence of homegrown fashion brands that blend traditional and contemporary styles at an affordable price point, which inspired her to create a brand that fills this gap,

I noticed that the local market lacked homegrown fashion brands that offered a blend of traditional and contemporary styles at an affordable price point. This gap inspired me to establish a brand that could fill this void, providing high-quality, culturally inspired fashion that resonates with customers both locally and internationally.

This demonstrates how entrepreneurs leverage local culture and consumer preferences to create unique and accessible products. Similarly, in the health and wellness sector, another participant (WE4) observed a lack of holistic services that integrate fitness, mental well-being and nutrition under one cohesive brand. She saw an opportunity to not only offer these services but also educate people on the long-term health benefits, as indicated:

Many people lacked access to programmes that combined fitness, mental well-being and nutrition under one cohesive brand. I was motivated to create a business that not

only offered these services but also educated people about the long-term benefits of adopting a healthier lifestyle.

This illustrates how addressing localised needs goes beyond business and is also about improving the well-being of the community (Pini, Brown and Ryan, 2004). Moreover, localised needs are not just about products but also about business support and accessibility. WE8 recognised that smaller businesses lack access to flexible and sustainable consulting solutions that are typically offered only by large firms as: *'I wanted to provide businesses with sustainable and accessible solutions that were not readily available from Tier 1 consulting firms'*. The participant has helped to bridge the gap between large-scale corporate solutions and the realities of smaller enterprises by offering consulting services tailored to the needs of small businesses. These findings indicate that women are motivated to start businesses to contribute to their communities.

Male entrepreneurs were also asked about their motivation to pursue entrepreneurship to understand the basic aspects that motivate both genders, as this can be an important contribution to the networking structure. The motivations for entrepreneurship among the male entrepreneurs in this study highlight a strong inclination toward problem-solving, a desire for creative control and the aspiration to contribute meaningfully to the business community (Batjargal et al., 2019). Many participants emphasised that their decision to pursue entrepreneurship stemmed from the opportunity to address challenges and create impactful solutions. For instance, ME1 said, *'I was motivated by the desire to solve problems'*, which indicates that entrepreneurship is a purposeful endeavour to tackle real-world issues. This problem-solving drive was further reinforced by another participant (ME4), who also mentioned, *'I was driven to develop solutions that addressed these needs'*. ME7 also noted that, *'I wanted to have an impact on the industry I work in. I saw inefficiencies and opportunities for innovation in the proptech sector and was driven to create solutions that could address these issues'*. These findings suggest that men are motivated by the problem-solving approach (cognitive level), while women entrepreneurs are motivated more on an emotional level, as they pursue personal fulfilment and contributing to their communities (Kwapisz, 2021).

4.2.2 Personal Fulfilment and Passion

The findings also indicate that creative expression and cultural representation play a pivotal role in motivating women to pursue entrepreneurship. Many women entrepreneurs expressed a deep-rooted passion for using their creative skills to reflect cultural heritage while

simultaneously catering to contemporary market demands (Ho and Pollack, 2014). Their entrepreneurial journey was not merely about financial success but also about making a meaningful contribution to the cultural landscape through fashion, marketing and artistic platforms. For instance, WE2 emphasised the personal significance of creativity, stating,

I have always had a strong interest in fashion and a desire to express my creativity through unique designs that reflect cultural influences while appealing to modern consumers.

This highlights how the fusion of tradition and modernity serves as a powerful inspiration for entrepreneurs who wish to create something distinctive (Shinnar, Giacomini and Janssen, 2012). Similarly, WE5 reinforced this idea by stating, ‘*My goal was to offer collections that not only stood out aesthetically but also celebrated the rich heritage of the region while appealing to contemporary tastes*’. This demonstrates that entrepreneurial motivation is often driven by a dual purpose, which is artistic fulfilment and the desire to preserve cultural narratives. The findings also indicate their desire to make a meaningful impact in the creative and cultural industries. As WE20 shared,

Passion motivated me to become an entrepreneur. I saw an opportunity to contribute meaningfully to the art and culture space, particularly by creating platforms that amplify local talent and preserve cultural narratives.

This finding underlines the broader impact of entrepreneurship beyond individual success, as it becomes a means of fostering cultural appreciation and creating opportunities for others within the creative ecosystem. These findings suggest that, for many women entrepreneurs, business is not just about profit but also about storytelling, cultural preservation and artistic innovation. Their motivations stem from a deep-seated passion to integrate cultural heritage into modern business ventures, ultimately bridging the past with the present in a way that resonates with both local and global audiences.

In addition, the findings from the male entrepreneurs also indicate that they are motivated to pursue entrepreneurship to shape their own professional journey. ME4 expressed that, ‘*Entrepreneurship provided me with a platform to explore and execute creative ideas without restrictions*’, underscoring the appeal of autonomy and self-direction. A similar response was provided by ME3, who stated that, ‘*I was motivated by the freedom to shape my own path and the desire to help others*’. These responses suggest that entrepreneurship serves as an avenue for individuals to break away from rigid corporate structures and create businesses

that align with their personal values and aspirations. In addition, a significant motivation was the desire to give back to the business community, particularly after years of experience in the corporate sector. For instance, ME2 shared, *'I was motivated by a desire to give back to the business community after a 30-year journey working in multinational companies. [...] Becoming an entrepreneur allowed me to share that knowledge by guiding others and helping businesses overcome challenges'*. This demonstrates that, for some, entrepreneurship is not solely about personal gains but also about mentoring and supporting others within the industry. Collectively, these insights illustrate how male and female entrepreneurs are driven by a blend of problem-solving ambitions, creative autonomy and the aspiration to contribute to the broader business ecosystem.

These findings set a baseline for understanding that women are motivated to pursue entrepreneurship to follow their passions and contribute to communities. However, it is not an easy journey, as many entrepreneurs shared the challenges they faced during this journey, which are explored in the following theme.

4.3 Theme 2 – Gender-Specific Entrepreneurial Challenges

4.3.1 Cultural and Societal Barriers

The cultural and social barriers faced by women entrepreneurs significantly impact their ability to fully commit to their businesses, as they navigate societal expectations, gender roles and systemic biases (Batjargal et al., 2019). Many women struggle to balance entrepreneurial ambitions with traditional family responsibilities, as society often expects them to prioritise caregiving over professional growth (Bui, Kuan and Chu, 2018). This expectation is reinforced by systemic norms that shape business environments, limiting women's access to essential resources such as funding and professional networks. As WE2 pointed out, *'There is often an underlying assumption that women should prioritise family responsibilities over professional aspirations, which can limit their ability to fully dedicate themselves to their business'*.

It can be observed that such persistent expectations can create an added layer of difficulty for women, who must constantly justify their business commitments while managing household obligations. Societal norms also often shape perceptions of women entrepreneurs, influencing how they are received in professional spaces and whether they are taken seriously in male-dominated industries. WE25 highlighted this issue by stating, *'In male-dominated industries like manufacturing, women entrepreneurs may encounter resistance or scepticism from peers and stakeholders'*. Such biases not only make it harder for women to establish credibility but also restrict their access to opportunities that could facilitate business growth.

These challenges are further compounded by the difficulty women face in securing financial support, as decision-making roles in banking and investment sectors are often dominated by men, reinforcing systemic obstacles. WE11 underscored this issue, explaining, *‘Many women entrepreneurs struggle to secure financing due to systemic biases and a lack of representation in decision-making roles within banks and investment firms.’*

Moreover, cultural norms also influence networking opportunities, as traditional expectations can discourage women from engaging in professional interactions, particularly in male-dominated spaces (Bridges et al., 2022). Limited access to mentorship and professional circles further isolates women entrepreneurs, making it difficult for them to gain the support necessary to thrive. As WE6 noted, *‘In many cases, cultural norms and expectations can create discomfort or hesitation for women when engaging with male counterparts, particularly in professional settings’*. This hesitancy, shaped by deep-rooted cultural expectations, limits women’s ability to expand their networks, form strategic partnerships and secure vital business opportunities.

Male entrepreneurs also acknowledged the concern related to societal expectations women have to bear in terms of their entrepreneurial capabilities. For instance, one male entrepreneur ME1 commented on these cultural barriers, noting, *‘Cultural barriers, such as societal expectations about women’s roles, can further hinder their ability to pitch their ideas confidently or access funding opportunities’*. This suggests that deeply ingrained social norms can impact women’s ability to navigate the entrepreneurial landscape as confidently as their male counterparts. Another participant (ME4) provided a similar perspective, stating, *‘Women often feel they should be treated differently because of their gender’*. This highlights how gender biases not only limit access to resources but also shape the overall entrepreneurial experience for women. Cultural expectations further compound these challenges, particularly in regions where traditional gender roles are deeply embedded (Aljuwaiber, 2021). ME3 emphasised the weight of societal norms, explaining, *‘Societal expectations regarding women’s roles can limit their access to resources and decision-makers’*. Similarly, another participant (ME4) reflected on the barriers faced by women in conservative societies, stating, *‘In the MENA region, cultural and societal norms can make it difficult for local women to even consider entrepreneurship’*. These responses reveal that cultural constraints do not merely impact access to funding but also influence the fundamental decision of whether a woman can or should pursue entrepreneurship in the first place.

4.3.2 Financial and Resource Limitations

Women entrepreneurs also face significant financial and resource limitations, which hinder their ability to establish, sustain and scale their businesses (Kanze et al., 2018). A major challenge is the lack of financial knowledge, which prevents many women from effectively managing budgets, handling taxes and navigating complex financial systems. As WE6 highlighted,

Many of the women face a lack of financial knowledge in the region. Many women entrepreneurs have strong ideas and visions for their businesses but lack the financial literacy required to manage budgets, handle taxes, or navigate complex financial systems.

This gap in financial literacy puts women at a disadvantage, making it difficult for them to make informed financial decisions, seek funding or comply with regulatory requirements (Abou-Moghli and Al-Abdallah, 2019). Another participant (WE16) shared her struggles, stating, *'I faced challenges such as production, hiring, sales, taxes (e.g., excise tax in the UAE), product registration, research and development and sourcing'*. These challenges illustrate how the absence of financial expertise creates additional burdens for women entrepreneurs, limiting their ability to grow their businesses.

In addition to financial knowledge gaps, women entrepreneurs often encounter scepticism from investors and suppliers, which further constrains their access to essential funding and resources. Investors frequently question women's leadership capabilities and the scalability of their businesses, reinforcing gender biases in entrepreneurial finance (Kephart and Schumacher, 2005). One participant (WE21) shared her experience, stating, *'Investors may question women's capability to scale their businesses due to stereotypes about their leadership and commitment'*, which indicates that such biases make it difficult for women to secure investment, forcing them to work harder to prove their credibility. Furthermore, scepticism from stakeholders can make business operations more challenging, as one participant (WE24) noted, *'In male-dominated industries, it can be difficult for women to be taken seriously or gain equal footing in discussions with stakeholders and investors'*. This scepticism not only limits financial opportunities but also affects women's ability to establish credibility and secure vital business relationships.

Another critical barrier for women entrepreneurs is the lack of accessible financial resources and training programmes, which further exacerbates their challenges (Leitch, Welter

and Henry, 2018). Many women must rely on personal savings or family support, restricting their ability to scale their businesses (Lins and Lutz, 2016). One participant (WE14) described the financial limitations she faced, stating, *‘Many women are forced to rely on personal savings or family support to finance their businesses, which can limit their ability to scale effectively’*. This reliance on informal funding sources places women at a disadvantage compared to male entrepreneurs who may have better access to institutional financing. In addition, the absence of targeted financial training programmes leaves women without the necessary tools to navigate the business landscape. As one participant (WE6) pointed out, *‘There is a lack of accessible resources or training programmes to address this knowledge gap, further exacerbating the issue’*. Without these critical resources, women entrepreneurs struggle to develop the financial acumen needed to secure funding, manage expenses and drive business growth (Malmström, Johansson and Wincent, 2017). Male entrepreneurs also emphasised the barriers that women encounter when trying to access funding and build networks. For instance, ME1 pointed out that, *‘Women entrepreneurs in the MENA region face limited access to investors and cultural barriers’*, reinforcing the idea that gender plays a significant role in determining access to essential business resources.

These financial constraints prevent women entrepreneurs from realising the full potential of their businesses, reinforcing gender disparities in the entrepreneurial ecosystem, especially in the MENA region.

4.3.3 Limited Opportunities and Representation

Along with cultural and resource-related challenges, women entrepreneurs also face challenges due to limited representation, networking opportunities and biases, all of which contribute to systemic barriers in achieving business success. These challenges are not just theoretical, as they are very much a reality that affects women on a daily basis in their entrepreneurial journeys. One of the most prevalent findings is related to the underrepresentation of women in leadership positions, which directly influences their ability to build credibility and establish trust within the business community, as also outlined by Mattis (2004) and ElFiky (2023). As WE3 pointed out, *‘Women often lack representation in leadership roles, making it harder to build credibility’*. This finding highlights the deep-rooted structural issue whereby women are not widely seen in positions of authority, whether in corporate boards, decision-making roles or high-profile business ventures. Without these visible role models, aspiring women entrepreneurs struggle to see a path forwards for themselves, perpetuating a cycle of underrepresentation (Kephart and Schumacher, 2005). Furthermore,

this lack of representation reinforces the perception that women are less capable or serious about their businesses than their male counterparts. WE5 elaborated on this issue, stating, *'Limited representation in leadership roles also means fewer role models and mentors for aspiring women entrepreneurs'*. The absence of such role models is a critical gap because it not only limits women's access to guidance but also leaves them without mentors who understand the unique challenges they face.

This lack of female leadership also extends to the financial sector, where women entrepreneurs encounter additional obstacles when seeking funding (EIFiky, 2023). The underrepresentation of women in financial institutions often leads to biases that hinder their ability to secure capital or develop meaningful relationships with potential investors. WE8 explained, *'The lack of female representation in financial and business leadership roles contributes to funding and networking barriers'*. These barriers are compounded by societal stereotypes that frame women as less committed or capable of scaling their businesses, making investors hesitant to place their trust in female-led ventures (Estrada and Schuber, 2022). As WE21 shared, *'Investors may question women's capability to scale their businesses due to stereotypes about their leadership and commitment'*. This lack of confidence from potential backers creates a significant hurdle for women looking to expand their businesses or access essential resources.

Another critical issue identified in the data is the limited access to networks and mentorship opportunities for women entrepreneurs (Danish and Smith, 2012; Tahir and Baradie, 2019). Networking and mentorship are vital for securing partnerships, gaining market insights and establishing valuable connections. However, for many women, these opportunities are scarce or unavailable. WE3 described how *'Women also face limited access to influential networks and mentorship opportunities, which are crucial for securing funding, partnerships and market insights'*. Without the right support, women entrepreneurs are left to navigate the business world on their own, which can be especially daunting in male-dominated industries. WE7 emphasised, *'There is a lack of mentorship programmes that cater specifically to women entrepreneurs'*, highlighting the fact that many mentorship programmes are not designed to address the unique challenges women face. This lack of specialised mentorship means that women are often left without the guidance they need to overcome these challenges, further exacerbating the barriers they encounter (Shastri et al., 2022). This perspective was echoed by WE19, who noted, *'Women are often perceived as less competent or experienced in professional settings, which can make it harder to gain respect and build relationships'*. These

biases create a culture in which women must work twice as hard to prove their worth and earn the respect of clients, partners and investors. The need to constantly prove themselves and overcome prejudices is a significant burden that impacts women's ability to thrive in business.

Male entrepreneurs were also asked about their perspectives on the challenges women entrepreneurs face in the region. Participant ME6 mentioned that, '*The relatively low number of female entrepreneurs in the region contributes to the challenges they face*', and ME7 also indicated that, '*The venture capital ecosystem is predominantly male-dominated, which can create barriers for women entrepreneurs*'. This lack of representation often results in fewer opportunities for women to pitch their ideas and secure funding. Another male participant (ME3) noted, '*Women entrepreneurs often face challenges being treated equally within the entrepreneurial ecosystem. Biases in venture capital funding processes can lead to women receiving fewer opportunities to pitch their ideas or secure funding*'. These perspectives indicate that systemic biases continue to affect funding decisions, leading to disproportionate hurdles for women-led businesses.

The findings indicate that women face multiple challenges in their entrepreneurial journeys. Their challenges begin with being female (as represented in theme 2), and the challenges continue when they are establishing their businesses (theme 3), growing their businesses (theme 4), acquiring funds (theme 5) and networking (theme 6), as explored in the following sections. It can be observed that they face these challenges throughout their entrepreneurial journeys, and there is a significant need to establish a networking framework that can provide support to all women entrepreneurs.

4.4 Theme 3 – Challenges in Business Establishment

4.4.1 Financial Capital-Related Challenges

The data collected from women entrepreneurs reveals significant financial capital challenges that hinder their business ventures, particularly in securing initial capital and navigating financial systems. The complexity of opening business accounts and securing funding have been recurring obstacles for these entrepreneurs, often amplified by structural challenges and gender biases (Alva, Vivas and Urcia, 2021). The complexity of opening a business account emerged as a key barrier. One participant (WE6) highlighted the tedious nature of the process, stating that, '*the process involved extensive paperwork and navigating banking requirements, which were not always clear or straightforward*'. Several participants also shared their struggles in convincing investors to provide funding when establishing their businesses. WE2 explained, '*Securing the initial capital to start my business was particularly*

difficult because I did not have a track record in the industry, which made potential investors hesitant'. Similarly, WE3 mentioned that *'investors were hesitant to back a tech start-up led by a woman, especially in a region where female entrepreneurs are underrepresented'*. This demonstrates how gender biases influenced financial decision-making, where female-led start-ups are often viewed with more scepticism, making it harder to secure the necessary funds when they are trying to establish their businesses, as also indicated by Malmström et al. (2020). WE5, reflecting on their own journey, stated, *'Starting out, I had limited capital, which made it difficult to invest in high-quality materials, marketing and a professional team'*. The lack of adequate funding not only limited their ability to scale but also restricted their access to the resources that were essential for growth. These challenges reflect the broader issue of a challenging financial environment, particularly for women entrepreneurs, which makes the task of establishing a business much more complicated.

Moreover, the difficulties in obtaining financing are compounded by investors' lack of understanding of niche markets or innovative business models. WE10 recounted, *'Raising capital was equally challenging, as many investors were unfamiliar with the intersection of healthcare and technology in the region and required extensive convincing of the market potential and scalability of my solutions'*. This speaks to the challenge of not just securing money but convincing investors of the worth and long-term potential of novel business ideas. From the findings, it can be understood that the challenges faced by women entrepreneurs are multifaceted and deeply interwoven with issues of access to capital, network dynamics and entrenched sociocultural biases. The findings align with and extend the existing literature (Ahl, 2006; Langowitz and Minniti, 2007) by demonstrating that while both male and female entrepreneurs contend with market and operational challenges, the additional burdens placed on women, such as the need to constantly prove their competence and navigate restrictive cultural norms, result in a distinct set of obstacles. These findings highlight the rigid financial requirements that disproportionately disadvantage new women entrepreneurs, without extensive financial backing or established reputations.

4.4.2 Market and Customer Challenges

For women entrepreneurs, building a strong market presence and earning customer trust in competitive industries also presents notable challenges. The difficulties in developing a customer base, communicating the value of their businesses and overcoming biases about new enterprises are common challenges that emerged from the participants' experiences and are also indicated by researchers (Khan, 2019; Li et al., 2020). One of the prominent challenges

highlighted by several women entrepreneurs was the fierce competition in their respective markets. For instance, WE2 pointed out the significant effort required to persuade customers to choose her brand over well-established ones in the fashion market: *'The fashion market is highly competitive and convincing customers to choose my brand over established ones required significant effort'*. Similarly, WE4 faced challenges in differentiating her business: *'As a new business, it was difficult to stand out in the competitive wellness industry and gain the trust of potential customers'*. The difficulty of establishing credibility as a new business is another pressing challenge, especially for women entrepreneurs. With regard to this, WE5 described her struggle to build a loyal customer base: *'Building a loyal customer base was difficult in the beginning, as many consumers were hesitant to trust a new, untested brand'*. For these women, earning the trust of potential clients involved both external marketing efforts and internal relationship-building with their target audiences (Markovi, 2007; Rashid and Ratten, 2020).

A significant challenge faced by women entrepreneurs is the struggle to demonstrate the value and legitimacy of their businesses. WE7 shared that credibility in her business was hard-earned: *'Building a brand required significant effort in marketing and establishing my business as a thought leader'*. Similarly, WE12 explained how building credibility and differentiating her services from larger competitors involved time and sustained effort: *'Building a brand required significant effort in establishing credibility and differentiating my services from those of larger, more established firms'*. This challenge of legitimacy is not just confined to customer trust but extends to convincing investors, partners and other stakeholders of the viability of the business. WE25, for example, shared that securing funding for her business involved presenting a detailed financial projection and demonstrating market demand: *'To secure funding, I had to present detailed financial projections, a comprehensive business plan and evidence of market demand to demonstrate the viability of my business'*.

These challenges can be commonly faced by all types of entrepreneurs, but these findings provide a perspective from women entrepreneurs, which showcases that these challenges are faced at an exacerbated level by women.

4.4.3 Regulatory and Ecosystem Challenges

Women entrepreneurs often encounter significant regulatory and ecosystem challenges that complicate the process of establishing and running their businesses. The regulatory barriers in place, particularly in the context of developing markets and industries, require these entrepreneurs to invest significant time and resources to navigate complex and sometimes

unclear frameworks (Ratten, Dana and Ramadani, 2017). A major challenge identified by several participants is the difficulty of complying with regulatory frameworks that are either underdeveloped or not suited to the specific needs of new businesses. For instance, WE1 shared that navigating the regulatory environment for her business was particularly difficult: *‘I had to navigate a regulatory environment that was not well-suited to the digital business landscape at the time, which often required lengthy processes to obtain licenses and approvals’*. Similarly, WE13 highlighted the challenges posed by unclear regulations, especially in niche sectors: *‘Licensing issues were the main challenge. In the UAE, navigating the bureaucratic processes required to establish an edtech business was time-consuming and complex’*. This perspective was echoed by WE8, who elaborated on the difficulties faced related to licensing: *‘Licensing was a major challenge, as the regulatory processes in Bahrain and the UAE were complex, time-consuming and lacked transparency’*. These responses showcase the frustration many women entrepreneurs face when dealing with regulatory hurdles that seem to lag behind the evolution of the industries they operate in. The lengthy and often complicated processes involved in obtaining licenses, meeting compliance requirements and understanding the legal nuances in the MENA region are not only time-consuming but also require continuous effort to keep up with changing laws, as also indicated by Aljuwaiber (2021).

In the healthcare sector, which is heavily regulated, women entrepreneurs face additional challenges. WE14 pointed out the uncertainty that arises due to a lack of supportive legislation in emerging industries, stating, *‘The lack of legislation to support new and innovative healthcare solutions created delays and uncertainty’*. Similarly, WE21 emphasised the challenges of navigating healthcare regulations, noting, *‘Understanding and complying with local healthcare regulations was a significant hurdle, as the requirements were often unclear and time-consuming’*. The absence of clear regulatory frameworks in such sectors complicates entrepreneurs’ efforts to grow their businesses and provide solutions that meet local needs. The regulatory ambiguity often leads to delays in approvals, making it difficult to launch or expand operations in a timely manner.

The underdeveloped nature of the business ecosystem in certain regions also poses significant obstacles for women entrepreneurs. WE1 reflected on the lack of infrastructure to support digital businesses, which further complicated her ability to operate efficiently: *‘One of the main challenges I faced was the very underdeveloped ecosystem. This included limited infrastructure to support e-commerce operations’*. In markets where the business ecosystem is not fully developed, entrepreneurs often face challenges beyond regulation, such as inadequate

support systems, limited access to networks and insufficient technological infrastructures. These limitations make it harder to scale and establish sustainable operations, particularly for businesses that require significant technological resources or logistics.

4.4.4 Supply Chain and Logistics Challenges

Women entrepreneurs often face significant supply chain and logistics challenges that can hinder their business growth and operational efficiency. These challenges range from sourcing reliable suppliers and manufacturers to dealing with logistical inefficiencies and shortages that disrupt their ability to meet customer demands. One of the primary hurdles reported by participants is finding reliable suppliers and manufacturers who can meet both quality standards and budget constraints. WE2 shared her experience with this struggle: *‘Another hurdle was sourcing reliable suppliers and manufacturers who could meet my quality standards while staying within my budget’*. For many women entrepreneurs, especially those operating in competitive markets, the balance between cost-effectiveness and maintaining high-quality products is a delicate one. WE5 echoed similar challenges, noting difficulties in sourcing materials that met her standards, particularly when scaling operations to meet larger orders: *‘I encountered difficulties in sourcing materials that met my standards and ensuring timely delivery from suppliers, especially when scaling operations to handle larger orders’*. The pressure to scale up while maintaining quality and consistency often forces these entrepreneurs to build relationships with suppliers, which requires time and negotiation skills. This was further emphasised by WE22, who said, *‘Finding suppliers who could consistently deliver high-quality products at affordable prices was challenging and involved building relationships and negotiating terms’*. These experiences highlight the complexity of building a reliable supply chain, particularly in regions where supplier options may be limited or fragmented.

Logistics issues, such as delays in shipments and inefficient delivery systems, further complicate supply chain management for women entrepreneurs. WE5 described the impact of logistics on her operations, stating, *‘Ensuring efficient logistics and distribution was another hurdle, as delays in shipments could affect customer satisfaction and brand reputation’*. Timely deliveries are essential to maintaining customer satisfaction and delays can negatively impact the brand’s reputation and long-term growth. WE1 also highlighted how inadequate logistics networks in certain regions affected her ability to meet growing demand, explaining, *‘Inadequate logistics networks and a lack of local suppliers equipped to meet growing demands’* posed significant operational challenges. Without reliable and efficient logistics

networks, businesses are often forced to explore alternatives that may be costlier or less efficient, further impacting their profitability and ability to scale.

In addition, managing supply chain disruptions and dealing with supplier shortages remain prevalent concerns. WE25 emphasised the challenge of sourcing raw materials at competitive prices and ensuring timely delivery, which required building trust with suppliers: *‘Sourcing raw materials at competitive prices and ensuring timely delivery required building relationships with trustworthy suppliers’*. The fragmentation of the manufacturing industry in some regions can exacerbate this issue, as it often leads to a lack of standardisation and difficulty in finding suppliers who can meet the required delivery timelines and quality standards. For these entrepreneurs, it is not only about the availability of materials but also about aligning with partners who are committed to mutual long-term success.

4.5 Theme 4 – Challenges in Growing Businesses

4.5.1 Expansion and Operational Challenges

For women entrepreneurs, the expansion of their businesses is often accompanied by various operational challenges that demand both creativity and resilience. One of the prominent findings from the data highlights the complexities associated with scaling operations without compromising quality (Li et al., 2020). For instance, WE4 shared how *‘competing with larger wellness brands that have more resources for advertising and outreach’* created a significant obstacle to expanding her business. Similarly, WE22 highlighted the financial and logistical challenges faced when attempting to expand product lines and reach new markets, all while *‘maintaining quality or customer satisfaction’*. These challenges are compounded by the necessity to balance rapid growth with maintaining a personalised and high-quality customer experience, which is often the core of a small business’s success.

A common thread in the experiences of the women interviewed was the difficulty in accessing and securing government projects (Shastri et al., 2022). As WE6 explained, *‘Getting access to government projects to apply as a woman vendor has been a challenge. Many government projects require businesses to go through complex registration and bidding processes, which can be difficult to navigate without prior experience or insider knowledge’*. For many women entrepreneurs, this challenge is heightened by the lack of access to necessary networks, making it harder to compete with more established firms. The exclusion from such opportunities, despite the hard work and innovation these entrepreneurs put into their businesses, results in both a loss of potential revenue and further difficulty in scaling their operations. WE17 also reflected on the operational struggles in her industry, noting the

difficulty in *'maintaining client relationships, meeting evolving demands and consistently delivering high-quality results'* without the right resources and strategies.

Operational costs are another significant barrier in the growth journey. Many of the women interviewed spoke of the high levels of investment required to scale their businesses. WE7's insight into the financial strain of scaling operations is poignant: *'Scaling operations required investments in technology, logistics and distribution channels, which added financial pressure'*. Similarly, WE25 detailed the immense financial burden of managing *'costs such as raw materials, labour and logistics'* in an effort to maintain profitability. For these women, securing external funding is an ongoing struggle, limiting their ability to make necessary investments in innovation and expansion. WE16 also mentioned *'the lack of access to sufficient external funding'*, which captured the overarching frustration of many women entrepreneurs who find themselves constrained by financial barriers that inhibit their growth potential.

4.5.2 Workforce and Talent Management Challenges

The findings on workforce and talent management challenges highlight the significant difficulties faced by women entrepreneurs in finding, attracting and retaining skilled workers (Kamberidou, 2020). The task of recruiting individuals who not only possess the required technical skills but also align with the entrepreneur's vision for the business is a recurring challenge. For instance, WE9 mentioned that, *'Attracting skilled professionals who shared my vision for the business was difficult due to competition in the market'*, pointing to the market dynamics in which numerous businesses vie for a limited pool of skilled workers. This perspective was also provided by WE1, who highlighted how *'[r]ecruitment has been particularly difficult because the talent pool for specialised roles, such as technology developers and digital marketers, is highly competitive in the region'*. The competition extends beyond just finding skilled workers to include retaining them, especially for roles that require advanced technical expertise or experience (De Clercq, Brieger and Welzel, 2021).

Furthermore, some entrepreneurs face additional challenges related to aligning the values of new hires with the company's culture. WE10 reflects on this, saying, *'The biggest challenge has been finding talent that shares my passion and values'*, underlining the importance of cultural fit in addition to skill sets. This alignment is particularly crucial in the start-up environment, where the company's success depends heavily on the team's dedication and shared vision. The complexities of talent acquisition are compounded by the nature of small businesses, which often cannot compete with the salary and benefits packages offered by larger companies. As WE22 explains, *'Retaining employees has been difficult, as small businesses*

often struggle to compete with larger companies offering higher salaries and more benefits'. This makes it harder for women entrepreneurs to attract and keep talented individuals, especially in industries in which expertise is rare and highly sought after. Also, some people do not want to work for women bosses, as indicated by WE23: *'For skilled men, they don't work under women, who will be their bosses, as it sometimes hurt their ego, which also makes it difficult to hire talent. Also, you would have noticed with many women-owned businesses, their employees are also women*'. This response indicates that women also face issues in hiring skilled professionals based on people's biases related to gender.

4.6 Theme 5 – Challenges in Acquiring Funds

4.6.1 Challenges in Securing Investment Due to Credibility Concerns

In the context of women entrepreneurs securing investment, one of the significant challenges they face is establishing credibility with investors. As women entrepreneurs are frequently met with scepticism and bias, the process of building trust and proving their business's worth can be very challenging (Ho and Pollack, 2014; Henry et al., 2022). WE7 shared the struggle of proving market viability, noting that establishing credibility with investors is a significant challenge: *'I had to overcome challenges such as proving market viability and establishing credibility with investors*'. This was further reflected in WE19's response, which pointed out that investors often demand extensive evidence of market demand and a clear business model to consider funding early-stage businesses, especially led by women: *'Demonstrating the uniqueness of my business model and its potential for long-term growth required detailed market research, clear financial projections and evidence of customer interest*'.

The need to present an evidence-based approach was underscored by WE3, who emphasised the importance of presenting detailed financial projections, business plans and market research to show investors the long-term potential of the business: *'I had to provide extensive market research, detailed projections and case studies to counter these concerns and prove that my business model could succeed not just locally but also on a broader scale*'. WE5 also provided a similar perspective, noting that investors often require more than just a compelling business idea; they expect solid evidence of how the business could succeed, *'Securing their investment required presenting a compelling business plan, showcasing the potential for profitability and emphasising the unique value proposition of my brand in the market.*' This is particularly challenging for women entrepreneurs, who may struggle to

demonstrate a proven track record or may not have access to networks that provide this kind of support (Brush et al., 2017; Leitch, Welter and Henry, 2018).

Women entrepreneurs often encounter additional biases and stereotypes that hinder their ability to secure investment (Gupta et al., 2009). WE19 noted that, as a woman, she had to work harder to overcome biases that sometimes made it difficult to gain the trust of investors: *‘Additionally, as a woman entrepreneur, I had to overcome biases and stereotypes that sometimes made it harder to gain the trust of investors’*. These biases can create an additional layer of difficulty, requiring women entrepreneurs to prove their worthiness not just through their business models but also by combating the perceptions that may undermine their credibility. In this respect, persistence becomes key, as highlighted by WE1, who emphasised that overcoming these biases requires building a track record of performance and aligning with investors who value innovation and market potential over gender stereotypes: *‘Overcoming these biases required persistence, building a strong track record of performance and aligning with investors who valued innovation and market potential over stereotypes’*. It can be understood that women entrepreneurs face significant challenges in terms of securing funds due to existing biases against women, high (not mandatory) requirements for new women entrepreneurs and other similar challenges.

Male entrepreneurs also acknowledged this issue. It was found that limited investor access was another common concern, particularly as investors often favour male entrepreneurs. For instance, ME1 stated, *‘Many investors tend to favour male entrepreneurs due to existing biases and a lack of understanding of the unique challenges women face’*. This suggests that unconscious biases in the investment landscape create an uneven playing field, making it more difficult for women to secure the capital needed to scale their ventures. Similarly, entrepreneurs ME5, ME6 and ME7 emphasised the difficulties in building the right networks:

ME5: This creates additional barriers to securing venture capital, as investors may question their ability to fully dedicate themselves to their businesses.

ME6: With fewer women-led ventures, it becomes harder for women to gain visibility and access opportunities. This lack of representation in turn impacts their ability to secure venture capital and develop successful start-ups.

ME7: The venture capital ecosystem is predominantly male-dominated, which can create barriers for women entrepreneurs.

This explains how access to capital is often intertwined with social and professional networks, making it imperative for women entrepreneurs to establish strong connections in the right circles.

4.6.2 Delays and Barriers in Accessing Funds

The process of accessing funding is a critical challenge faced by many women entrepreneurs, as evidenced by the numerous delays and barriers they encounter in securing financial resources (Bittner and Lau, 2021). These obstacles are multifaceted, ranging from the rigorous approval processes to systemic biases that affect how women's business ventures are perceived by investors and financial institutions. One significant issue is the complexity and lengthiness of the loan approval process. As one participant, WE2, explained, *'The rigorous documentation process and multiple rounds of approval delayed access to funds, which put additional strain on my personal finances during the initial stages of the business'*. This delay in accessing funding not only impacts entrepreneurs' ability to grow their businesses but also puts additional financial pressure on them personally. The extensive paperwork and multiple steps required to secure a loan can create barriers, especially for first-time women entrepreneurs who might lack the experience or resources to navigate these complex systems effectively (Greene et al., 2001).

In addition to procedural delays, gender bias plays a crucial role in hindering women's access to funding. Participants reported experiencing scepticism and doubt regarding their ability to lead businesses, which they attributed to their gender. As WE1 shared, *'As a woman entrepreneur, I noticed that many investors questioned my ability to lead and grow a business in a traditionally male-dominated industry'*. Similarly, WE7 noted that, *'Women also face barriers in accessing funding, as venture capitalists and investors may perceive female entrepreneurs as higher-risk candidates'*. This gender bias, compounded by underrepresentation in decision-making roles, further discourages women from pursuing funding opportunities. WE8 pointed out that, *'Women struggle to access funding due to systemic biases and underrepresentation in decision-making roles'*. The finding indicates that, beyond individual perceptions, the overall structure of the investment landscape tends to favour male entrepreneurs, making it more difficult for women to gain the financial backing they need to thrive. Similarly, WE14 shared her experience of raising angel investment, noting that, *'Raising angel investment was challenging, with investors pulling out, which forced me to start over'*. Investors often viewed the market as too risky or fragmented, making them hesitant to invest in businesses, especially those led by women. This reluctance to fund ventures that do

not align with traditional business models can delay progress and contribute to the difficulties women face in accessing funds.

Many women entrepreneurs also faced issues in accessing funds through loans. For instance, WE2 experienced challenges securing a loan, recalling that '*[i]t involved preparing a detailed business plan, financial forecasts and proof of my ability to repay the loan. As a first-time entrepreneur, I faced scepticism from lenders who questioned the viability of my business model and my experience in the fashion industry*'. The hesitation of lenders to provide capital to businesses led by women, especially those in perceived high-risk sectors, highlights the systemic challenges that these entrepreneurs face in securing funding.

4.6.3 Funding Sources Adopted

Women entrepreneurs adopt various funding sources to finance their businesses, often relying on personal and familial resources due to the challenges associated with securing external investment. Many of them turn to personal savings and family support as their primary financial sources, while others explore options such as government grants, venture capital and business loans. Careful financial planning is also crucial for ensuring the sustainability of their ventures. Family funding plays a significant role in helping women entrepreneurs take their first steps in business. Many participants highlighted how financial and emotional support from their families enabled them to launch their ventures. As WE4 noted, '*My family's financial and emotional support also played a critical role in helping me take the leap into entrepreneurship. Their belief in my vision and willingness to assist provided me with the stability and confidence to start the business and navigate the initial risks involved*'. Similarly, WE19 shared that, '*Initially, my personal savings and financial backing from family members allowed me to cover start-up costs such as purchasing equipment and securing a production facility*'. The reliance on family support suggests that women often face difficulties accessing institutional funding, making personal networks a crucial financial safety net.

In addition to family support, personal savings and loans are commonly used funding sources. Many women entrepreneurs prefer self-funding to maintain control over their businesses while avoiding the complexities and biases associated with external funding. As WE6 explained, '*I used my own savings to fund my business. This decision allowed me to avoid the complexities and delays associated with seeking external funding, such as loans or investments. By relying on personal savings, I maintained full control over my business decisions and avoided the pressure of meeting investor expectations*'. Similarly, WE18 emphasised the importance of financial independence, stating, '*I self-funded my business, using*

personal savings to establish and grow the company. This approach gave me full control over my operations and decisions but required careful financial planning and management'. While self-funding provides autonomy, it also demands careful financial planning, as entrepreneurs must ensure their resources last through the critical early stages of business development.

Despite the preference for self-funding, some entrepreneurs seek external support through government grants and venture capital. Government grants provide crucial financial assistance, particularly for technology-driven businesses. As WE3 shared, *'I applied for government grants designed to support technology start-ups in the region. These grants not only provided financial support but also helped build credibility for my business in the eyes of other stakeholders, including potential clients and partners'*. The credibility that grants offer can be instrumental in attracting additional funding sources, demonstrating the role of government programmes in fostering female entrepreneurship. Venture capital is another funding avenue pursued by some entrepreneurs, though it requires extensive effort to secure. As WE1 recounted, *'I secured funding through venture capital. This involved approaching multiple investors and presenting a detailed business plan that highlighted the market opportunity, growth potential and scalability of the business'*. While venture capital provides growth potential, it also introduces external pressures and expectations, which some women entrepreneurs prefer to avoid by self-funding.

It can be understood that these funding sources adopted by women entrepreneurs reflect a strategic balance between maintaining financial independence and securing external resources for growth. Many rely on personal savings and family support to establish their businesses, while those seeking expansion explore venture capital, government grants and business loans. Given the barriers to accessing institutional funding, careful financial planning remains essential for sustainability. The funding sources adopted by women entrepreneurs reflect both resilience and systemic barriers. Many have no choice but to self-fund because investors and financial institutions are reluctant to support them. The reliance on personal savings and family contributions underscores the limited access to external capital, with gender biases continuing to shape the investment landscape. While some manage to secure venture capital or government grants, the process is far more difficult than it should be, indicating the need for more equitable financial opportunities for women in entrepreneurship.

4.7 Theme 6 – Networking Challenges for Women Entrepreneurs

4.7.1 Male-Dominated Networking Spaces

Women entrepreneurs frequently encounter difficulties in networking due to the male-dominated nature of many professional spaces (Bridges et al., 2022). These challenges manifest in different ways, including exclusionary environments, gender bias and cultural norms that discourage women's participation (Bridges et al., 2022). Many networking events are structured in ways that inadvertently favour men, making it harder for women to gain visibility and credibility. As WE1 noted, *'Many networking activities are designed with men in mind, which can present challenges for women. For example, events held during late evenings or in exclusive venues may not be accessible for women due to cultural or personal commitments'*. This indicates that scheduling and location choices for networking events often fail to consider women's responsibilities and constraints, thereby limiting their participation. Bias in male-dominated forums further exacerbates the challenge, as women struggle to have their voices heard and their contributions acknowledged. As WE3 stated, *'In some male-dominated forums, I have noticed that my ideas or contributions were not given the same level of attention or respect as those of my male counterparts. This bias can make it challenging to build meaningful connections or establish credibility'*. This lack of recognition can discourage women from actively engaging in networking, ultimately restricting their access to business growth opportunities. Moreover, cultural norms often reinforce these barriers. As WE21 explained, *'Cultural norms and biases may discourage women from engaging in networking activities or make them feel unwelcome in predominantly male spaces'*. This also indicates that in some societies, women may face additional social pressure that limits their ability to freely engage in professional networking.

The findings from male entrepreneurs also highlight the gender-specific challenges that women face in networking and entrepreneurship, particularly in male-dominated industries such as technology, construction and mining. Male entrepreneurs acknowledged that these sectors often present additional barriers for women, making it more difficult for them to find mentors, collaborators and funding opportunities. As ME2 pointed out, *'Networking challenges differ across industries, particularly in male-dominated sectors such as oil and gas or mining, where women often face additional barriers'*. This suggests that the structural composition of certain industries inherently limits women's access to key networking opportunities, requiring targeted interventions to bridge the gap.

4.7.2 Balancing Personal and Professional Responsibilities

One of the major networking challenges women entrepreneurs faces is the difficulty of balancing family responsibilities with professional commitments (De Clercq, Brieger and Welzel, 2021). Many networking events are scheduled at times that clash with family obligations, making it difficult for women to participate, and the scheduling issue is particularly problematic for women who are primary caregivers (Rehman and Roomi, 2012). WE2 described this challenge, stating that, *‘Women often struggle with balancing time between family commitments and networking. Many events are scheduled during evenings or weekends, which might conflict with family responsibilities’*. This suggests that traditional networking models do not accommodate the realities of women’s lives, potentially excluding them from crucial opportunities.

Furthermore, societal expectations often place additional pressure on women to prioritise domestic responsibilities over professional advancement (Rehman and Roomi, 2012). WE15 highlighted this issue, saying that, *‘Women are often judged not only on their professional abilities but also on how well they conform to cultural and societal norms, which can limit their access to networking opportunities’*. This judgment can make women hesitant to actively participate in networking, fearing criticism for prioritising their careers over familial obligations. Women entrepreneurs may also struggle with balancing their networking efforts alongside their core business operations. As WE16 shared, *‘Time constraints and a lack of alignment in business styles have been challenges. Balancing networking activities with core business operations is difficult, and differences in approach or objectives with potential collaborators can hinder the formation of meaningful connections’*. This demonstrates that, beyond family obligations, women also face logistical difficulties in managing their businesses while investing time in networking.

The challenges in networking with women entrepreneurs, as identified by male entrepreneurs, highlight several cultural and social factors that impact interactions and hinder collaborative opportunities (Bruin, Brush and Welter, 2006). A recurring finding was the impact of cultural and societal norms on both the willingness and ability of women to engage in mixed-gender networking environments. ME1 mentioned that, *‘For example, there are instances where women may feel hesitant to network in mixed-gender environments’*, which speaks to the discomfort and social constraints that affect their participation. This challenge is further emphasised by another participant, ME2, who noted that, *‘Challenges arise from cultural and societal norms in the GCC [the Gulf Cooperation Council] and Middle East, which may*

discourage women from fully participating in mixed-gender networking'. The underlying issue here is the prevalence of cultural expectations that discourage open interaction between genders, making it difficult for women to engage freely with their male counterparts. Moreover, certain societal expectations seem to influence the professional dynamics of mixed-gender interactions. ME3 also highlighted that, '*Cultural and social norms can restrict women from speaking freely with male counterparts, limiting their ability to network effectively*', underscoring the potential missed opportunities for professional development and collaboration. These norms often create barriers to effective communication, resulting in professional interactions that are either limited or overshadowed by discomfort. The discomfort in mixed-gender settings is not just limited to verbal interactions but also extends to the physical environment of networking events. ME4 also shared that, '*Cultural and religious beliefs often create challenges in mixed-gender networking events*', which suggests that the structure and nature of such events may inadvertently alienate women from participating fully. As a result, societal barriers such as alcohol consumption or inappropriate social behaviour may deter women from forming genuine professional connections.

Also, it is interesting to note that this particular challenge of balancing personal and professional responsibilities makes networking a more significant obstacle for women entrepreneurs compared to their male counterparts. This is because women in traditional societies, such as those in the MENA region, are expected to take on the primary role in managing household duties and caregiving. These responsibilities limit the time and flexibility women have to engage in networking activities, attend industry events or build relationships with potential investors and business partners. In contrast, men often have fewer societal expectations regarding domestic responsibilities, allowing them to dedicate more time to professional engagements and networking opportunities. The extent to which this challenge affects women entrepreneurs does depend on cultural norms, family structures and institutional support.

4.7.3 Overly Formal Networking Structures

While structured networking events can provide a platform for professional interactions, they may sometimes hinder genuine relationship-building. Many women entrepreneurs have found that excessively formal settings limit the organic and meaningful connections necessary for long-term professional growth (Davis, 2012). As WE1 explained, '*I have not faced any challenges while networking. However, I have observed that some networking events can be overly formal or structured, which might limit genuine interactions and relationship-building*'.

This indicates that while formal networking structures can provide an initial opportunity to meet new people, they do not always foster the deep, trust-based relationships that are crucial for business growth. Rigid formats and predetermined interactions often prevent spontaneous and meaningful discussions. Unlike informal networking, which allows for more organic conversations, structured events can sometimes feel transactional (Krackhardt and Stern, 1988). Women entrepreneurs might find it difficult to build long-term professional relationships in such settings, making networking feel less effective.

Another significant aspect raised by the male participants is the need for women-focused networking events and mentorship programmes to address these challenges. ME3 also noted that, *'In male-dominated sectors like construction or technology, women may face more barriers to entry and fewer networking opportunities. In such cases, creating women-centric events or programmes can help bridge the gap and provide targeted support'*. This indicates that deliberate efforts to create inclusive spaces can help women build meaningful professional relationships and access crucial resources (Pini, Brown and Ryan, 2004). The findings also reveal contrasting perspectives on gender differences in networking and funding access. While some participants observed that men typically have wider networks and greater access to funding, others suggested that recent initiatives aimed at empowering women have led to increased opportunities. As ME1 remarked, *'Yes, men usually have wider networks and greater access to funding opportunities'*, whereas ME4 suggested that *'women are often given more opportunities than men due to global and regional initiatives focused on women's empowerment'*. This highlights a nuanced debate, where structural disadvantages for women in networking persist, yet recent gender-focused initiatives have started to shift the landscape.

4.7.4 Women Cannot Break into Informal Networks

A significant barrier for women entrepreneurs is the challenge of accessing informal or exclusive professional circles, often referred to as the 'old boys' club.' Many key business deals and opportunities are discussed within these networks, making them crucial for professional success. However, women frequently find themselves excluded from such spaces. As WE3 pointed out, *'Many influential networks are informal and exclusive, making it difficult for women to gain entry or be taken seriously within these circles'*, This reflects a broader issue of exclusion, where longstanding professional relationships prevent outsiders, especially women from integrating into these groups. Newer women entrepreneurs face even greater difficulties in penetrating established networks. As WE4 shared, *'As a relatively new entrepreneur, I've found it challenging to break into established networks where participants often already know*

each other. This can make it harder to build meaningful connections and gain visibility'. Without pre-existing relationships or strong endorsements, women entrepreneurs struggle to gain the credibility needed to join these networks. Moreover, cultural and societal factors can further restrict women's access to informal business circles. As WE2 expressed, *'As a woman entrepreneur, I have sometimes felt out of place in male-dominated settings where the dynamics can be intimidating or exclusionary'*. This sense of exclusion discourages women from actively engaging in informal networking spaces, which limits their access to crucial industry insights and investment opportunities.

Despite efforts to promote gender diversity in networking spaces, challenges remain according to the perspectives of the male entrepreneurs interviewed. Some male entrepreneurs noted that women entrepreneurs often struggle with self-doubt and hesitation in navigating these spaces. As ME2 stated, *'Women entrepreneurs face several challenges, including self-doubt, hesitation to delegate responsibilities and difficulty marketing themselves and their businesses'*. ME6 also stated that, *'The statistics I have read depict a more challenging situation for women entrepreneurs when it comes to fundraising. Women often face biases and additional hurdles in securing funding compared to their male counterparts'*. These findings indicate that, beyond structural barriers, psychological and cultural factors also play a role in limiting women's networking success, emphasising the need for mentorship and confidence-building initiatives.

4.7.5 Most Events Not Relevant to Business and Limited Access

Women entrepreneurs often struggle to gain entry into high-profile networking events, which are essential for business growth, funding opportunities and industry visibility. Many of these events operate on an invitation-only basis, making it difficult for newer or less-connected women entrepreneurs to participate. WE5 highlighted this issue, stating that, *'Many high-profile networking opportunities are invitation-only, making it difficult for emerging entrepreneurs to gain access.'* This exclusivity creates a barrier for women who do not have existing connections in influential business circles. Without access to these high-profile events, women entrepreneurs miss out on potential partnerships, investment opportunities and exposure to industry leaders. One of the significant networking challenges for women entrepreneurs is finding events that align with their industry and business goals. Many networking opportunities are structured in a way that caters to large, well-established businesses, leaving smaller or niche businesses struggling to find relevant connections. WE2 shared this frustration, stating that, *'Yes, I have faced difficulty finding the right events tailored*

to my niche. Many networking events are either too broad in focus or cater to larger, more established businesses, which can make it challenging for smaller brands like mine to find relevant opportunities'. This highlights how many women entrepreneurs, particularly those running smaller businesses, feel excluded from mainstream networking events that prioritise big corporations.

A lack of industry-specific networking opportunities further compounds the problem. WE4 echoed this concern, saying that, *'Many events are too broad or not specifically tailored to the wellness industry, which limits their relevance to my business'*. This finding also indicates that, even when networking events are available, they often do not cater to specialised sectors, making it difficult for entrepreneurs to make meaningful connections within their industry. Even when women entrepreneurs do attend networking events, they sometimes find them unproductive. As WE14 explained, *'Understanding the value of specific events has been challenging, as some are not fruitful'*, which indicates that women entrepreneurs may invest time and effort in attending networking events only to find that they do not yield the expected results in terms of partnerships, collaborations or business growth.

4.7.6 Challenges in Finding Reliable Business Partners

Finding reliable business partners is a fundamental aspect of entrepreneurship, yet women entrepreneurs often struggle to establish trustworthy collaborations. Whether it is securing dependable suppliers, forming strategic partnerships or building a strong client base, networking challenges make it difficult for women to connect with the right people. WE5 emphasised this difficulty, stating that, *'Establishing trust and finding reliable business partners for collaborations and supply chain management has been essential but challenging'*. The finding suggests that, beyond simply networking, women entrepreneurs must navigate the complexities of building credibility and trust in business relationships. Trust is a critical factor in long-term collaboration and women often find it challenging to secure partnerships that align with their values and business goals.

For newer entrepreneurs, the difficulty of networking is even greater, as they often start without a solid network or industry connections. As WE19 explained, *'Building a network was equally challenging as I was new to the industry and needed to establish connections with suppliers, clients and other stakeholders'*. This highlights how women who are just starting their entrepreneurial journeys struggle to break into established business networks, making it difficult for them to access reliable resources and trusted partners. The challenge of finding reliable business partners is often linked to the broader issue of exclusion from key networking

spaces. Women entrepreneurs who lack access to high-profile networking opportunities or industry-specific groups may find themselves at a disadvantage when seeking dependable collaborators. Without strong business networks, they face barriers in establishing supply chains, securing funding, or expanding their market reach.

While many women entrepreneurs experience significant challenges in networking, some have found the process to be relatively smooth, particularly when operating in supportive ecosystems or industries that encourage collaboration. Certain regions and sectors provide substantial backing for women entrepreneurs, making networking more accessible and productive. As WE9 shared, *'I have not encountered unique challenges; the region offers substantial support for women entrepreneurs'*. This perspective highlights that, in some environments, women entrepreneurs benefit from structured support systems that facilitate networking and professional growth. In addition, personality traits and industry dynamics can influence networking experiences. As WE17 explained, *'No, I have not faced challenges as I am an extrovert'*, which indicates that confidence and social ease can play a crucial role in overcoming networking barriers. Similarly, WE20 stated, *'I find that people in the art and culture space are generally open to collaboration and eager to share their knowledge and experiences'*. This indicates that industries with a strong culture of openness and inclusivity may present fewer networking obstacles for women entrepreneurs. However, while some women do not perceive networking as a challenge, their experiences highlight the importance of having access to well-structured support systems and inclusive professional spaces where networking can thrive.

4.8 Theme 7 – Key Market Impact Factors

4.8.1 Cultural Factors

Cultural influences play a crucial role in shaping the business activities of women entrepreneurs, particularly in regions with strong cultural traditions and consumer preferences. The findings are in line with Badghish et al. (2022), who also highlight the significance of cultural congruence in consumer markets. WE2 highlighted this challenge, stating that, *'Cultural and seasonal preferences in the region influence product design and marketing strategies. For instance, demand for certain styles or fabrics fluctuates based on religious or social occasions, requiring careful planning to meet these expectations'*. This underscores the need for businesses to remain flexible and responsive to cultural trends to maintain relevance and sustain customer engagement. Moreover, cultural expectations extend beyond product design to business operations. In certain industries, women entrepreneurs must navigate

preferences for gender-segregated spaces or industry-specific cultural norms. As WE4 shared, *‘Cultural nuances in the region, such as preferences for gender-segregated spaces or specific wellness practices, influence how I design and market my services’*. The finding implies that businesses in fields such as wellness and healthcare must be particularly mindful of cultural sensitivities to ensure acceptance and customer satisfaction.

In addition, cultural diversity within a region means that entrepreneurs must adapt to varying consumer expectations and behaviours. WE9 emphasised this challenge, stating that, *‘Cultural differences require sensitivity and adaptability when working with diverse clients across the MENA region’*. This highlights the importance of cultural awareness in business operations, especially for those serving multiple markets. Entrepreneurs must continuously refine their strategies to align with cultural shifts, evolving media landscapes and changing consumer preferences to remain competitive in a dynamic market. The current study further contributes to the literature (e.g. Batjargal et al., 2019; Modarresi and Arasti, 2021; Bridges et al., 2022;) by underscoring the direct influence of cultural expectations on operational choices, including the need for gender-segregated venues and the implementation of culturally specific wellness measures. In contrast to other studies (e.g. Hellmann and Puri, 2000; Knight, 2006) that have primarily examined customer behaviour or product modification, the results of the current study indicate that cultural influences can influence internal corporate structures and processes. Many entrepreneurs must tailor their products, services and marketing strategies to align with cultural expectations and shifting consumer behaviours.

4.8.2 Economic Factors

Economic conditions play a significant role in determining the success and sustainability of women entrepreneurs’ businesses. Factors such as currency fluctuations, economic stability and changes in government policies directly impact operations, consumer spending and overall profitability. As WE1 shared, *‘Moreover, currency fluctuations and political instability in some parts of the region add layers of uncertainty that require careful risk management and contingency planning’*. This highlights how entrepreneurs must adopt strategies to mitigate financial risks and navigate uncertainties that can affect supply chains, investments and pricing structures. Furthermore, the experiences of the participants in this research indicate that economic recessions diminish customer confidence and limit investment prospects for women-led enterprises. These findings are in line with studies (e.g. Knight, 2006; Lock and Smith, 2016; Ribeiro-Soriano, 2017; Hellmann and Puri, 2000; Neumann, 2020; Sajjad et al., 2020)

that also indicate that economic instability is a universal obstacle, which affects women entrepreneurs.

In addition, economic stability influences consumer confidence and, consequently, business performance. When economies experience downturns, purchasing power decreases, affecting sales and investment in new business ventures. WE3 emphasised this connection, stating that, *‘Economic stability affects consumer confidence and business investments, which directly influence the demand for technology solutions. Political or economic uncertainties in the region can disrupt business operations and slow down growth’*. This reflects how economic shifts impact various sectors differently, requiring entrepreneurs to adjust their approaches based on prevailing financial conditions. Government policies, such as taxation and trade regulations, further shape the economic landscape for women entrepreneurs. As WE23 pointed out, *‘Government policies, such as taxation and e-commerce regulations, also influence the cost and scalability of the business’*. The difficulties of recruiting and keeping competent workers are well discussed in entrepreneurial research. The current study’s results underscore the specific challenges faced by women entrepreneurs in competitive areas, particularly those requiring specialised knowledge. Prior research has also identified talent shortages in emerging markets (Valliere and Peterson, 2009; Francesca, Paola and Paola, 2017; Alva, Vivas and Urcia, 2021); however, the current study’s findings underscore that women-led companies often have issues such as lack of money and lower operational scales that it make it difficult for them to compete with bigger companies. These findings indicate that navigating bureaucratic and financial constraints is an ongoing challenge for entrepreneurs, particularly those looking to scale their businesses. It can be understood that women entrepreneurs must develop resilient strategies, diversify revenue streams and stay informed about economic trends that impact their industries to further sustain economic growth.

4.8.3 Human Resources

The availability and retention of skilled labour are significant concerns for women entrepreneurs, particularly in competitive industries requiring specialised expertise. Many entrepreneurs struggle to find and keep qualified employees, making business growth and operations more challenging. WE3 underscored the importance of skilled labour, stating that, *‘The availability of skilled labour is critical for my business, as technology development requires a highly specialised workforce. The competition for top talent in the region often makes it challenging to find and retain qualified professionals’*. The finding suggests how businesses in technology-driven industries face intense competition for talent, which can limit

their ability to expand and innovate. Retaining employees is another challenge, particularly for small businesses that may not offer the same financial incentives as larger corporations. WE22 expressed this difficulty, stating that, *'Retaining employees has been difficult, as small businesses often struggle to compete with larger companies offering higher salaries and more benefits'*. Women entrepreneurs must find alternative ways to attract and retain talent, such as fostering a strong workplace culture, offering flexible work arrangements, or providing professional development opportunities (Caputo and Dolinsky, 1998; Cetindamar et al., 2012).

Some industries require employees with highly specialised expertise, making recruitment even more difficult. As WE24 shared, *'Recruiting skilled professionals with expertise in both healthcare and technology was particularly difficult'*. This indicates that businesses operating at the intersection of multiple industries face even greater hiring challenges, as they must find professionals with niche skills. Women entrepreneurs must continuously invest in training, mentorship and strategic hiring practices to overcome labour shortages and build strong teams (Davis, 2012).

4.8.4 Regulatory Factors

Regulatory compliance is a major concern for women entrepreneurs, particularly those operating across multiple markets with differing legal frameworks. Government regulations related to trade, taxation and industry standards can create significant administrative and operational burdens. As WE1 explained, *'Each country has unique legal, tax and compliance frameworks that must be navigated carefully. For instance, differences in import duties, data privacy laws and consumer protection policies can complicate cross-border operations'*. This suggests that entrepreneurs managing international or regional businesses must invest time and resources into understanding regulatory differences and ensuring compliance. Some industries, such as healthcare and technology, have particularly complex regulatory landscapes. As WE10 noted, *'Differences in standards for data privacy, medical device approvals and reimbursement policies can create significant administrative and operational burdens'*. This highlights how industry-specific regulations can make it difficult for businesses to scale efficiently, as entrepreneurs must meet varying compliance requirements in different markets.

Furthermore, navigating trade policies and taxation laws can significantly impact profitability and business operations. As WE22 stated, *'Trade policies, including import/export regulations and tariffs, influence the cost and availability of goods, impacting profitability'*. This suggests that shifts in government policies can either facilitate or hinder business expansion, depending on how they affect supply chains and cost structures. Respondents

pointed out that the new regulations of the industry devoted specifically to the healthcare and IT companies are also a source of additional costs of compliance, which result in limiting their growth and innovation. Unlike other prior studies (e.g. Hall and O'Toole, 2004; Valliere and Peterson, 2009; Francesca, Paola and Paola, 2017; Agostino et al., 2020; Alva, Vivas and Urcia, 2021) that exclusively examine the entire effects of the legal environment on the company's performance, this research reveals how these laws could seriously limit women-led firms and suggests policies that pay more attention to the gender issues in this area. Entrepreneurs must stay informed about evolving regulations and work closely with legal experts to ensure their businesses remain compliant while maintaining operational efficiency.

4.8.5 Technological Factors

Technology plays a vital role in shaping the activities of women entrepreneurs, influencing how they market, operate and expand their businesses. The rapid evolution of digital tools, e-commerce platforms and industry-specific innovations requires entrepreneurs to stay adaptable and informed. WE2 emphasised this need, stating that, '*I must constantly innovate and adapt to changing trends and consumer demands*'. This highlights how businesses must continuously evolve to remain competitive in an increasingly digital market. In addition, technological investments can be costly, particularly for small businesses. As WE19 explained, '*The adoption of new technologies in the manufacturing process is essential to staying competitive, but it requires significant investment and training, which can be challenging in the MENA region's evolving industrial landscape*'. This suggests that while technology adoption is crucial for long-term success, financial constraints may limit entrepreneurs' ability to implement advanced tools. Previous studies (e.g. Hampton, Gowan and Cooper, 2011; Gowan, Cooper and Hampton, 2013; Alakaleek and Cooper, 2018; Struckell et al., 2022) have highlighted the advantages of digital tools and e-commerce platforms; nevertheless, this study indicates that several women entrepreneurs face significant obstacles due to the high expenses associated with technical investments and the need for continuous training. It can be understood from these findings that women entrepreneurs must seek cost-effective technological solutions, explore digital marketing strategies and leverage online platforms to expand their reach and visibility.

4.9 Theme 8 – Perceptions of Networking Benefits for Business Growth

4.9.1 Networking Builds Credibility

Networking plays a fundamental role in helping women entrepreneurs establish credibility and expand their reach. By fostering strong professional connections, entrepreneurs

can gain referrals, access influential industry figures and enhance their business reputation. In industries in which trust is paramount, such as wellness, personal services or finance, credibility is often a key differentiator (Brush, Bruin and Welter, 2009; Brush et al., 2017). WE4 highlighted this, stating that, '*It also helps me gain referrals and recommendations, which are crucial for building trust and credibility in the wellness industry*'. This suggests that credibility is not only built through direct client interactions but also through word-of-mouth recommendations facilitated by networking.

Furthermore, partnerships formed through networking strengthen an entrepreneur's reputation by association (Forret and Dougherty, 2004). WE7 emphasised this, stating that, '*Partnerships expand my reach and enhance credibility by associating with established entities*'. This demonstrates that aligning with reputable businesses or mentors can elevate an entrepreneur's profile and create further growth opportunities. Attending industry events and actively engaging in professional circles can also enhance visibility and credibility. As WE21 noted, '*Building relationships with industry leaders and peers enhances my reputation, making it easier to attract clients and investors*'. This highlights the long-term benefits of networking in positioning entrepreneurs as industry experts. Male entrepreneurs also acknowledged that access to established industry leaders through networking can help women gain credibility and valuable insights, as participant ME1 pointed out: '*Networking also helps women showcase their capabilities, gain credibility and access opportunities that might otherwise be unavailable*'. The male entrepreneurs also acknowledged the broader impact of networking in fostering a supportive ecosystem in which women can collaborate, gain confidence and seek mentorship (Manolova et al., 2007). More women may feel encouraged to step into entrepreneurship and navigate challenges more effectively by creating a structured networking framework. As participant ME2 noted, '*A networking framework would encourage more women to pursue entrepreneurship by providing access to mentorship, funding opportunities and a supportive community*'. This reinforces the idea that networking is not just about business transactions but also about cultivating a collaborative and empowering environment in which women entrepreneurs can thrive. Women entrepreneurs can strategically leverage networking opportunities to gain trust, strengthen their brand and establish themselves as credible leaders in their respective industries.

4.9.2 Networking Creates Economic and Sustainable Business

Networking is instrumental in helping women entrepreneurs build and sustain their businesses by providing access to potential clients, investors and strategic partners (McAdam,

Harrison and Leitch, 2019). It facilitates business expansion by connecting entrepreneurs to valuable resources that contribute to long-term success (Guire, 2002). WE3 reinforced this point by stating that, *‘Connections made through networking have led to introductions to potential clients and investors, contributing to the growth and sustainability of my business’*. This underscores how strategic networking efforts can result in tangible business benefits, including funding and new market opportunities. Beyond financial benefits, networking also enables business owners to collaborate with industry professionals to strengthen their offerings. As WE4 shared, *‘Networking helps by building awareness about my brand and services. Through networking, I’ve been able to connect with potential collaborators, such as fitness instructors and nutritionists, who have helped expand my offerings and attract more clients’*. This demonstrates that business sustainability is closely linked to an entrepreneur’s ability to form meaningful professional relationships that drive value. In addition, networking allows entrepreneurs to exchange knowledge and learn from others’ experiences, ensuring they remain adaptable in a changing market (Moletta et al., 2023). As WE18 observed, *‘Networking helps by sharing best practices, staying updated on industry trends and building meaningful connections. It enables me to learn from others, access new opportunities and strengthen my business’s reputation within the industry’*. This highlights that networking is not only about direct business transactions but also about creating a supportive ecosystem that fosters continuous learning and resilience.

The economic contributions of women’s networking extend far beyond individual business success, influencing broader economic growth, innovation and job creation (Moletta et al., 2023). Male entrepreneurs in this study acknowledged that a structured networking framework could harness the untapped potential of women entrepreneurs, leading to substantial economic benefits, as also indicated by Neumeyer et al. (2019). Participant ME1 highlighted this by stating that, *‘A networking framework for women entrepreneurs could boost innovation, create jobs and enhance diversity in the region’s economy’*. ME7 also stated that, *‘Enabling women entrepreneurs through a structured networking framework would lead to job creation, innovation and economic growth in the MENA region. It would also promote diversity and inclusivity, which are essential for long-term sustainability’*. This emphasises that networking not only supports individual business ventures but also strengthens the overall economic fabric by promoting inclusivity and varied perspectives in entrepreneurship. Several participants stressed that women represent an underutilised economic resource, particularly in the MENA region. Participant ME3 pointed out, *‘Women are a significant untapped resource in the MENA*

region'. This perspective suggests that effective networking strategies could lead to greater economic participation by women, fostering both short-term financial gains and long-term sustainable development. Similarly, participant ME4 reinforced this view, stating that, *'Integrating them more fully into the economy through a robust networking framework could unlock innovation, create jobs and drive sustainable growth across the region'*. M6 also outlined that, *'Enabling women entrepreneurs could create substantial job opportunities, foster innovation and drive economic growth in the MENA region'*. These responses reflect a consensus among male entrepreneurs that networking can play a transformative role in unlocking economic opportunities for women. Beyond innovation and job creation, networking is also seen as a key driver of economic diversity. Participant ME2 highlighted the importance of structured support systems, stating that, *'There are many talented and hardworking women in the MENA region whose ideas and skills remain untapped. A structured framework would empower these women to transform their ideas into successful businesses, driving innovation, job creation and economic growth'*. This underscores the idea that providing women with access to the right networks could lead to a more diverse and competitive economy, where different perspectives contribute to industry growth and resilience.

4.9.3 Networking Enables Creating Awareness

One of the significant benefits of networking for women entrepreneurs is the ability to increase visibility and brand awareness (Brush, Bruin and Welter, 2009). Through participation in industry events, online platforms and professional groups, entrepreneurs can showcase their expertise and attract potential clients and partners. WE17 stated that, *'Networking is very effective as it provides exposure and builds awareness'*. This highlights the power of networking in helping businesses gain recognition in their respective fields. In addition to increasing personal and business visibility, networking platforms provide opportunities to share ideas and knowledge. As WE9 explained, *'These platforms provide opportunities to connect with peers, share insights and stay informed about industry developments'*. This suggests that networking is not just about making business contacts but also about positioning oneself as an active participant in industry conversations. Moreover, professional forums and networking groups serve as valuable channels for exchanging ideas and staying informed about trends. WE12 pointed out, *'Forums provide a platform to exchange ideas, discuss industry trends and build relationships with like-minded professionals'*. By engaging in such discussions, women entrepreneurs can establish their presence in their industries and create opportunities for growth.

4.9.4 Networking Provides Unique Partnership Benefits

Forming strategic partnerships through networking allows women entrepreneurs to access new markets, streamline operations and enhance their business offerings (Weber and Kratzer, 2013). By attending trade shows, industry conferences and business events, entrepreneurs can identify potential collaborators who complement their business models. As WE1 shared, *'It also opens doors to partnerships, collaborations and market entry opportunities that might not have been accessible otherwise. For instance, I have been able to identify and connect with logistics providers and tech start-ups that have significantly improved the efficiency of my supply chain'*. This illustrates how networking can provide direct operational benefits by facilitating partnerships that improve business efficiency. Similarly, networking enables entrepreneurs to connect with industry professionals who can help enhance their products and services. As WE3 emphasised, *'I have been able to form strategic partnerships with other companies to co-develop products or expand into new markets'*. This demonstrates how networking can create expansion opportunities that might not have been possible without these relationships. In addition, networking plays a crucial role in marketing and brand promotion. As WE4 noted, *'It has also allowed me to establish relationships with retailers and influencers who promote my brand to a wider audience'*. This highlights how collaborations formed through networking can significantly enhance brand visibility and consumer reach, ultimately leading to business growth.

4.9.5 Networking Increases Visibility

For women entrepreneurs, visibility is key to accessing new business opportunities and establishing credibility in their industries. Engaging with professional associations, business groups and industry forums allows entrepreneurs to position themselves as thought leaders and gain exposure to influential decision-makers. As WE3 remarked, *'Actively participating in professional associations and industry-specific groups can help women gain visibility and access to influential connections'*. This suggests that sustained engagement in networking circles can lead to greater professional recognition. In addition to professional associations, women-focused business groups provide a platform for mentorship and support. WE22 mentioned *'Joining women-focused business groups and actively seeking mentorship'*. This highlights the importance of targeted networking strategies that cater specifically to women entrepreneurs, helping them navigate industry challenges and build lasting professional relationships. Through consistent networking efforts, women entrepreneurs can increase their visibility in competitive industries, making it easier to attract clients, investors and

collaborators. The increased presence in industry circles ultimately enhances credibility and opens doors to greater opportunities.

4.9.6 Networking Provides Access to Industry Insights and Partnerships

Networking is a powerful tool for staying informed about industry trends, consumer preferences and emerging technologies. By engaging with professionals across different sectors, women entrepreneurs can gain valuable insights that help them make informed business decisions. WE1 emphasised this, stating that, *'Through networking, I gain insights into emerging trends, consumer behaviours and innovative technologies that can enhance my operations'*. This demonstrates how networking serves as a critical information channel that helps entrepreneurs stay ahead of market shifts. Online platforms and industry forums also provide spaces for learning and collaboration. As WE2 shared, *'Online platforms and social media groups are also valuable for building relationships, sharing insights and staying updated on industry developments. These channels provide opportunities to learn from others' experiences and identify potential partnerships that can help grow my business'*. This suggests that digital networking opportunities are just as valuable as in-person interactions, offering continuous access to industry knowledge. Also, industry-specific conferences and professional groups create spaces for entrepreneurs to discuss challenges, exchange ideas and explore collaboration opportunities. As WE11 noted, *'Industry conferences allow me to meet potential partners, clients and suppliers while staying updated on the latest trends and innovations'*. This highlights the importance of networking not only for business growth but also for staying relevant in a rapidly evolving market.

According to male entrepreneurs also, networking plays a crucial role in the success of women entrepreneurs by providing them with access to resources, mentorship and funding, ultimately helping them overcome the unique challenges they face in the business world. Male entrepreneurs acknowledged that networking can be instrumental in building trust, increasing visibility and facilitating connections with investors and industry experts. For instance, ME6 indicated that, *'Networking helps women entrepreneurs connect with mentors, investors and collaborators, enabling them to gain visibility and build credibility'*. ME5 also stated that, *'Networking connects women entrepreneurs with mentors, investors, and potential collaborators, helping them gain visibility and build credibility'*. These responses highlight the impact of networking on expanding opportunities for women-led businesses. Another participant, ME3, reinforced the idea that networking serves as a gateway to mentorship and funding, which are critical for business growth. He stated that, *'Networking provides women*

entrepreneurs with opportunities to meet like-minded individuals, showcase their success stories and identify ways to level the playing field'. This suggests that, beyond financial benefits, networking allows women to share experiences, learn from role models and position themselves more competitively in their industries.

4.10 Theme 9 – Preferred Networking Channels

4.10.1 Industry Forums and Accelerator Programmes

Industry forums and accelerator programmes provide women entrepreneurs with structured environments to network, learn and access growth opportunities (Jack, Dodd and Anderson, 2004; Bastian, Wood and Ng, 2023). These platforms offer mentorship, funding and valuable connections with industry experts and investors. WE3 emphasised the importance of these channels, stating that, *'I network through industry forums and accelerator programmes'*. This highlights how these platforms facilitate engagement with key industry stakeholders and potential collaborators. Accelerator programmes are particularly beneficial for start-ups, as they provide access to resources, training and financial backing (Eijdenberg et al., 2019). WE3 further elaborated: *'Accelerator programmes have been particularly valuable, as they not only offer mentorship and resources but also create opportunities to collaborate with other start-ups and connect with investors'*. This suggests that accelerators are not only about funding but also about fostering long-term business relationships that drive innovation. Workshops and specialised initiatives also play a critical role in networking by providing structured spaces for interaction. As WE10 noted, *'I network through programmes such as the Cartier Women's Initiative, Endeavor and INSEAD networks'*. This shows that entrepreneurs actively seek out high-impact programmes that align with their business growth strategies. Industry forums and accelerator programmes thus serve as essential networking channels, offering mentorship, exposure and collaboration opportunities that are crucial for business success.

4.10.2 Industry Events and Communities

Industry events and community-based gatherings serve as vital networking platforms for women entrepreneurs (Granovetter, 1983; Krackhardt and Stern, 1988). These spaces allow professionals to showcase their work, connect with potential partners and stay updated on emerging industry trends. As WE5 shared, *'Fashion expos and trade shows provide an excellent opportunity to connect with industry professionals, showcase my designs and learn about emerging trends and technologies'*. This underscores the importance of attending industry-specific events to gain visibility and build credibility. Industry conferences and expos

also create opportunities for entrepreneurs to form partnerships and collaborate with other businesses. As WE19 noted, *'I network through industry conferences, expos and professional associations'*. This highlights how participation in industry events extends beyond networking as it also facilitates business development and knowledge exchange. Local community events, such as wellness fairs and meetups, offer additional networking avenues, particularly for businesses targeting niche markets. As WE4 shared, *'I also attend wellness-focused community events, such as health fairs and fitness expos, where I can interact with other entrepreneurs, potential customers and collaborators'*. This suggests that localised networking is just as valuable as large-scale industry events. Industry events and communities are thus crucial for entrepreneurs looking to connect with peers, showcase their expertise and stay competitive in their industries.

The findings from male entrepreneurs also indicated that male entrepreneurs actively participate in exclusive peer groups and industry events to enhance their networking efforts (Achor, 2018). These spaces provide opportunities for face-to-face interactions and in-depth discussions. ME1 and ME5 described the effectiveness of such platforms in thought leadership, explaining, *'My podcast provides a unique platform for deeper conversations, allowing me to establish meaningful connections while also promoting thought leadership in my industries'* and *'Online clubs provide an exclusive space to interact with like-minded professionals, exchange ideas and stay updated on industry trends'*, respectively. These findings indicate that some entrepreneurs use content-driven networking approaches, such as podcasts, to position themselves as industry experts while simultaneously strengthening professional relationships. Also, male entrepreneurs adopt a multifaceted approach to networking, combining digital tools, in-person events and content-driven strategies to cultivate meaningful connections.

4.10.3 Social Media Platforms

Social media has emerged as a powerful networking tool for entrepreneurs, enabling them to connect with industry professionals, share insights and build their brands (Francesca, Paola and Paola, 2017). Platforms such as LinkedIn and Instagram have been particularly valuable for expanding professional networks and reaching potential clients (Ukperere, Slabbert and Ukperere, 2014). As WE8 noted, *'LinkedIn has been invaluable for connecting with industry professionals, showcasing expertise and generating business opportunities'*. This highlights LinkedIn's role in professional networking and business growth. Social media also enables entrepreneurs to engage with like-minded individuals and industry experts on a global scale. As WE11 explained, *'Digital platforms like LinkedIn enable me to expand my network globally,*

connect with industry leaders and showcase my business achievements to a broader audience'. This suggests that online networking is not limited by geographical constraints and can be a key driver for visibility and credibility. In addition to LinkedIn, platforms such as Instagram and Facebook are also useful for business promotion and customer engagement. WE4 shared, *'Social media platforms like LinkedIn and Instagram have been invaluable for connecting with other professionals, sharing knowledge and promoting my business*'. This underscores the role of social media in both professional networking and brand-building. Social media platforms provide an accessible, efficient and scalable way for entrepreneurs to expand their networks, engage with industry leaders and stay informed about market trends.

The findings from male entrepreneurs also highlight the diverse networking approaches adopted by male entrepreneurs to expand their professional circles and build valuable business relationships. Entrepreneurs strategically leverage multiple platforms and methods, including professional networking sites, exclusive peer groups and thought leadership content, to establish credibility and stay connected within their industries. A key approach that emerges is the use of professional networking platforms such as LinkedIn and WhatsApp groups. These platforms serve as critical tools for both broadening connections and maintaining close professional relationships. As ME3 noted, *'LinkedIn serves as a vital tool for building and maintaining relationships with a global network, enabling me to exchange knowledge and explore potential collaborations*'. In addition, another participant ME1 emphasised the value of private WhatsApp groups in fostering deeper engagement within a close-knit entrepreneurial community, stating that, *'Private WhatsApp groups are invaluable for maintaining close-knit relationships with peers and sharing real-time insights*'. This suggests that, while LinkedIn helps in broadening professional networks, WhatsApp facilitates ongoing, real-time discussions among trusted peers. According to the findings of the study, digital platforms such as LinkedIn and private messaging groups, particularly those formed on programmes such as WhatsApp, are critical to male entrepreneurs' networking activities. These platforms not only enable the quick growth of professional circles but also support long-term contacts within a close-knit group of peers.

4.10.4 Venture Capital and Founder Networks

Venture capital and founder networks are highly valuable for entrepreneurs seeking funding, mentorship and strategic business connections (Åstebro, Rafih and Serrano, 2022). These networks provide exclusive access to investors, industry experts and successful business founders who can offer guidance and support. WE1 highlighted this, stating that, *'I network*

primarily through venture capital and founder networks. These platforms provide access to like-minded individuals who are navigating similar challenges and opportunities'. This illustrates the importance of these networks in fostering collaboration among entrepreneurs. Venture capital networks often host exclusive events, workshops and mentorship programmes that enable entrepreneurs to gain insights and build credibility. WE1 further noted that, *'VC networks often host exclusive events, workshops and mentorship programmes that allow me to exchange insights and stay updated on industry trends*'. This suggests that these networks offer structured opportunities for learning and business expansion. Founder networks, in particular, provide a strong support system through which entrepreneurs can share experiences and seek advice. As WE1 explained, *'Founder networks, on the other hand, offer a sense of community and support, where I can share experiences and learn from others' successes and failures*'. This highlights the emotional and professional benefits of networking within a community of peers.

4.10.5 Business Groups

Business groups serve as an essential networking avenue for entrepreneurs, providing a platform to exchange knowledge, collaborate on projects and support professional growth. These groups often facilitate regular meetups, workshops and industry discussions that enhance learning and business development. As WE6 noted, *'I have enrolled in several business groups where we meet regularly to exchange knowledge and information*'. This demonstrates the role of business groups in fostering continuous learning and industry awareness. Beyond knowledge-sharing, business groups also open doors to potential collaborations that can drive innovation and business growth. As WE14 explained, *'Networking also opens doors to collaborations that can drive innovation and accelerate growth by combining resources and expertise*'. This suggests that these groups provide more than just networking opportunities, as they create a foundation for strategic partnerships and business expansion. Attending business group meetings and industry conferences allows entrepreneurs to connect with like-minded professionals who share similar business challenges and aspirations. WE9 shared, *'I network through business groups and conferences.'* This highlights the complementary nature of networking through structured business organisations and industry events. Business groups, therefore, serve as an effective platform for entrepreneurs to access industry knowledge, foster collaborations and create meaningful professional connections that support business growth.

4.11 Theme 10 – Networking Strategies for Empowering Women Entrepreneurs

4.11.1 Structuring Effective Networking Opportunities

The findings reveal that structuring effective networking opportunities for women entrepreneurs requires a thoughtful balance between formal and informal interactions, accessibility considerations and the integration of online platforms. Women entrepreneurs recognise the importance of both formal and informal networking events, as they serve distinct purposes in fostering professional credibility and authentic connections. Many participants emphasised the need for a balance between formal and informal networking opportunities. Formal events, such as conferences, workshops and trade fairs, offer structured settings that facilitate learning, professional engagement and credibility-building. WE18 highlighted this by stating that, *‘Formal events provide structure, credibility and professional engagement, while informal events encourage open dialogue and foster genuine connections’*. Similarly, WE19 affirmed the dual necessity of both types of events, explaining that, *‘Formal events provide structure and credibility, while informal ones allow for genuine interactions’*. This suggests that structured engagements help women entrepreneurs gain industry insights and establish their businesses, whereas informal settings offer the opportunity to develop more personal and long-lasting relationships.

Several women entrepreneurs expressed a preference for formal networking events due to their value in professional growth and industry visibility. Conferences, panel discussions and trade fairs were mentioned as crucial platforms for engaging with industry leaders and securing business opportunities. WE3 emphasised the benefits of structured networking, stating that, *‘Formal events, such as conferences, provide clear agendas and opportunities to learn from industry leaders’*. This perspective was also provided by WE15, who stated that, *‘These events often have a clear agenda, making them more effective for building business-relevant connections and discussing specific opportunities’*. The structured nature of formal events allows women entrepreneurs to interact with high-profile individuals and establish credibility in their respective industries.

While formal events offer structure and professional engagement, informal networking settings provide an avenue for deeper, more personal connections. Participants highlighted the value of casual meetups, coffee chats and relaxed gatherings in fostering genuine relationships. As WE2 explained, *‘Informal settings encourage open and genuine conversations, which often lead to stronger connections’*. Likewise, WE4 stated that, *‘In informal settings, such as casual meetups or coffee chats, people tend to be more relaxed and open, which makes it easier to*

have genuine conversations and build relationships'. These interactions are particularly beneficial for women entrepreneurs as they create an environment of trust, allowing for candid discussions about challenges and opportunities in business.

Another crucial aspect in structuring effective networking opportunities is ensuring convenience and accessibility. Women entrepreneurs highlighted the importance of flexible scheduling, affordable fees and inclusive formats, which can encourage greater participation. As WE6 noted, *'Ensuring that events are accessible through flexible scheduling, affordable fees and inclusive formats would encourage more participation'*. In addition, childcare support, transportation options and virtual participation were cited as key enablers for women entrepreneurs to attend networking events. As WE4 suggested, *'Providing support systems, such as childcare facilities or virtual participation options, would make it easier for women to attend events and engage fully'*. These considerations help remove barriers that often prevent women from fully participating in networking activities. The increasing role of digital platforms in networking was also emphasised. Many women entrepreneurs expressed that online platforms allow them to connect with a broader network of professionals, regardless of geographical or time constraints. WE2 highlighted this by stating that, *'Online platforms would allow women to network flexibly and overcome geographical or time-related constraints'*. Similarly, as WE19 pointed out, *'Digital platforms like LinkedIn enable women to connect with a broader network of professionals at their convenience, overcoming time and geographical constraints'*. The accessibility of digital networking ensures that women entrepreneurs can engage in professional interactions beyond their immediate surroundings, expanding their opportunities for growth and collaboration.

4.11.2 Encouraging Diversity, Inclusion and Collaboration

Encouraging diversity, inclusion and collaboration in networking strategies is crucial for empowering women entrepreneurs. The findings suggest that fostering inclusivity in networking opportunities, engaging male allies and advocating for systemic change are essential in creating a supportive entrepreneurial ecosystem for women. The findings indicate that women entrepreneurs can build stronger professional connections and overcome societal barriers by forming women-centric networks, promoting gender collaboration and emphasising diversity in events and mentorship programmes. One of the key aspects of fostering inclusivity is creating safe and supportive spaces where women can connect and share experiences. Many participants emphasised the significance of women-focused networks and mentorship programmes in achieving this. As WE1 highlighted, *'Building women-focused networks and*

mentorship programmes can also help create safe and inclusive spaces for women to connect, share experiences and support each other'. Such networks not only provide women with the opportunity to collaborate but also enable them to navigate the unique challenges they face in their entrepreneurial journeys. Another participant WE8 pointed out that *'Ensuring inclusive and supportive networking spaces can encourage greater participation from women entrepreneurs'*. This indicates that inclusive environments, whether in-person or digital, play a crucial role in empowering women and facilitating meaningful connections.

In addition to forming women-focused networks, the findings highlight the importance of gender collaboration in networking strategies. While women-centric spaces are vital, engaging men as allies can contribute to creating an even more inclusive entrepreneurial landscape. WE1 emphasised that *'A networking structure could be effective if it includes men as well. By fostering collaboration and understanding between genders, such a framework can create a more inclusive environment where everyone feels valued'*. The inclusion of male allies in networking initiatives not only challenges gender biases but also promotes shared learning and access to broader opportunities. Another participant WE3 suggested that *'Engaging male allies who advocate for inclusivity and gender equality can also help break down stereotypes and create a more supportive networking environment'*. This underscores the need for male allies to actively support women entrepreneurs, advocate for their inclusion in professional circles and contribute to changing systemic barriers that hinder women's success.

Diversity and inclusion were also identified as crucial elements in networking strategies for empowering women entrepreneurs. Ensuring representation across different industries, backgrounds and experiences in networking events, mentorship programmes and speaker panels can significantly impact women's confidence and participation. WE1 noted the importance of visibility and representation, stating that it is important to *'[e]mphasise diversity and inclusion in speaker panels, participants and activities, ensuring that women feel represented and empowered'*. This reflects the necessity of designing networking events that acknowledge and accommodate the varied experiences of women entrepreneurs, fostering a sense of belonging and recognition. Advocacy campaigns further play a vital role in driving systemic change and addressing the structural barriers that limit women's entrepreneurial success. These initiatives raise awareness about the unique challenges faced by women entrepreneurs and create pathways for policy changes that support gender equity. As WE7 highlighted, *'Advocacy campaigns raise awareness about women's entrepreneurial potential and drive systemic change'*. By addressing issues such as access to funding, mentorship and

skill-building opportunities, advocacy efforts can help shape an environment in which women entrepreneurs are better supported and valued.

In addition, male entrepreneurs also emphasised the importance of fostering open, respectful environments in which clear boundaries are maintained, particularly in male-dominated spaces where issues of professionalism and respect can often be overlooked. With regard to the above, ME1 noted that addressing these challenges requires the *'fostering [of] open, respectful environments where clear boundaries and professionalism are maintained'*. This perspective aligns with ME3's suggestion to *'educate men on the importance of respecting personal boundaries and avoiding inappropriate topics during conversations'*. This suggests that a key solution lies in reshaping the conversation around networking itself by ensuring that women feel safe and respected while interacting with others, particularly male entrepreneurs. Such approaches would allow women to engage more confidently and effectively in networking activities, fostering better connections that could ultimately support their entrepreneurial ventures.

4.11.3 Providing Mentorship, Training and Leadership Development Programmes

The findings highlight the critical role of mentorship, training and leadership development programmes in empowering women entrepreneurs, emphasising their need for structured support and practical learning opportunities. As the data suggests, women entrepreneurs deeply value platforms that not only connect them to mentors but also provide industry-specific resources and knowledge-sharing opportunities. For example, WE2 stresses the importance of mentorship by stating that, *'Mentorship programmes would provide women with access to experienced professionals who can offer guidance and support tailored to their specific needs'*. This response underscores the demand for structured programmes that go beyond generic support, targeting the specific challenges women face in their entrepreneurial journeys.

The significance of confidence-building initiatives also emerges strongly in the findings. Women entrepreneurs often navigate male-dominated industries, in which confidence can be a major factor in their success. WE3 highlighted the importance of confidence-building workshops, noting that, *'Confidence-building workshops can help women develop the skills and self-assurance needed to navigate male-dominated spaces'*. This aligns with the broader theme that women entrepreneurs often face challenges of being overlooked or underestimated, and structured workshops can provide them with the tools to assert themselves more confidently. Furthermore, WE4 added that, *'Women can also benefit from building their*

confidence and proactively seeking out opportunities to showcase their expertise', suggesting that confidence is not just an internal trait but a proactive skill that can be honed through training and mentorship. The findings also highlight the desire for industry-specific learning opportunities and the value of access to industry experts. This is echoed in the response from WE12, who mentioned that, *'Workshops would help women develop critical skills and stay updated on industry trends'*. These workshops are seen as essential for equipping women entrepreneurs with the skills needed to remain competitive in their respective industries. The integration of workshops focused on real-world applications and industry insights is crucial for women to make informed decisions and strategise their business growth effectively.

Moreover, the data reveals that mentorship is seen as a pivotal resource for women entrepreneurs. Many participants highlight the need for one-on-one interactions and networking opportunities that go beyond simply sharing general advice. WE20 mentioned that, *'Mentorship and collaboration opportunities are essential features. Providing guidance from experienced professionals and fostering partnerships can help women entrepreneurs navigate challenges and achieve their goals'*. This reflects the perspective that mentorship is not merely about receiving advice but also about fostering meaningful connections that can open doors for collaboration, funding and business growth. In addition, the findings indicate that mentorship is not only about guidance from experienced professionals but also about creating a supportive community in which women can share resources and experiences. For instance, WE5 points out that, *'Women-focused networking groups can provide a supportive and inclusive environment where women can connect, share resources and learn from each other'*. WE3 aptly summarises the importance of leadership development, stating that, *'Leadership programmes can help women entrepreneurs build the skills and confidence needed to take on larger roles and grow their businesses'*. This insight reflects a broader trend in the data, whereby women express a need for targeted leadership training that prepares them to navigate complex business challenges and pursue higher-level opportunities.

4.11.4 Providing Financial and Business Growth Opportunities

The importance of financial resources and business support was a consistent and crucial theme across the participants' responses. Several emphasised the need for targeted funding opportunities and networks that specifically address the challenges faced by women entrepreneurs. WE4, for instance, suggested that a structured framework could facilitate access to vital resources such as grants or investor networks, stating that, *'It could also facilitate access to funding opportunities, such as grants or investor networks and create platforms for*

women to collaborate on projects or initiatives'. These resources could help women overcome the financial barriers that often limit their business growth, especially in male-dominated industries in which they may face additional obstacles to securing funding.

Furthermore, WE16 highlighted the significant role that mentorship programmes and industry-specific resources could play in expanding opportunities for women-led businesses. She stated that, *'Investor networks are a key feature I would like to see. Additionally, mentorship programmes, skill-building workshops and access to industry-specific resources would enhance the effectiveness of such a framework'*. This response emphasises that financial support alone is not enough. A multifaceted approach that includes mentorship and skill development is necessary to ensure women have the tools to succeed in entrepreneurship. Access to investor networks can also serve as an essential vehicle to introduce women to potential partners, while workshops could equip them with the skills to pitch effectively, manage finances or navigate legal complexities in business. Another crucial point raised by participants is the need for women-specific funding resources to address financial inequalities. As WE22 pointed out, *'Dedicated funding resources, such as grants or women-focused investment funds, would address the financial barriers many women face'*. This highlights a systemic issue in which women entrepreneurs often face greater challenges in securing capital due to bias, stereotypes, or institutional barriers. By focusing on dedicated funding mechanisms tailored to women, such as women-focused investment funds, the disparity between male and female entrepreneurs can begin to close. It was indicated that creating financial and business growth opportunities specifically for women could also help address the broader gender gap in entrepreneurship. Such targeted resources can help level the gender imbalance and provide the necessary support to foster women's entrepreneurship and leadership in business.

4.11.5 Creating a Supportive and Safe Ecosystem

A key finding from the participants was the importance of creating a supportive and safe ecosystem for women entrepreneurs. Many respondents highlighted the necessity of fostering an environment that not only supports professional growth but also ensures personal and emotional well-being. WE3 emphasised how a structured framework can empower women by addressing their unique needs and challenges. She stated that, *'By addressing the specific needs and challenges of women entrepreneurs, such a structure could foster an environment where women feel empowered to succeed and contribute to the growth of the regional economy'*. This comment underscores the importance of a comprehensive framework that goes beyond mere financial support to actively nurture and empower women entrepreneurs. The creation of such

an ecosystem can provide women with the necessary tools, resources and opportunities to thrive in their entrepreneurial journey, contributing to both individual and broader economic growth. Similarly, WE12 highlighted that building confidence and creating collaboration opportunities are essential components of a supportive ecosystem. She stated that, *'A well-designed framework would include initiatives to build women's skills, improve their confidence and create opportunities for them to collaborate with others in their field'*. Confidence-building initiatives can be particularly impactful for women who face societal pressures or internalised biases that undermine their entrepreneurial potential. By providing targeted initiatives aimed at increasing women's self-assurance and fostering collaboration with peers and mentors, such a framework can help break down the barriers that may inhibit women's entrepreneurial success.

Another critical element mentioned by several participants was inclusivity within the ecosystem. WE5 emphasised that fostering a sense of community and inclusivity could help women feel supported and inspired to take risks and pursue their business ventures. She stated that, *'By fostering a sense of community and inclusivity, the framework could create an environment where women entrepreneurs feel supported and inspired'*. This response aligns with the belief that a collaborative and non-judgmental environment is key to enabling women to excel in entrepreneurship. Inclusivity also ensures that all women, regardless of their background or experience, have equal opportunities to access resources, mentorship and business growth platforms. In addition to these elements, ensuring cultural sensitivity within the ecosystem was a point raised by WE15. She explained that, *'By creating a supportive environment that acknowledges and respects cultural norms, the framework can make networking more accessible and less intimidating for women'*. This is particularly important for women in regions or communities where traditional norms may discourage or limit women's participation in business. The ecosystem must be sensitive to these cultural dynamics and adapt its approach to meet the diverse needs of women entrepreneurs, thus creating a truly safe and welcoming environment.

Male entrepreneurs also emphasised on the importance of creating more respectful environments and being flexible to ensure inclusivity. Many women entrepreneurs face the challenge of balancing business commitments with family or caregiving responsibilities, a factor that can make attending traditional networking events difficult. A solution, therefore, lies in developing virtual platforms or scheduling events at more convenient times. ME7 highlighted this need: *'hosting women-only networking events and creating virtual*

opportunities can help address these barriers and provide women with a comfortable space to connect and collaborate', emphasising the need for more inclusive timing to accommodate the specific needs of women entrepreneurs. ME2 echoed this idea, suggesting that *'creating virtual networking platforms can provide a flexible and inclusive solution'*. Virtual networking is a powerful tool, especially in today's digital age, as it allows for greater participation without the constraints of time and location, thus breaking down barriers that might otherwise limit women's engagement in networking opportunities. Moreover, the findings also highlight the importance of having a structured networking framework that offers support, mentorship and access to business opportunities. This would provide women with a clear path to connect with like-minded entrepreneurs and gain resources crucial for business growth. As ME2 pointed out, *'A networking framework would encourage more women to pursue entrepreneurship by providing access to mentorship, funding opportunities and a supportive community'*. A similar perspective was provided by ME3, who indicated that a structured approach to networking can *'reduce anxiety and fear associated with networking by setting clear expectations and guidelines'*. The structured environment would not only ease the apprehensions some women may feel when entering unfamiliar networking spaces but would also ensure that the networking is productive, allowing women to focus on building valuable business relationships and gaining critical insights from experienced mentors. The importance of mentorship was also an important finding. Participants expressed that mentorship programmes are essential in connecting women with experienced entrepreneurs who can guide them in their entrepreneurial journeys. ME1 noted that mentorship programmes would *'connect women with experienced entrepreneurs who can provide personalised guidance'*, highlighting the invaluable resource mentorship can provide in terms of knowledge transfer and relationship-building. Such programmes create environments in which women can gain insights into overcoming challenges, navigating the business world and ultimately growing their businesses.

4.11.6 Making Structural Adjustments for Better Engagement

Structural adjustments in networking and event planning emerged as another important theme for enhancing the engagement of women entrepreneurs. Several participants emphasised the need to accommodate the diverse responsibilities and challenges that women face in order to create more inclusive and accessible networking opportunities. WE1 suggested that events should be scheduled at times that are convenient for women, particularly avoiding times that conflict with family responsibilities, such as childcare. She noted that, *'Events are scheduled*

at times that are convenient for women, such as avoiding times that conflict with childcare responsibilities or require significant travel'. This observation acknowledges the reality that many women entrepreneurs face the challenge of balancing family commitments with professional aspirations. Flexible scheduling and ensuring that events cater to the specific needs of women are key to ensuring greater participation. In addition to flexible scheduling, offering virtual options or on-site childcare were other structural adjustments recommended by participants to increase accessibility. WE5 highlighted the importance of providing these accommodations, stating that, 'Providing on-site childcare or virtual participation options would make it easier for women with family responsibilities to attend events'. The ability to participate in events without worrying about childcare or the need to travel long distances would significantly reduce barriers for women, allowing them to engage more freely with networking opportunities. This flexibility would likely increase attendance and engagement from women who might otherwise be unable to attend due to familial obligations.

WE3 further emphasised that structural adjustments, such as offering incentives, could be effective in motivating women to participate. She explained that, '*Offering incentives, such as discounted entry fees, free access to resources, or the opportunity to pitch to investors, can make events more appealing*'. Providing incentives not only motivates women to attend but also enhances the perceived value of the events, making them more beneficial for their entrepreneurial growth. WE15 echoed this point, highlighting the importance of showcasing the tangible benefits of participation, such as professional development, skill-building workshops and access to funding. She stated that, '*Highlighting the value of networking through real-life examples and providing incentives such as skill development or funding opportunities can motivate more women to engage actively*'. These adjustments ensure that networking events are not only accessible but also meaningful and beneficial for women entrepreneurs. It was indicated by the participants that making structural adjustments that cater specifically to the challenges women face, such as providing networking opportunities in both formal and informal settings can foster a more engaging environment. WE12 suggested that '*forums provide a platform to exchange ideas, discuss industry trends and build relationships with like-minded professionals*'. Informal settings encourage open communication and foster more genuine connections, which can lead to stronger professional relationships. These structural adjustments can enhance the overall value of networking events and encourage more women to engage actively in such opportunities.

4.11.7 Encouraging Male Entrepreneurs to Support Women

The role of male entrepreneurs in supporting women's networking and entrepreneurship is significant, as they have the capacity to foster inclusivity, provide mentorship and facilitate access to crucial business networks. Many male entrepreneurs recognise that their active involvement can help break down systemic barriers and create a more equitable entrepreneurial landscape. For instance, ME1 emphasised that, '*Male entrepreneurs can support women by advocating for inclusive events, mentoring women entrepreneurs and making introductions to key players in their networks*'. This suggests that male entrepreneurs see themselves as facilitators who can open doors that may otherwise remain closed to women due to entrenched gender biases in business spaces. One of the most impactful ways male entrepreneurs can contribute is by advocating for and organising inclusive events where women are given equal opportunities to network and showcase their potential. By ensuring that women have access to the same networking opportunities as men, they help level the playing field. ME5 also highlighted this by stating that, '*Male entrepreneurs can play an active role by mentoring women, sharing their networks and advocating for equal opportunities*'. Similarly, ME6 and ME7 stated that, '*Male entrepreneurs can enhance networking opportunities for women by mentoring them*' and '*Networking is helpful for all entrepreneurs. For women, it provides access to mentors, investors and industry experts who can offer guidance and resources*'. These responses indicate that intentional efforts are necessary to dismantle exclusivity in networking spaces and create environments in which women feel welcomed and valued.

Another key contribution male entrepreneurs can make is through facilitating introductions to influential figures in their business networks. Access to high-level connections often determines entrepreneurial success and male entrepreneurs can use their positions to bridge this gap for women. Participant ME2 explained that, '*By making introductions to key players, mentoring women and creating opportunities for collaboration, male entrepreneurs can help women overcome barriers and succeed in their ventures*'. This underscores the role of male allies in actively using their networks to support women's professional growth rather than merely offering passive encouragement. Some male entrepreneurs also emphasised the importance of recognising women based on their individual potential rather than their gender. As ME4 pointed out that, '*Male entrepreneurs can focus on individual potential rather than gender, ensuring that women receive equal opportunities to succeed*'. This perspective suggests a shift away from tokenistic inclusion towards genuine merit-based opportunities, where women are recognised for their capabilities rather than simply to meet diversity quotas.

5 Chapter 5: Discussion of Findings

5.1 Chapter Introduction

The main aim of this research was to establish a networking framework for women entrepreneurs in the MENA area by combining formal and informal networking components. The objectives of the research were identifying factors that impact the activities of women entrepreneurs, outlining the challenges they face and outlining ways to develop formal and informal networks. These objectives were achieved based on the findings presented in the previous chapter. This chapter provides a comprehensive discussion of the findings obtained from the qualitative analysis and situates them within the wider theoretical frameworks and current research. The discussion critically examines how the findings align with or diverge from previous research and also outlines new insights that contribute to the field of women's entrepreneurship, particularly in the MENA region. The thematic analysis of the interview data identified significant themes, including gender-specific obstacles, the efficacy of formal and informal networking tactics and the need for institutional changes to foster a more inclusive entrepreneurial environment.

The chapter is structured based on the research objectives outlined in the introduction chapter. These sections cover an understanding of crucial topics in line with institutional theory to understand the challenges faced by women entrepreneurs, networking challenges, networking activities and strategies that can further contribute to the development of the framework. It focuses on the current situation as it relates to women entrepreneurs obtaining venture capital. The arguments related to how networking functions as a strategic instrument for women entrepreneurs to surmount systemic obstacles and attain sustainable company success are outlined. It seeks to augment the understanding of women's entrepreneurship in the MENA region by assessing the results.

5.2 Factors Impacting Women Entrepreneurs

The findings of theme 1 and theme 7 (sections 4.3 and 4.9) represent the motivation for women entrepreneurs and the factors that impact them. The analysis of the data reveals a complex interaction of cultural, economic, human resource, regulatory and technology elements in influencing the entrepreneurial endeavours of women entrepreneurs, especially in the MENA region. The study highlights that cultural effects are both widespread and actively drive product design, marketing and operational procedures among women entrepreneurs. The participants indicated that it is important for them to respond to seasonal, religious and social subtleties to remain in line with market relevance. This comprehensive perspective indicates

that women entrepreneurs in culturally varied areas must consistently reconcile exterior market demands with internal organisational structures, which is an interesting finding that is less explored in previous women's entrepreneurship research.

The findings also indicated that economic factors are determined by currency fluctuations, political instability and changing government policies, which do have an impact on corporate viability. This research offers a gendered perspective on the well-documented unfavourable consequences of economic uncertainty on entrepreneurial initiatives, illustrating how these macroeconomic issues specifically exacerbate the risks encountered by women entrepreneurs. The participants also outlined the need for stringent risk management and contingency planning to be implemented with financial planning strategies to include flexible operational techniques. The study highlights the ingenuity of women entrepreneurs in addressing these dilemmas through the adoption of novel strategies such as the development of a strong organisational culture, employment of various time schedules and investment in self-improvement. The current study stands out by treating the matter not just as an indication of human resource challenges but as one that also points to the unique ways in which the issues are gender and context related.

Regulatory complexity is considered the main challenge for the companies that have to follow multiple legal systems. Indeed, tax regulations are the most laborious to comply with, covering customs levies and export/import duties, as well as the privacy of sensitive personal data. In the research, the focus was on a detailed analysis of the intersection of regulatory constraints in the context of the business environment and the needs arising for digital market time. A comprehensive view of this matter shows that regulatory barriers relate not only to the limitation of bureaucratic operations but also to the fact that they are decisive elements that play a role in companies' competitive status and economic development among women entrepreneurs.

Technological innovation and digital transformation are recognised as fundamental catalysts of contemporary enterprise. The current study's results confirm that ongoing technological adaptation is essential, but they also reveal the financial and operational challenges linked to technology adoption in resource-limited environments. This study enhances the current literature by emphasising that these issues are especially pronounced in countries within the MENA region, where changing industrial environments need swift and economical technical advancements. This study highlights sector-specific obstacles and calls for the creation of cost-effective, scalable technical solutions designed for women-led

enterprises, a viewpoint that has been largely overlooked in prior studies. The combined examination of cultural, economic, human resource, regulatory and technical aspects provides a thorough understanding of the complex context in which women entrepreneurs function.

Based on the discussion of factors, the following framework is represented to understand the factors impacting women entrepreneurs.

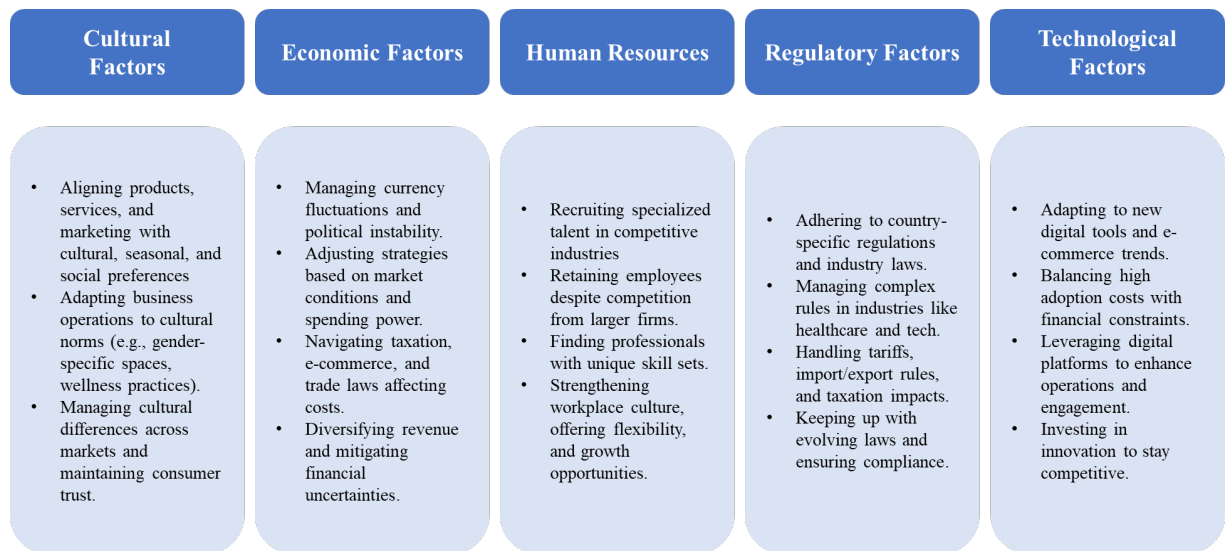


Figure 7: Factors Impacting Women Entrepreneurs

5.3 Challenges Faced by Women Entrepreneurs

Women entrepreneurs continue to encounter a complex web of challenges that extend beyond the typical hurdles of starting and running a business, as the current research reveals. In many cases, these challenges are deeply rooted in cultural norms and institutional biases that persist despite growing awareness and efforts to promote gender equality. The findings indicate that issues such as restricted access to financial capital, limited networking opportunities and pervasive sociocultural stereotypes are not only obstacles in themselves but also interact with each other to compound the difficulties that women face. For instance, while the struggle to secure venture capital is a common issue for many new ventures, women-led businesses are particularly disadvantaged by investor biases that question their competence and risk appetite, as highlighted by Tiwari and Tiwari (2007), Brush, Bruin and Welter (2009) and Brush et al. (2010; 2017). This bias is not solely a matter of financial conservatism or market conditions; rather, it reflects a deeply entrenched scepticism about women’s leadership capabilities, which in turn limits their access to the funds necessary for growth.

In addition to funding challenges, the research underscores the critical role that networking plays in entrepreneurial success and how deficiencies in this area

disproportionately affect women. Networking, as conceptualised by Granovetter (1983) and further explored by Gulati, Dyaldin and Wang (2017), is essential for accessing resources, information and support that can bridge the gap between an innovative idea and a thriving enterprise. However, women entrepreneurs are often confined to informal networks that, although rich in emotional and social support, fall short of providing the strategic connections needed for financial backing and business scaling. Many women reported that while their personal networks, comprised largely of family and friends, offer encouragement and moral support, these ties rarely translate into access to professional networks and investor circles that are critical for securing high-impact investments. In contrast, male entrepreneurs typically have more established routes into formal networks, which facilitate smoother access to venture capital and strategic partnerships. This discrepancy, as noted by Tinkler et al. (2015) and Balachandra (2020), points to a systemic issue whereby the structure of networking opportunities inherently favours male entrepreneurs, leaving women to navigate a labyrinth of informal ties that often lack the breadth and influence necessary for sustained business growth.

The research further outlines the pervasive impact of sociocultural norms on the entrepreneurial journey of women. In many contexts, traditional gender roles and cultural expectations serve as formidable barriers to women's participation in entrepreneurship. These norms dictate not only what kinds of businesses are considered acceptable for women to run but also influence perceptions regarding their leadership and managerial capabilities, as also outlined by a number of studies (e.g. Achor, 2018; Ademola, Adegboyegun and Adegoke, 2020; Hein, Kreutzer and Diehl, 2021). Women are frequently expected to balance the demands of entrepreneurship with family responsibilities, an expectation that is less rigidly imposed on their male counterparts. This double burden not only limits the time and energy women can invest in their ventures but also reinforces societal stereotypes that question their commitment to business growth. The work of Ahl (2006) and Langowitz and Minniti (2007) points to the negative consequences of such cultural constraints and the current findings provide further evidence that these norms continue to play a significant role in shaping women's entrepreneurial experiences.

Moreover, the research reveals that women entrepreneurs are often forced to adopt adaptive strategies simply to gain entry into professional circles that are predominantly male-orientated. Many respondents described instances in which they had to work extra hard to prove their competence and reliability, sometimes by aligning themselves with influential mentors or by leveraging personal relationships in an effort to break into formal networks. This

'relationship work' is a double-edged sword as, even though it can lead to short-term gains in credibility, it also reinforces the notion that women must go above and beyond to be taken seriously, a burden that is rarely expected of male entrepreneurs, as indicated in a number of studies (e.g. Jennings and Brush, 2013; Li et al., 2020; Khan, 2020a; Khan, 2020b). The narratives provided by women entrepreneurs underscore the additional psychological and emotional toll of constantly having to validate their abilities in a system that is inherently biased against them. In contrast, some studies (e.g. Meunier, Krylova and Ramalho, 2017; Kwapisz, 2021; Bridges et al., 2022) outline that male entrepreneurs more often take their access to networks for granted, benefiting from pre-existing social structures that facilitate trust and access to resources without the need for such continuous self-justification.

A recurring theme in the discussion is the interplay between funding challenges and networking deficiencies. The literature (e.g. Ho and Pollack, 2014; Leitch, Welter and Henry, 2018; Henry et al., 2022) consistently shows that access to finance is not merely a function of having a solid business plan but is also closely tied to the quality and diversity of an entrepreneur's network. For many women, the lack of formal networks means that even when they do secure initial seed funding from personal contacts, the resources necessary for scaling up remain elusive. This creates a cycle in which the absence of robust networks limits access to further investment, which in turn stifles business growth and innovation. The research echoes observations made by scholars such as Tiwari and Tiwari (2007) and Brush et al. (2017), who argue that the interplay of gender bias and network limitations creates a unique disadvantage for women entrepreneurs. At the same time, the narratives also reveal that some women have found ways to partially circumvent these barriers by building alternative networks, such as women-only entrepreneurial groups that offer both support and some degree of access to resources. However, while these networks provide an important counterbalance, they often lack the scale and influence of more traditional, formal networks that are accessible to male entrepreneurs.

Another main finding that emerged from the discussion is the critical role of perception in shaping the entrepreneurial landscape. Both male and female entrepreneurs face market uncertainties and operational challenges; however, the interpretation and internalisation of these challenges can differ significantly by gender. Studies (e.g. Markovi, 2007; Ratten, Dana and Ramadani, 2017; Khan, 2019; Li et al., 2020; Rashid and Ratten, 2020) report that women often report a heightened sense of vigilance and a persistent need to prove their worth, which can lead to a cautious approach in decision-making. This self-imposed pressure is compounded

by external signals, such as investor scepticism and limited media representation, that further erode confidence. The impact of these perceptions is multifaceted. For instance, on the one hand, they contribute to a reluctance to take bold risks, which may limit innovation and growth, and on the other hand, they may also drive women to seek out and develop more resilient and adaptive strategies. Male entrepreneurs, by contrast, generally benefit from societal expectations that are more aligned with risk-taking and assertive decision-making, which can translate into more aggressive growth strategies and a higher likelihood of securing large-scale investments (Forret and Dougherty, 2004; Manolova et al., 2007). The divergence in perceptions is not merely an academic observation but has real-world implications for the way in which entrepreneurial opportunities are identified, pursued and sustained. When the experiences of both female and male entrepreneurs were examined, it was evident that the challenges associated with securing funding and building effective networks are intertwined with broader issues of social and institutional equity. The narratives revealed that even in environments in which overall entrepreneurial activity is robust, women remain at a disadvantage due to the compounded effects of bias, cultural norms and the uneven distribution of network resources. These challenges are further exacerbated by the fact that many of the traditional markers of entrepreneurial success, such as rapid scaling and high-risk ventures, are often inaccessible to women due to the additional scrutiny they face. The current research, therefore, does not simply highlight the existence of a funding gap but also points to the underlying mechanisms that sustain this gap. In this research, it became clear that the issue is not related to capability or the ambition of women and male entrepreneurs; it is related more to structural inequities that have been long embedded in the entrepreneurial ecosystem.

The critical discussion also raises questions about the role of alternative networking strategies in mitigating these challenges. It was evident from the findings that formal networks play a significant role in facilitating access to capital and strategic resources, but the reality for many women is that such networks are either inaccessible or hostile. As a result, women entrepreneurs often turn to informal networks, which, while valuable, are not sufficient on their own to overcome the significant financial and operational challenges of scaling a business. This reliance on informal networks is both a strength and a weakness: on the one hand, it reflects the resilience and resourcefulness of women who are determined to succeed despite the odds; on the other hand, it highlights a systemic failure to integrate women into the more influential networks that drive economic growth. The literature offers mixed insights on this issue. While some studies (e.g. Jack, Dodd and Anderson, 2004; Hung, 2006; Eijdenberg et al., 2019;

Bastian, Wood and Ng, 2023) recognise the benefits of strong interpersonal ties, others caution that reliance on close-knit networks can limit exposure to diverse ideas and opportunities. In the context of the current research, the evidence suggests that the benefits of informal networks are undermined by their inability to open doors to significant financial resources, a gap that is readily filled by the more established, formal networks accessible to male entrepreneurs.

Moreover, the experiences of women entrepreneurs highlight the persistent issue of bias in investor behaviour. The scepticism faced by women when pitching for venture capital is not a new phenomenon, but its persistence suggests that significant changes are required in the way investment decisions are made. Investors, as noted by scholars such as Tiwari and Tiwari (2007) and Brush et al. (2017), often unconsciously adhere to stereotypes that favour male-led ventures, thereby creating an uneven playing field. The current findings provide further evidence that these biases are not merely reflective of individual prejudices but are embedded in the very structures that govern entrepreneurial finance. For many women, the challenge is not just about accessing capital; it is about having to constantly navigate a landscape that questions their competence and undervalues their contributions. This systemic bias contributes to a cycle in which women are compelled to prove their worth repeatedly, thereby diverting energy and focus away from strategic business development. Throughout the research, a number of narratives emerged that illustrate the emotional and psychological toll of these challenges. The female participants frequently spoke of the pressure to 'do it all' and to manage not only the practical aspects of running a business but also the emotional labour of countering negative stereotypes and justifying their presence in predominantly male-dominated arenas. This dual burden has significant implications for both personal well-being and business performance. The need to constantly navigate these multifaceted challenges can lead to burnout and diminished confidence, which in turn can stifle innovation and risk-taking. In contrast, male entrepreneurs, who often benefit from a more straightforward path to credibility and resource access, tend to experience fewer of these psychological stressors, allowing them to focus more exclusively on growth strategies and market expansion.

Another aspect of the research focused on the need for a critical re-examination of what constitutes successful networking. Traditional measures of entrepreneurial success have often emphasised the role of formal networks and high-profile investor relationships, yet the experiences of women entrepreneurs suggest that these metrics may not fully capture the realities of entrepreneurial resilience in the face of structural bias. While informal networks may lack the immediate power to secure large investments, they provide a critical foundation

of trust, knowledge-sharing and moral support that can sustain entrepreneurs through the early, most challenging phases of business development. However, the current research makes it clear that reliance on these networks, without access to more influential formal channels, is insufficient for achieving long-term scalability. The dichotomy between formal and informal networking not only underscores the disparities between male and female entrepreneurs but also calls into question the prevailing assumptions about what types of networks are most beneficial for business growth. The lived experiences of women entrepreneurs, as captured in this study, offer a powerful critique of the current entrepreneurial ecosystem. The evidence points to a scenario in which the same traits that are celebrated in male entrepreneurs, such as assertiveness, risk tolerance and an ability to leverage established networks, are either less accessible or more heavily scrutinised in women. As a result, women must often adopt a more complex and multifaceted approach to entrepreneurship, one that requires constant negotiation between societal expectations and business imperatives. The narratives suggest that while women are increasingly entering the entrepreneurial arena, the playing field remains uneven, with institutional biases and cultural norms continuing to undermine their efforts. By critically examining these issues through the lens of both qualitative narratives and established research (Granovetter, 1983; Tiwari and Tiwari, 2007; Brush et al., 2017; Gulati, Dialdin and Wang, 2017), it becomes evident that the current entrepreneurial environment demands a rethinking of the strategies employed by women. Rather than merely adapting to existing frameworks, women entrepreneurs are forced to innovate their own methods of overcoming exclusion and bias, highlighting both the resilience and the systemic challenges that characterise their experiences. The findings indicated that women entrepreneurs experience a continuous struggle to secure funding, build effective networks and challenge longstanding stereotypes, reflecting the broader issues of gender inequality that persist in the entrepreneurial sphere. The narratives drawn from this study serve as a reminder that while progress has been made, significant work remains to create a truly level playing field. The evidence underscores that structural reform, increased awareness and deliberate actions to dismantle biases are critical if the entrepreneurial ecosystem is to fully harness the potential of women entrepreneurs. Based on the discussion of the challenges, the following framework is represented to understand those challenges that impact women entrepreneurs.

| Gender-Specific Entrepreneurial Challenges | | | | |
|--|------------------------|---------------------|------------------|-----------------------|
| Cultural & Societal Barriers | Work-Life Balance | Traditional Roles | Gender Bias | Networking Hesitation |
| Financial & Resource Limitations | Financial Literacy Gap | Investor Skepticism | Informal Funding | Lack of Training |
| Limited Opportunities & Representation | Leadership Gap | Stereotypical Views | Sparse Networks | Few Mentors |

| Challenges Faced When Establishing Businesses | | | | |
|---|----------------------|---------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| Financial Capital Challenges | Seed Funding Issues | Banking Complexity | Bias in Investment | Capital Constraints |
| Market & Customer Challenges | High Competition | Credibility Hurdles | Brand Differentiation | Customer Trust |
| Regulatory & Ecosystem Challenges | Complex Regulations | Bureaucracy | Infrastructure Gaps | Niche Delays |
| Supply Chain & Logistics Challenges | Supplier Reliability | Quality Consistency | Logistics Delays | Disruption Management |

| Challenges Faced While Growing Businesses | | | | |
|---|---------------------|----------------------|---------------------------|--------------|
| Expansion & Operational Challenges | Scaling Issues | Competitive Pressure | Government Project Access | Rising Costs |
| Workforce & Talent Management Challenges | Recruitment Hurdles | Talent Retention | Hiring Bias | Cultural Fit |

| Challenges Faced While Acquiring Funds | | | | |
|--|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------|--|-----------------------------------|
| Securing Investment / Credibility Concerns | Proving Viability and Credibility | Need for Detailed Projections | Overcoming Gender Bias to Gain Capital | Track Record and Present Plans |
| Delays & Barriers in Accessing Funds | Lengthy Approvals | Extensive Paperwork | High Risk Perception | Complex Requirements |
| Funding Sources Adopted | Depend only on Personal Savings | Depend only on Self-Funding | Limited Access to Government Grants | Limited Access to Venture Capital |

| Challenges Faced While Networking with Stakeholders | | | | |
|---|--------------------------------|---------------------------|-----------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Male-Dominated Networking Spaces | Primarily Male-Dominated Areas | Inaccessible Venues/Times | Gender Bias | Cultural Constraints |
| Balancing Personal & Professional Responsibilities | Time Conflicts | Family vs. Work Balance | Scheduling Clashes | Domestic Work Prioritization |
| Overly Formal Networking Structures | Rigid Formats | Transactional Feel | Limited Organic Interaction | |
| Inability to Break into Informal Networks | Informal Exclusion | Old Boys' Club | High Entry Barriers | Trust Deficit Among Investors |
| Irrelevant Events & Limited Access | Exclusive Events | Non-Specific Networking | Limited Access to Events | Unproductive Events |
| Finding Reliable Business Partners | Partner Reliability | Collaboration Barriers | Networking Trust Gap | |

Figure 8: Challenges Faced by Women Entrepreneurs in the MENA Region

5.4 Networking Activities of Women Entrepreneurs

The networking activities of women entrepreneurs, as revealed by this study, represent a multifaceted and dynamic strategy aimed at overcoming structural barriers and resource limitations inherent in many entrepreneurial ecosystems. The analysis of women entrepreneurs' narratives, particularly through themes 8 and 9, illustrates a dual approach whereby formal networking engagements are interwoven with more personalised, informal relationship-building practices. In contrast, the perspective obtained from male entrepreneurs, captured in theme 3, underscores a more streamlined access to institutional networks and a greater ease of integration into established professional circles. When these findings are critically compared with established researchers, such as Granovetter (1983), Tiwari and Tiwari (2007), Brush et al. (2017) and Gulati, Dialdin and Wang (2017), notable differences emerge that suggest the current research provides a more nuanced understanding of networking strategies and challenges, particularly in the context of gendered experiences.

The findings of the present study indicate that women entrepreneurs actively pursue formal networking opportunities such as industry conferences, trade associations and structured mentorship programmes. This behaviour, as reflected in theme 8, indicates that women are aware of the potential these formal venues hold for accessing critical financial and strategic resources. However, their participation in such events is frequently met with subtle exclusion and a need to negotiate additional credibility. This is contrary to their male counterparts, who indicated that they have pre-established relationships within these formal networks and also outlined that women must often expend extra effort to overcome preconceptions about their entrepreneurial competence. In this regard, while prior studies (e.g. Hall and O'Toole, 2004; Jack, Dodd and Anderson, 2004; Hung, 2006; Parker, 2008; Davis, 2012; Yukhanaev et al., 2015; Eijdenberg et al., 2019; Xheneti, Madden and Karki, 2019; Bastian, Wood and Ng, 2023) have documented the general challenges of accessing formal networks, the current research extends this understanding by revealing that women not only face entry barriers but also engage in network self-legitimation. Such a process involves consciously adapting their presentation styles, seeking endorsements from respected figures and aligning with organisations that can bolster their perceived legitimacy. Such adaptive strategies underscore a critical divergence from previous research, which has tended to treat networking participation as a more passive process rather than an active negotiation of identity and credibility.

In parallel, theme 9 from the women entrepreneurs' analysis uncovers a heavy reliance on informal networking activities that often occur outside of formal business settings. These informal networks, which include relationships with family, friends and community-based groups, provide not only emotional support but also practical assistance in terms of advice, referrals and even modest financial backing. The narratives indicate that these networks are instrumental in compensating for the shortcomings of formal networks, which offer a safety net and a source of resilience when access to institutional capital is obstructed by gender bias. The critical insight here is that while informal networks have long been recognised for their value in entrepreneurial ventures (Granovetter, 1983), the current research highlights the paradox that, for women, these same networks often serve as both a lifeline and a constraint. On the one hand, they furnish the trust and reciprocity necessary for initial business development; on the other hand, their limited scope and lower reach hinder opportunities for significant growth and access to high-calibre investors. This observation is particularly salient when compared with the literature (Krackhardt and Stern, 1988; Guire, 2002; Spring, 2009; Williams and Vorley, 2014) that generally assumes informal networks to be universally beneficial, suggesting that the benefits for women are double-edged and context-dependent. Male entrepreneurs, as captured in theme 3 of the analysis, present a contrasting picture. Their networking activities are characterised by a more effortless entry into formal and institutional networks where pre-existing relationships and social capital are more readily available. These networks, often steeped in tradition and established norms, provide men with a streamlined path to accessing venture capital, industry knowledge and strategic partnerships. Unlike women, male entrepreneurs do not report the need for additional validation or the burden of having to 'prove' their legitimacy at every interaction (Kanze et al., 2018; Pfefferman, Frenkel and Gilad, 2022). This difference is critical in understanding how gender influences networking dynamics, because, while men appear to benefit from structural advantages that facilitate smoother interactions within formal settings, women are compelled to work doubly hard, creating hybrid strategies that merge the benefits of both formal and informal networking channels (Kanze et al., 2018). The current study's findings thereby challenge earlier assumptions that networking opportunities are evenly distributed, instead revealing an underlying asymmetry that reinforces gender disparities.

Moreover, the analysis demonstrates that the networking activities of women entrepreneurs are imbued with a heightened sense of agency and intentionality. Faced with systemic obstacles, many women adopt proactive measures to expand and diversify their

networks. This includes leveraging social media platforms, joining women-focused entrepreneurial groups and seeking out mentors who can provide both strategic insight and advocacy. Such actions are not merely reactive but represent a deliberate strategy to reconfigure the existing network landscape in their favour. This nuanced approach contrasts with the more linear networking practices observed among male entrepreneurs, who tend to rely on established channels that are often closed off to women due to historical and cultural biases. In essence, while the literature has frequently highlighted the importance of networks for entrepreneurial success (Gulati, Daldin and Wang, 2017), the current research reveals that the effectiveness of these networks is highly contingent upon the ability to navigate gendered dynamics – a factor that previous studies have not sufficiently explored. The comparison of these findings with earlier research shows both convergence and divergence in key areas. For instance, Tiwari and Tiwari (2007) and Brush et al. (2017) argue that women face significant challenges in accessing funding and formal networks due to persistent stereotypes and biases. The current research corroborates these insights but goes further by providing empirical evidence of the specific adaptive strategies women employ. Rather than simply being victims of exclusion, the women entrepreneurs in this study are actively reconfiguring their network engagements through hybrid models that blend formal participation with robust informal support. This duality is a critical advancement in understanding, as it underscores the dynamic nature of networking activities as both a response to and a means of overcoming systemic obstacles.

In addition, the role of cultural context is brought to the fore in this discussion. The narratives indicate that in environments in which traditional gender roles are deeply entrenched, the challenges of networking are exacerbated, necessitating even more innovative approaches by women. While earlier studies have acknowledged cultural factors as impediments (Ahl, 2006; Langowitz and Minniti, 2007), the present findings reveal that women are not only navigating these cultural constraints but are also reinterpreting them to carve out unique spaces for professional engagement. For example, women who participate in women-only networks often view these forums as safe spaces where they can freely exchange ideas and resources without the pressure of conforming to male-dominated norms. However, the trade-off is that these networks may lack the diversity and reach required to connect with influential investors and strategic partners. This critical tension – between the safety and support of informal, gender-specific networks and the expansive potential of formal, mixed-gender networks – is a distinctive contribution of the current research. It suggests that the pathway to successful

entrepreneurship for women is not simply about gaining entry into existing networks but about transforming the nature and composition of those networks to better meet their unique needs. In contrast, the analysis of male entrepreneurs' networking activities suggests that their experiences are marked by a continuity of traditional practices, where longstanding relationships and institutional affiliations provide a secure foundation for business growth. Men tend to benefit from a self-reinforcing cycle in which early access to influential networks translates into ongoing opportunities for expansion, thus perpetuating existing power structures. This disparity is critical because it highlights the structural advantages that have historically favoured male entrepreneurs, and it raises important questions about the efficacy of current networking practices in promoting true equity. While the literature has often noted the benefits of formal networks (Granovetter, 1983), the current research makes it clear that the ease with which men access these networks is not matched by women, who must engage in additional relational work to achieve similar outcomes.

The divergence in networking strategies between male and female entrepreneurs, as revealed by this study, also explains how networking should be understood as an inherently gendered practice. For women, networking is not simply a matter of accumulating contacts but rather an active process of negotiating identities, challenging stereotypes and reconstituting relationships in ways that can counterbalance systemic disadvantages. This process of 'relationship work' is both a resource and a burden, as it requires constant vigilance and adaptation in the face of entrenched biases. In contrast, the networking activities of male entrepreneurs, while not devoid of challenges, are generally less encumbered by the need to overcome identity-related hurdles. This critical difference emphasises that networking should not be viewed as a neutral or uniformly beneficial activity but rather as a domain in which power dynamics and social constructs play a decisive role.

The current research has critically examined the effectiveness of different types of networking activities in yielding tangible business benefits. The findings suggest that while formal networks can facilitate access to significant resources such as venture capital and strategic partnerships, their benefits are often undermined by the gendered barriers that women face when attempting to enter these circles. Informal networks, on the other hand, provide a level of emotional and practical support that is indispensable during the early stages of business development, yet they frequently fall short in facilitating high-stakes growth opportunities. This dichotomy points to a critical challenge for women entrepreneurs: the need to bridge the gap between the supportive, albeit limited, benefits of informal networks and the expansive but

less-accessible opportunities offered by formal networks. By highlighting this gap, the present research contributes a nuanced perspective that challenges the conventional wisdom that networking, in itself, is a straightforward path to success. It is also evident that while earlier studies have acknowledged the importance of both formal and informal networks (e.g. Granovetter, 1983; Gulati, Dialdin and Wang, 2017), they have not fully captured the intricate balancing act that women entrepreneurs must perform. The current study demonstrates that women are not passive recipients of network benefits; rather, they actively construct and modify their networks in response to the unique challenges they encounter. This dynamic process, which involves both the cultivation of new ties and the reinforcement of existing ones, is a departure from earlier models that tended to view networking as a static resource. Moreover, the juxtaposition of these strategies with the more streamlined networking practices observed among male entrepreneurs provides a critical lens through which to assess the inherent inequities in access and opportunity.

The evidence presented here suggests that the networking activities of women entrepreneurs are characterised by a continuous tension between aspiration and constraint. On the one hand, there is a clear recognition of the transformative potential of networking to unlock new markets, secure investment and foster innovation. On the other hand, the practical realities of navigating a system that is still largely skewed in favour of male entrepreneurs impose significant limitations. This tension is reflected in the adaptive strategies that women employ, which include both the adoption of formal networking practices and the cultivation of supportive informal networks. The dual nature of these strategies underscores the complexity of the entrepreneurial journey for women – a journey that is marked by persistent efforts to overcome both external barriers and internalised doubts about their legitimacy and competence. The critical examination of networking activities in this study reveals that while the fundamental importance of networks for entrepreneurial success is well established in the literature (e.g. Krackhardt and Stern, 1988; Guire, 2002; Elfring and Hulsink, 2007; Spring, 2009; Williams and Vorley, 2014; McAdam, Harrison and Leitch, 2019; Ademola, Adegboyegun and Adegoke, 2020; Hein, Kreutzer and Diehl, 2021), the specific challenges and adaptive strategies employed by women entrepreneurs remain underexplored. By contrasting the experiences of women, who must continually negotiate and reconfigure their networking practices, with those of men, who benefit from more straightforward access to institutional networks, this research provides a fresh perspective on how gender shapes the dynamics of entrepreneurial networking. The findings demonstrate that networking is not a

one-size-fits-all solution; rather, it is a complex, gendered process that requires a deep understanding of both the structural impediments and the creative strategies that can be deployed to overcome them.

The analysis also reveals that the networking activities of women entrepreneurs are a testament to their resilience and ingenuity in the face of systemic obstacles. Their efforts to blend formal and informal networking practices highlight a sophisticated approach to building business relationships that is markedly different from the more conventional practices observed among male entrepreneurs. This nuanced understanding challenges prior research by revealing that the benefits of networking are not uniformly accessible and that the gendered dimensions of these activities play a crucial role in shaping entrepreneurial outcomes. The evidence suggests that while networking remains an indispensable tool for business success, its efficacy is contingent upon the ability to navigate and transform the underlying power structures that govern access to resources. Through this lens, the current research contributes a critical and differentiated perspective on entrepreneurial networking, one that emphasises the need to consider gender as a fundamental factor in the design and evaluation of networking strategies. Based on the discussion of networking approaches, the following framework is represented to understand the networking approaches women entrepreneurs should implement to enhance their networking capabilities for better business growth and success.

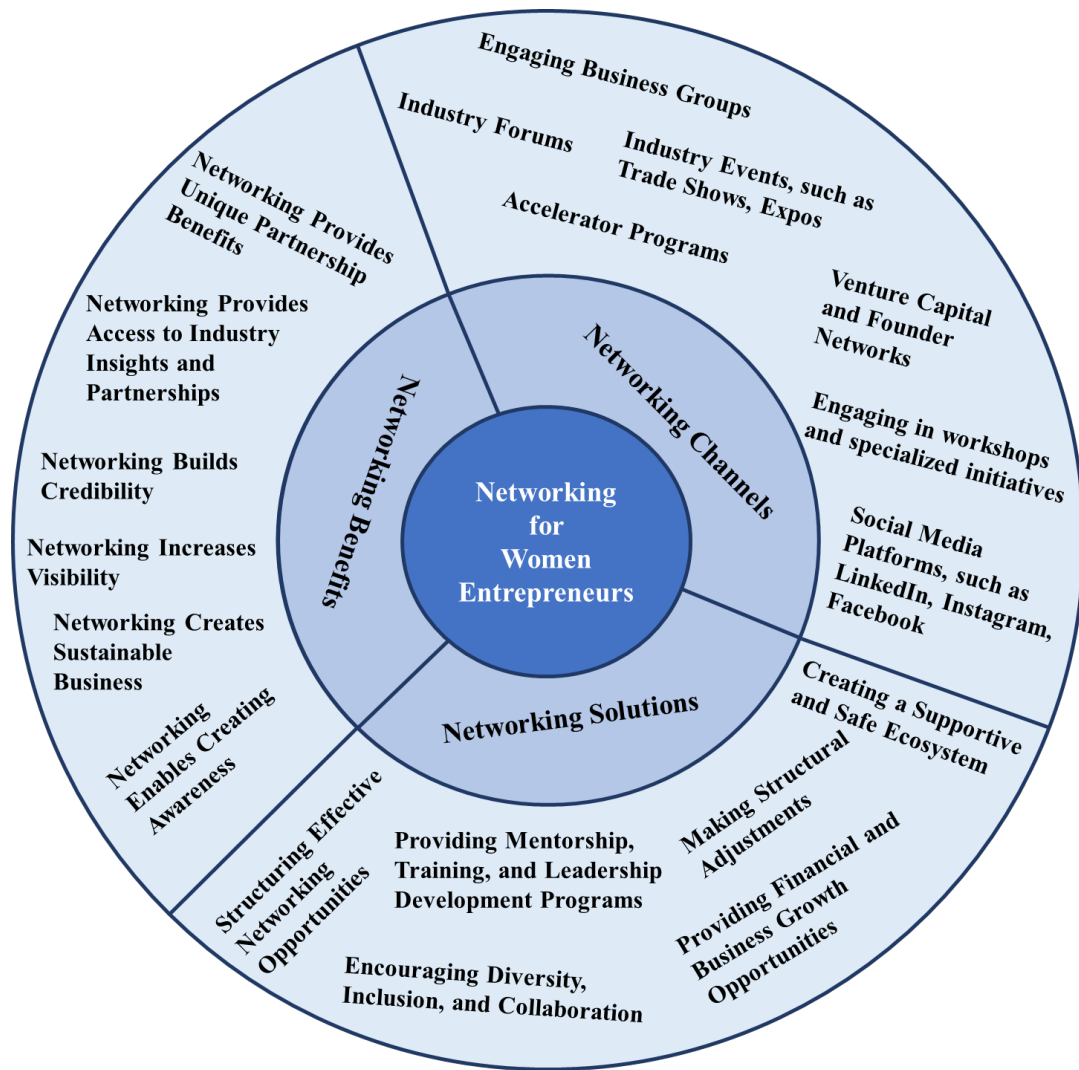


Figure 9: Networking Solutions for Women Entrepreneurs

5.5 Strategies for Improving Networking for Women Entrepreneurs

This study's results present a comprehensive and complex picture of entrepreneurial networking, including a detailed comparison of the methods and obstacles faced by male and female entrepreneurs. In light of previous research, these results validate and expand current ideas, notably in terms of digital platform integration, the necessity of structural changes and the need for inclusive, supportive ecosystems. Historically, networking in entrepreneurship has been generally recognised as critical for acquiring resources, developing trust and allowing information sharing. Aldrich and Zimmer (1986) and Burt (1992; 1998) have shown that good networking may provide the groundwork for the development of social capital, which is important for entrepreneurial success. The current research validates these concepts by indicating that networking is essential for both male and female entrepreneurs, but it further

complicates this knowledge by identifying gender-specific hurdles and preferences that impact how networking is perceived and carried out.

Male entrepreneurs highlight the need to establish a worldwide network that allows for the sharing of information and collaboration possibilities. This approach is congruent with earlier research, which emphasises the efficiency and scalability of digital networking, allowing for quick communication and reinforcement of existing professional ties. Furthermore, male entrepreneurs frequently use these digital tools to promote their thought leadership through content-driven strategies such as podcasts and online clubs, which serve both to disseminate industry insights and to reinforce their reputations as industry experts. Female entrepreneurs, on the other hand, seem to favour a more balanced networking strategy that includes both professional and informal venues. They respect planned events such as conferences, trade fairs and seminars for their legitimacy and professional involvement, but they also value informal meetings such as coffee talks and casual encounters to develop real, trust-based connections. The dual focus identified among female entrepreneurs adds to previous studies by Brush et al. (2001; 2004), which demonstrate the importance of both bonding and bridging social capital in entrepreneurial success. However, this study builds on earlier research by finding that female entrepreneurs are more sensitive to the structural and cultural hurdles that often prevent them from participating in typical networking events.

Female entrepreneurs, more than their male counterparts, are obliged to push for changes in the design and execution of networking opportunities that better address their specific concerns. Many female respondents emphasised the need for flexible scheduling, low participation costs and the inclusion of virtual networking possibilities to mitigate the burden of family or caregiver commitments. These practical factors are crucial because they address the cultural and institutional barriers that have traditionally hampered women's access to prominent networks. While previous research has identified these hurdles, the new results provide more in-depth knowledge of how such limits influence networking engagement and provide concrete solutions – such as on-site childcare and culturally relevant scheduling – to address these difficulties. This research adds to a more comprehensive knowledge of how networking structures might be altered to promote gender equality in entrepreneurship. Another key finding of the research is the significance of mentoring, training and leadership development in empowering female entrepreneurs. Mentorship emerges as an especially valuable resource, not just to gain business knowledge but also to develop the confidence required to negotiate male-dominated sectors. Female entrepreneurs in the survey emphasised

the importance of one-on-one mentoring programmes and women-focused networking groups, which provide safe and inclusive environments in which to share experiences and overcome obstacles. This focus on mentoring is consistent with the findings of previous studies, which suggest that access to experienced mentors may have a major influence on the success of budding female entrepreneurs. However, the current study contributes to the discourse by clearly tying mentoring to the need for confidence-building and leadership development activities, defining it as a practical and psychological tool for empowerment. Male entrepreneurs, on the other hand, while appreciating the value of mentorship, tend to prioritise the use of their existing networks to exchange industry insights and confirm their positions as thought leaders. Their approach is distinguished by a dependence on digital connection and a focus on efficiency and quick information distribution, rather than the establishment of safe, supportive settings that address deeper systemic concerns.

The research also makes a significant addition to the literature (e.g. Sundermeier, Wessel and Davidson, 2018; Kamberidou, 2020; Schillo and Ebrahimi, 2021) in terms of the integration of digital platforms in networking. While previous studies (e.g. Kamberidou, 2020; Schillo and Ebrahimi, 2021) often separate digital and in-person networking into distinct modalities, the present results show that a successful networking approach increasingly requires a hybrid model that blends the best of both worlds. Male entrepreneurs enjoy digital platforms for their capacity to promote rapid and expanded interactions across geographical borders, providing access to a global pool of contacts and prospects. Female entrepreneurs, while appreciating the advantages of digital technologies, emphasise the need to complement these platforms with properly conceived physical events that allow for greater human contact (Sundermeier, Wessel and Davidson, 2018). This insight indicates a significant change in perspective, implying that the future of entrepreneurial networking rests in developing integrative models that can be tailored to a variety of requirements and conditions. The call for such a hybrid model is especially timely in an era when technological advancements are rapidly changing the landscape of business interactions, and it serves as a reminder that the value of networking lies not only in the number of connections made but also in the quality of relationships formed.

Furthermore, the research has investigated the role of lobbying and institutional change in tackling the specific problems that female entrepreneurs confront. The results show that successful networking for women is more than just a personal technique; it is also a social problem that needs wider cultural and institutional support. Many female respondents asked

for the development of advocacy campaigns and legislative efforts to overcome longstanding gender prejudices and boost women's involvement in powerful corporate circles. This viewpoint draws on previous studies (e.g. Abou-Moghli and Al-Abdallah, 2019; Abiola, Gift and Abhulimen, 2024), which reveal structural barriers to women's entrepreneurial success. However, the current study goes a step further by emphasising the importance of designing networking interventions with a clear understanding of these systemic issues, integrating practical solutions, such as women-focused investment funds and mentorship programmes with larger efforts to reshape the entrepreneurial ecosystem in a more equitable manner. The importance of such systemic interventions is highlighted by the fact that, while male entrepreneurs typically operate within existing frameworks that reinforce established hierarchies, female entrepreneurs are frequently marginalised by the same structures, necessitating targeted efforts to level the playing field.

When the viewpoints of male and female entrepreneurs are combined, it becomes clear that, although there is a common appreciation of the vital role that networking plays in entrepreneurial success, the underlying motives and obstacles vary significantly. Male entrepreneurs prefer to rely on existing digital networks and exclusive peer groups to increase efficiency and influence, highlighting the need for fast, technology-driven communication channels. Their networking techniques are based on the notion that having access to a large and active network naturally leads to greater commercial prospects, which is congruent with most of the current research on the advantages of social capital. In contrast, female entrepreneurs are more aware of the relational and structural aspects of networking. They advocate for workplaces that create not just professional ties but also a feeling of belonging, safety and support. This disparity in approach highlights a larger issue of equity in entrepreneurship: while men may benefit from well-established networks that provide both breadth and depth, women frequently face additional layers of complexity, such as balancing professional and personal responsibilities, overcoming cultural biases and navigating spaces that are not always designed with their needs in mind. This study's findings are especially noteworthy given the rising digitisation of corporate relationships. The growing importance of digital platforms has altered conventional networking patterns, creating new possibilities for both men and women entrepreneurs. However, the research found that internet connection alone is inadequate to address the structural and cultural barriers that disproportionately harm female entrepreneurs. To develop genuinely inclusive and helpful networking spaces, women must combine the use of digital technologies with purposeful structural changes such as flexible event scheduling,

on-site daycare and culturally sensitive programming. This comprehensive understanding of the interaction between digital and physical networking marks a significant change from previous research, which has tended to concentrate on only one modality or the other. It implies that the future of entrepreneurial networking rests in creating flexible frameworks that can fulfil the different demands of today's entrepreneurial communities.

The comparative analysis offered in this research calls into question the standard narrative, which often portrays entrepreneurial networking as a uniform activity that occurs regardless of gender. By contrasting the experiences and methods of male and female entrepreneurs, the study not only reveals the shared significance of networking but also discloses major differences in how networking is perceived and performed. Male entrepreneurs, who rely on digital platforms and exclusive peer groups, benefit from business climates that meet their networking demands without necessitating big structural adjustments. However, female entrepreneurs face unique challenges that demand a more considered and inclusive approach. This disparity emphasises the significance of developing networking treatments that are attentive to the gendered aspects of entrepreneurship. It also emphasises the potential advantages of cross-gender cooperation, in which male entrepreneurs may actively advocate for and support the institutional reforms required to establish more equal networking opportunities for women. When considering the wider significance of these results, it is obvious that the research helps to provide a more holistic picture of entrepreneurial networking by pushing beyond the basic binary of digital versus face-to-face contacts. Instead, it provides a nuanced perspective that acknowledges the significance of including many modalities of interaction to fulfil the diverse requirements of various entrepreneurial groups. The study not only verifies the importance of networking in promoting entrepreneurial success but also encourages politicians, educators and business leaders to think about how networking frameworks may be rebuilt to address structural imbalances. By emphasising the unique challenges that female entrepreneurs face, such as balancing familial responsibilities, overcoming cultural biases and accessing tailored mentorship, the study makes a compelling case for the development of targeted interventions that can close the existing gender gap in entrepreneurship.

The insights gained from this study serve as a call to action for the wider entrepreneurial community. They emphasise the need to develop networking environments that are not just successful at promoting corporate development but are also equal and helpful. This comparative study of male and female entrepreneurs' networking activities finds that, although

both groups appreciate the opportunity to interact and cooperate, the paths to accomplishing these objectives vary significantly. Male entrepreneurs benefit from existing digital and physical networks that are already incorporated into the current business culture, but female entrepreneurs face additional challenges that need new and inclusive solutions. As the entrepreneurial environment evolves in response to technological breakthroughs and evolving cultural standards, the results of this research provide useful insights for the creation of future networking frameworks. They argue that, by taking a more holistic and intersectional approach, combining digital innovation with institutional changes and cultural sensitivity, the entrepreneurial community can build a more inclusive environment that allows all people to reach their full potential.

Based on the discussion of the factors, challenges, networking activities and strategies, the following integrated framework is developed and represented to enhance overall networking opportunities for women entrepreneurs in the MENA region.

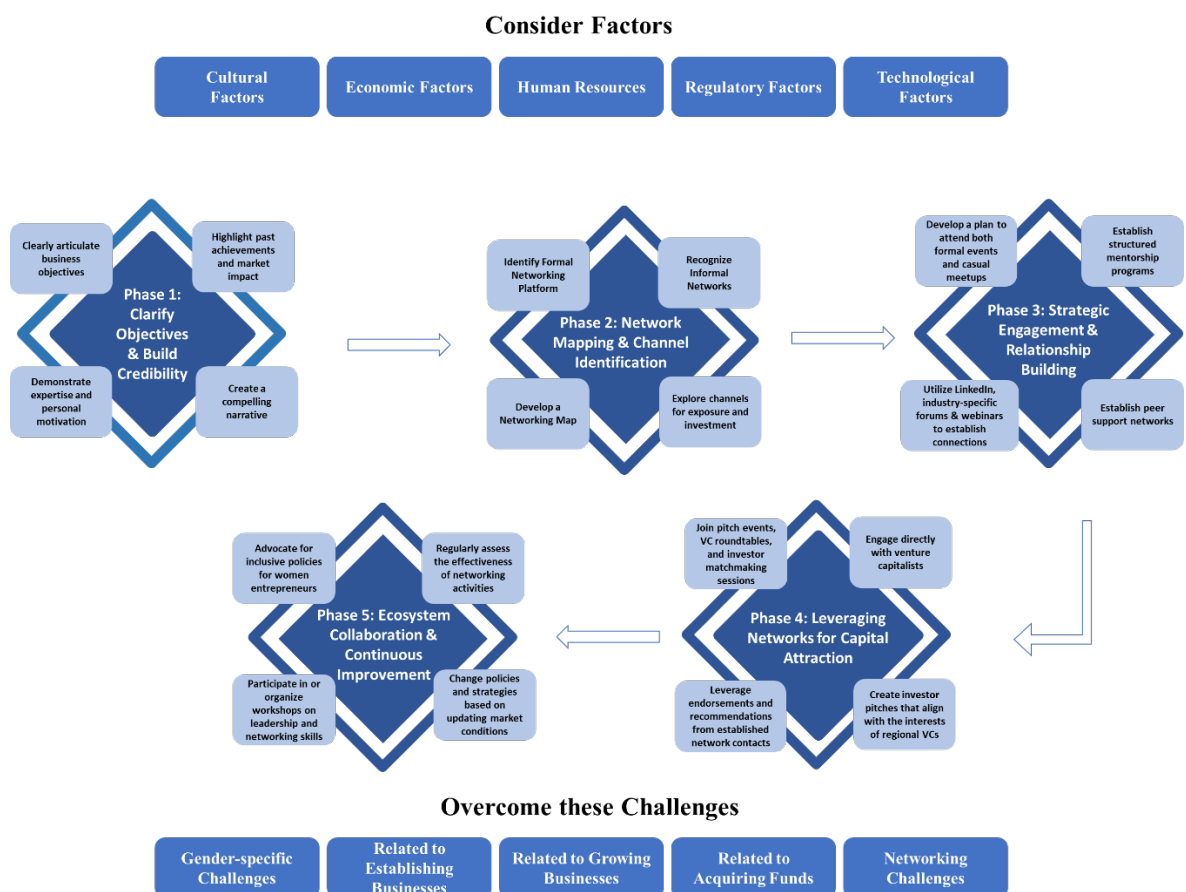


Figure 10: Integrated Networking Strategy

5.6 Research Implications

5.6.1 Theoretical Implications

The findings of this study contribute to the existing body of literature on entrepreneurship, networking and gender studies by providing nuanced insights into the dynamics of networking among women entrepreneurs in the MENA region. The research confirms that the integration of formal and informal networks is not merely additive but synergistic, leading to improved outcomes in accessing venture capital and sustaining business growth. One key theoretical contribution is the enhanced understanding of institutional theory in the context of women's entrepreneurship. The research enhances institutional theory from a gendered perspective, as it supports the view that formal institutions, such as regulatory bodies, financial organisations and governmental initiatives, enable and constrain women's access to resources. The study demonstrates that while these formal networks are critical for securing venture capital, they are often underutilised by women due to entrenched cultural and gender biases. This insight contributes to the broader discussion on institutional barriers and the need for policy interventions that specifically address these inequities.

Furthermore, the study reinforces and extends RDT by highlighting the unique resource dependencies that women entrepreneurs experience. The research shows that, unlike their male counterparts, women rely heavily on informal networks to bridge the gap created by the limited access to formal financial resources. This reliance not only shapes the way women approach business challenges but also underscores the importance of designing strategies that expand and strengthen these informal networks while simultaneously facilitating access to formal channels. These findings provide a compelling argument for reconceptualising RDT to accommodate the gender-specific challenges and opportunities in entrepreneurial ecosystems.

Another important theoretical implication relates to the concept of network strength and diversity. The study has identified that the quality and diversity of a network, which is defined by elements such as tie strength, density and reachability, are critical determinants of entrepreneurial success. Women entrepreneurs who are able to cultivate diverse networks tend to have higher resilience and better access to innovative ideas, market information and potential investors. The study offers a more comprehensive model that captures the multifaceted nature of entrepreneurial networking by incorporating these network-related elements into the theoretical framework. Beyond the immediate context of the MENA region, the framework provides valuable insights into the broader interplay between gender, networks and economic development. It extends current theories by illustrating how strategic networking can serve as

a lever for both challenging institutional biases and enhancing resource flows. This, in turn, can spur entrepreneurial activity and foster more inclusive economic growth. The strategy thus contributes to a growing body of literature that explores the intersection of gender studies, social capital theory and entrepreneurship, offering a model that may be applicable in other emerging markets facing similar challenges. This expanded model can serve as a basis for future research that aims to quantitatively test the relationships between network characteristics and entrepreneurial performance in various contexts.

5.6.2 Practical Implications

The practical contributions of this study have significant ramifications for policy-makers, investors and practitioners who are engaged in promoting women's entrepreneurship in the MENA region. The research emphasises that the challenges faced by women entrepreneurs are not solely due to a lack of resources but also due to the absence of an integrated networking ecosystem that bridges formal and informal channels. Governments and regulatory bodies in the MENA region are encouraged to develop policies that foster a more inclusive entrepreneurial environment. Specific measures include the creation of dedicated support centres for women entrepreneurs, streamlining the process of accessing venture capital and incentivising financial institutions to offer products that cater to the unique needs of women-led businesses. The study's evidence on the institutional barriers faced by women underscores the need for legislative reforms that remove gender-based biases in funding and networking opportunities.

One of the key practical implications is the necessity of implementing comprehensive training and mentorship programmes. These initiatives should be designed to enhance the networking skills of women entrepreneurs by focusing on building strong ties, both formal and informal. Workshops, leadership development programmes and mentorship schemes can equip women with the necessary tools to navigate both established business networks and emerging digital platforms. Such programmes would also help women develop the confidence needed to engage with formal investors and financial institutions, thereby increasing their chances of securing venture capital. The research findings reveal that while informal networks are crucial for immediate support and resource sharing, formal networks are essential for long-term business growth and access to capital. Investors and venture capital firms in the region should be encouraged to participate in targeted networking events specifically designed for women entrepreneurs. For instance, creating platforms where investors and women-led start-ups can interact directly may help break down existing biases and foster relationships that lead to

financial support. In addition, business incubators and accelerators that focus on women-led enterprises can serve as bridges to formal networks, thus ensuring that women are not excluded from the broader entrepreneurial ecosystem.

In today's digital age, online platforms and social media provide a unique opportunity to bypass traditional networking barriers. The study suggests that digital tools can be harnessed to develop virtual networks that complement the physical, formal networks. Social media platforms, online communities and virtual mentorship programmes offer an accessible medium for women entrepreneurs to connect with peers, mentors and investors. These digital networks not only democratise access to information and funding opportunities but also help women entrepreneurs reach a global audience, expanding their market reach and business influence. In addition, public-private partnerships (PPPs) can play a pivotal role in addressing the multifaceted challenges faced by women entrepreneurs. By combining the resources and expertise of governmental bodies with the innovation and agility of private enterprises, PPPs can help create tailored support systems. This could include joint initiatives for research and development, funding schemes or the creation of networking hubs that cater specifically to the needs of women in entrepreneurship. Such collaborative efforts can help ensure that the support structure is both comprehensive and sustainable.

Another practical implication is the need to educate investors about the untapped potential of women-led enterprises. Biases in investment decisions can be mitigated through awareness campaigns that highlight the success stories of women entrepreneurs and the economic benefits of gender diversity in business. This approach would not only challenge preconceived notions but also encourage investors to adopt a more balanced view when evaluating funding proposals. By showcasing empirical evidence that contradicts common stereotypes, the study contributes to a shift in the investment culture towards one that is more inclusive and equitable. Hence, it is important to understand that such practical-based outcomes of this research advocate for a strategic, inclusive and well-coordinated approach to foster the growth of women's entrepreneurship in the MENA region. The proposed framework aims to dismantle existing barriers and create an ecosystem in which women entrepreneurs can thrive by integrating formal and informal networking strategies.

6 Chapter 6: Conclusion

6.1 Research Summary

The current research aimed to develop a networking structure (framework) for women's entrepreneurship that will help women entrepreneurs to develop strong ties using formal and informal networks to increase their growth in the MENA region. The study employed a qualitative method and thematic analysis underpinned with an interpretivist and inductive approach, which provided valuable insights into the unique challenges and opportunities faced by women entrepreneurs, as well as the potential pathways to enhance their access to venture capital and business growth. The research also aimed to investigate the interactions between women's entrepreneurship and networking in the MENA region, concentrating on the transformation of formal and informal networks as the main controllers of business success. On the one hand, institutional theory formed the basis of the study, and on the other hand, RDT was used to understand how women entrepreneurs are navigating the complex sociocultural, institutional and financial landscapes to ensure their venture capital and sustainability growth.

The research was motivated by outlining an important contextual gap, as it is crucial to focus on context in such studies. In addition, the countries focused upon in this research were Saudi Arabia, Egypt and the UAE. The researcher focused on these three countries because, even though they have high economic potential, women entrepreneurs remain underrepresented, primarily due to limited access to financial resources and networking opportunities. Also, there is limited research in the MENA region that explores the interplay between networking and women's entrepreneurship. Networking is an important aspect that should be focused upon in the context of women's entrepreneurship because it allows women entrepreneurs to connect and network with other stakeholders who can provide them with necessary support. Past researchers have outlined that women entrepreneurs have primarily been dependent on informal networks, i.e. personal contacts, which often have limitations and are insufficient for overcoming the structural barriers imposed by traditional, male-dominated formal institutions. The researcher conducted a qualitative study, using semi-structured interviews, to overcome this gap as it allowed the exploration of a diverse set of experiences and perspectives from many women entrepreneurs and a few male entrepreneurs.

The data collection involved interviews, which lasted between 45 and 60 minutes and were designed to obtain detailed narratives regarding networking practices, challenges in securing venture capital and the perceived benefits of both formal (e.g. government agencies, venture capital firms) and informal (e.g. family, social circles) networking channels. By

conducting thematic analysis on the data collected from the women entrepreneurs, ten primary themes were generated; four primary themes were generated from the data collected from the male entrepreneurs. Themes generated from the women entrepreneurs' data were motivation for entrepreneurship, gender-specific entrepreneurial challenges, challenges in business establishment, challenges in growing businesses, challenges in acquiring funds, networking challenges for women entrepreneurs, key market impact factors, perceptions of networking benefits for business growth, preferred networking channels and networking strategies to empower women entrepreneurs. Themes generated from the data from the male entrepreneurs included motivation and challenges in entrepreneurship, gender dynamics in networking and entrepreneurship, benefits and impact of networking and networking strategies and methods.

The current research not only confirmed that women entrepreneurs in the MENA region face significant barriers stemming from entrenched gender norms, limited access to formal funding and a lack of supportive networking ecosystems; it also demonstrated that a strategically designed networking framework could mitigate these challenges. The study's findings underscore that while informal networks provide emotional support and immediate access to basic resources, formal networks are indispensable for accessing venture capital and facilitating business expansion. These insights provide a robust foundation for developing a comprehensive networking strategy that integrates both dimensions.

6.2 Addressing Research Objectives

The first objective of the research was to identify factors that impact the activities of women entrepreneurs in the MENA region. The first research objective was achieved as the findings of the study (specifically theme 7 – impact of key factors) indicated that there are various factors that affect the activities of women entrepreneurs. The findings indicated that cultural factors, economic factors, technological factors, regulatory factors and human resources impact the activities of women entrepreneurs. The findings indicated that there are multiple realities of patriarchy, which directly or indirectly impact the functioning of women entrepreneurs, especially in firmly traditional areas and in relation to consumer preferences among a number of cultures. This implies that women entrepreneurs are expected to respond to the cultural expectations and cope with seasonal demands by adjusting their products, services and marketing strategies accordingly. Also, the cultural complexity present in businesses could exacerbate the problem because women entrepreneurs would have to greatly vary their approaches in order to correspond with the multifarious needs of different consumer groups. The findings also indicated that there is high sensitivity and low adaptability towards

women-owned businesses, as, in the MENA region, cultural differences heavily dictate customer interactions with businesses. The refinement of business strategies must be a continuous operation, attuning them to cultural changes, the transformation of the media and alterations in consumer attitudes. In addition, the findings also indicated that economic factors in the region also significantly affect women entrepreneurs' activities. It was found that women entrepreneurs' businesses depend on many economic issues to be able to grow sustainably. For instance, currency fluctuation, political stability and government policies are directly related to business operations, consumer spending and the general money-making of companies. Investors do consider these uncertainties and risks, as these lead to changes in supplier networks, investment decisions and pricing structures. When investors are biased towards women entrepreneurs, these factors can be focused upon more if they do not want to invest in women-owned businesses. The findings also indicated that women entrepreneurs must consider economic stability in their nations as it is an important indicator of consumer confidence that has a significant impact on the general business performance. In the case of economic crises, a decrease in purchasing power is going to reduce sales and consequently impede company advancement, particularly in fields that depend on consumer demand. Administrative and financial limitations present a challenge, mainly among enterprises that plan to extend their business operations. In order to harness long-term growth, women entrepreneurs should make their strategies resilient by means of diversifying their sources of income and keeping themselves up to date with finance news. The third factor that was found to have an impact was human resources. The findings indicated that the demand for and preservation of a qualified labour force comes with significant barriers for women entrepreneurs. Women entrepreneurs in science and technology-related fields, which are rapidly developing, face issues with finding talented people; in addition, despite the high competition, talent does not all come from the same pool. Retaining staff can be challenging, as small businesses have limited financial resources. To manage these issues, women entrepreneurs need to hire talented people and offer them positive environments, training and flexible work settings, among other benefits. Moreover, continuous training and mentorship can be utilised in closing skills gaps, and therefore employers can build strong, resilient workforces that enable them to continue despite the constraints of the labour market. The findings also indicated that regulatory factors affect women entrepreneurs' activities. It was found that laws governing commerce, taxes and industry standards impose administrative responsibilities that must be carefully managed. It is important for women entrepreneurs to implement efforts to learn and comply with various legal standards when they are operating businesses in multiple countries. It is also important to

acknowledge that these regulatory considerations may stifle corporate growth, raise operating expenses and require continuous legal knowledge to assure conformity with changing policy. In addition, trade policy and taxes regulations have a direct impact on firm profitability and operational efficiency. Changes in import/export restrictions, tariffs and municipal tax policies have an influence on supply chain costs, product price and market access. The findings also indicated that technology has a significant impact on the business activities of women entrepreneurs, impacting operations, marketing and growth plans. It was also indicated by women and male entrepreneurs that they need to adapt to these digital transformation changes and use new technologies to improve consumer interaction and optimise corporate procedures. However, keeping ahead of technological advances requires ongoing learning and investment, which may be especially difficult for small women-owned enterprises with little financial means.

The second objective of the research was to identify challenges faced by women entrepreneurs to obtain venture capital while developing start-ups in the MENA region. The research objective was achieved, as the findings (represented in themes 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6 based on the data collected from the women entrepreneurs and themes 2 and 4 based on the data collected from the male entrepreneurs) represented multiple challenges faced by women entrepreneurs. The findings indicated that the most dominant are the problems related to cultural and social norms, acquiring the capital and the absence of sufficient numbers of active players to support women in their competent roles. The interviews with the male entrepreneurs also indicated that, despite having innovative business ideas, women often find it challenging to penetrate the formal networks that provide funding. This reinforces the notion that the difficulty in securing venture capital is not due to a lack of merit but rather to structural impediments ingrained in the investment ecosystem. The findings outlined that a significant set of the challenges women entrepreneurs face are primarily related to their gender, which apply in obtaining venture capital, starting their businesses, networking and other entrepreneurial activities. Cultural and social expectations often create extra responsibilities for women, forcing them to reconcile conventional family obligations with business goals. Women entrepreneurs also have financial and resource constraints as many are unable to obtain funding, secure investment or gain financial literacy, which impedes their growth. Furthermore, a lack of representation in leadership positions and restricted access to professional networks create structural hurdles that limit chances for women entrepreneurs in many male-dominated industries. The findings further indicated that women entrepreneurs face significant challenges

in establishing their businesses, specifically related to obtaining venture capital, navigating market rivalry, complying with legal requirements and managing supply chain logistics. Many women struggle to obtain early finance owing to complicated banking processes and investor distrust, which restricts their capacity to grow efficiently. Additional issues, such as market- and customer-related issues contribute to their challenges, as they must work harder to build credibility and acquire consumer confidence in competitive markets. Regulatory and ecological impediments, such as confusing regulations and bureaucratic inefficiency, provide additional challenges, particularly in developing regions such as the MENA region. Supply chain and logistical restrictions, such as unreliable suppliers and inadequate delivery networks, also create operational issues that impede corporate development. The findings further indicated that women entrepreneurs not only face challenges in establishing their businesses but also in growing them. The results indicate that these challenges are related to obtaining government contracts, controlling operational expenditures and dealing with personnel concerns. Many businesses struggle to grow without sacrificing quality owing to fierce competition from bigger companies with greater resources. It was also found that women entrepreneurs face challenges in accessing government contracts, since cumbersome registration and bidding procedures sometimes disqualify smaller, less-connected enterprises. Financial restrictions, such as high operating expenses and limited external financing sources, further impede growth attempts. Furthermore, women entrepreneurs have continual labour and personnel management challenges, since it is difficult to recruit and retain qualified staff, particularly in competitive sectors. Cultural and gender prejudices can present difficulties, with some prospective workers being unwilling to work for female bosses. One of the most prominent challenges women entrepreneurs face at all times, especially while establishing and growing their businesses and even in later stages, is obtaining funding from investors. These issues occur because of investors' trust issues and gender prejudices, and also because of administrative delays and restricted access to institutional financial backing. Many women entrepreneurs struggle to acquire investor faith because they are often asked to show substantial market research, financial forecasts and evidence of company viability, and it is important to note that these requirements are considerably stricter for women than for men. Systemic biases can breed suspicion among investors and lenders, resulting in delayed or rejected financing possibilities. In response to these hurdles, many women depend on personal funds and family assistance to start their firms, while others look into government subsidies and venture capital, despite these options remaining difficult to obtain. Another set of challenges that women entrepreneurs face is networking challenges, which link this research prominently to the networking aspect. The

findings indicated that women face prominent networking challenges due to male-dominated environments, cultural expectations and restricted access to relevant or high-profile events. Many professional networking situations are designed in ways that unintentionally exclude women, whether via scheduling problems, gender prejudices or cultural norms that discourage involvement. Balancing personal commitments affects networking chances, since many women are unable to attend events that conflict with family or professional obligations. Furthermore, official networking systems may often impede actual relationship-building and informal networks, wherein crucial commercial agreements that frequently take place are difficult to access for women entrepreneurs. Even if women obtain access to events, they may find them irrelevant to their sector or inefficient in terms of forming real business relationships. Finding dependable business partners remains a considerable challenge, especially for those new to the market. Many women fail to form trustworthy partnerships because they lack established networks and are excluded from crucial corporate circles. However, in certain supporting businesses or areas, women entrepreneurs have fewer networking barriers, especially in collaborative and inclusive sectors such as the arts and culture.

The third objective of the research was to critically outline the mechanism through which women entrepreneurs develop formal and informal networks in the MENA region. The research objective was achieved as the findings critically examined how women entrepreneurs develop and maintain their networks. The results were in line with themes 8 and 9 (data collected from the women entrepreneurs) and theme 3 (data collected from the male entrepreneurs) and the results indicated that informal networks, usually based on family, friends and social ties, provide critical emotional support and immediate resources. However, these networks lack the scale and institutional connections necessary for business growth. In contrast, formal networks, though less accessible, offer the potential for significant financial backing and professional development. By contrasting these two approaches, the study illustrated that a hybrid networking strategy, which integrates both formal and informal elements, is essential for overcoming the multifaceted challenges faced by women entrepreneurs in the MENA region. The study's results highlight that women entrepreneurs in the MENA region should use networking as a strategic technique to gain credibility, maintain their enterprises, boost brand recognition, develop important relationships and remain up to date on industry trends. These results show that networking is more than just a company development technique; it is also a comprehensive instrument that determines an entrepreneur's growth path and long-term success. Networking helps women entrepreneurs establish and retain a reputation by creating

trust, obtaining recommendations and interacting with important industry leaders, allowing them to establish connections. Entrepreneurs in these areas use networking to improve their professional image and obtain access to possibilities that might otherwise be out of reach. This aligns with institutional theory, which stresses the role of social institutions and cultural norms in creating organisational behaviour. Women entrepreneurs earn social legitimacy by conforming to the social norms and expectations established by industry leaders and significant personalities, which boosts their market position. Furthermore, networking may help businesses achieve long-term success. It provides women entrepreneurs with vital resources such as capital, strategic connections and industry expertise. The results suggest that networking not only gives immediate commercial advantages, but also fosters an ecosystem of ongoing learning and support, which is critical for managing market shifts. This is consistent with the resource-dependence theory, which holds that organisations must form links with other entities in order to acquire critical resources and maintain their existence. Women entrepreneurs who successfully network are able to access larger pools of resources, such as financial capital, human resources and expertise, which contribute to their companies' sustainability and competitiveness. One of the study's primary results is that networking helps to increase brand recognition and exposure. Active engagement in industry events, forums and online platforms allows women entrepreneurs to exhibit their skills, network with colleagues and position themselves as thought leaders. Another significant advantage noted by the participants is the potential to build strategic connections via networking. Women entrepreneurs who network may cooperate with other firms to broaden their market reach, improve operational efficiency and co-develop goods or services. These collaborations are beneficial to corporate development, especially in areas in which competition is fierce and distinctiveness is critical. The resource-dependence hypothesis is also relevant here, since partnerships enable entrepreneurs to gain access to resources (e.g. distribution networks, technical knowledge) that would otherwise be unavailable or difficult to obtain independently. The interchange of resources via joint efforts improves the company's capacity to adapt and develop, assuring its long-term viability. The findings also indicated the importance of digital platforms such as LinkedIn and Instagram in broadening the networks of women entrepreneurs. Social media platforms are important in the growth of both official and informal networks because they provide direct access to decision-makers, influencers and peers. These platforms represent an emerging world in which networking is becoming more digital and global in nature. The findings also show that networking via specialised organisations, such as women-focused business communities, venture capital networks and accelerator programmes, provides women

entrepreneurs with unique possibilities to access mentoring, financing and industry knowledge. These networks provide controlled contexts in which entrepreneurs may connect with other like-minded people who understand the issues they confront. It can be understood that the study's results emphasise the importance of both formal and informal networking in the success and sustainability of women entrepreneurs in the MENA region. Women entrepreneurs use networking to establish credibility, gain exposure and access to critical resources and develop strategic connections that drive company success.

The fourth objective of the research was to develop a networking strategy/framework for women entrepreneurs to develop strong ties using formal and informal networks and attract more venture capital in the MENA region. The objective was achieved as the findings (represented in theme 10 based on the analysis of the data from the women entrepreneurs and theme 4 based on the analysis of the data from the male entrepreneurs) were in line with this objective. Also, the study has developed a networking strategy (presented in figure) that could help women entrepreneurs build strong ties and attract venture capital. Based on the insights gathered, the study has proposed a conceptual framework that emphasises the need for a dual-channel approach. This strategy incorporates initiatives to strengthen formal networks, such as government policies, training programmes and investor outreach, with measures that enhance informal networking capabilities, including mentorship programmes and community-building efforts. The proposed framework aims to create an ecosystem in which women can seamlessly transition between personal support systems and professional networks, thereby increasing their chances of obtaining critical resources and achieving sustainable growth. The findings highlighted the multifaceted nature of networking strategies as critical enablers for empowering women entrepreneurs while also emphasising the importance of reconfiguring traditional networking practices to accommodate the unique challenges that women face in entrepreneurial spaces. The findings indicated that there is a need to mix formal and informal networking opportunities. Formal events, such as conferences and seminars, give structure, industry insights and legitimacy, but informal settings, such as casual gatherings and coffee conversations, foster real, trust-based connections, which are critical for long-term cooperation and support. In addition, it was also observed that the findings are underpinned by institutional theory, as this was implied in the results suggesting that the norms, values and regulations within society and organisational frameworks have a substantial impact on entrepreneurs' behaviour. Women entrepreneurs' need for secure, inclusive and culturally sensitive networking spaces is a reaction to longstanding institutional policies that have historically

disadvantaged women. The entrepreneurial ecosystem starts to confront and progressively shift established gender stereotypes by building women-centric places, mentoring programmes and networking events that include both male and female entrepreneurs. These strategy changes not only promote inclusion but also communicate to larger institutional stakeholders the importance of diversity and equality in driving long-term entrepreneurial development. Resource dependence theory also complements this viewpoint by emphasising the need to access vital resources, such as financial capital, industry expertise, mentoring or leadership development, for better business growth and competitive advantage for women entrepreneurs. The results show that established networking frameworks, supplemented by flexible scheduling, digital platforms and supported infrastructures, such as childcare services, are critical to alleviate resource restrictions. Such strategic networking activities provide for direct access to investor networks, customised mentoring programmes and industry-specific learning opportunities. Furthermore, male entrepreneurs' perspectives on polite, inclusive networking methods enrich the whole story. Their focus on building organised settings with defined boundaries and encouraging the involvement of male allies is consistent with the ideas of institutional theory and RDT. By creating conditions that are both courteous and adaptable, the wider entrepreneurial ecosystem can expand to accommodate all of its members, boosting overall innovation and growth. Male entrepreneurs' readiness to confront and solve concerns of professionalism and inclusion demonstrates an institutional shift by recognising that a varied network may lead to more robust resource-sharing and better commercial success. The inclusion of data from both female and male entrepreneurs emphasises the important need for networking frameworks that are adaptive, inclusive and resource-oriented. Institutional constraints and changing cultural standards need the breakdown of conventional networking systems that have traditionally disadvantaged women. Simultaneously, the resource-dependence approach emphasises the need for good networking in obtaining mentoring, finance and industry insights for entrepreneurial success.

6.3 Generalisability of Findings

Despite the contributions and insights offered by this study, several limitations must be acknowledged. The study focuses specifically on women entrepreneurs in the MENA region, particularly in the countries of Saudi Arabia, Egypt and the UAE. While this focus provides depth in understanding the unique challenges of these contexts, it may limit the generalisability of the findings to women entrepreneurs in other regions with different cultural, economic and institutional frameworks.

However, it is important to note the potential relevance the current research might hold for other geographies. Nonetheless, it would be more applicable to regions that mirror or are close to the key contextual parameters identified in the MENA setting. For instance, one of these conditions is related to cultural norms surrounding gender roles and entrepreneurship. In the MENA region, informal networks often hinge on family-based trust, gender-segregated social spaces and patron–client relationships that are in line with the religious beliefs prevalent in the region. The findings could translate meaningfully to other contexts, whether South Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa or Latin America, as these cultural norms are also prevalent there. These regions also have a highly significant gender bias, which translates in the field of women’s entrepreneurship. Women entrepreneurs in these regions also network resources primarily from families or relatives, so the mechanisms of reciprocity, reputation management and access to capital uncovered in this study are likely to resonate. Conversely, in societies in which professional networks are institutionally formalised (for example, through trade associations that admit both genders equally), the dynamics of informal trust-building observed here may play a less central role.

Another aspect that could contribute to the generalisability of the findings is regulatory frameworks. The three MENA countries examined display a mix of guardianship or sponsorship rules, licensing requirements for foreign and local investors and tiered business-registration processes that create both barriers and entry points for women entrepreneurs. To generalise these findings and settings, a similar regulatory framework and policy instruments must govern market entry, ownership structures and the operation of special economic zones or women’s business councils. Human capital factors also shape the transferability of the study’s conclusions. In the UAE, educational attainment among women entrepreneurs is generally high, with many holding graduate degrees or international credentials. Moreover, digital literacy and English-language proficiency facilitate cross-border networking via online platforms. In contrast, regions where women’s educational access remains limited, or where digital infrastructures are underdeveloped, may require substantial capacity-building before the formal and informal tie-strengthening strategies identified here can be adopted effectively. Generalisation therefore presupposes a minimum threshold of human capital, both in terms of technical skills and soft competencies, such as negotiation and intercultural communication, to leverage diverse networking opportunities.

Economic conditions constitute a fourth boundary condition. The MENA economies studied rank among the top in per capita income within their respective subregions, and their markets benefit from sizable sovereign wealth funds, remittance inflows and established venture capital syndicates. These resource endowments have enabled the rapid scaling of high-growth ventures and the proliferation of incubator programmes that serve as formal network hubs. Transplanting the networking framework to low-income or frontier-market contexts would require compensatory mechanisms, such as microfinance pools, diaspora investment schemes or blockchain-based crowdfunding, that approximate the capital availability found in the Gulf and Egypt. Without parallel economic leverage, entrepreneurs in less-affluent settings may struggle to operationalise the formal network tactics that are feasible for their MENA counterparts.

Technological infrastructure and adoption patterns also contribute to the generalisability of the findings. The post-COVID-19 acceleration of digital networking tools, ranging from Zoom-based pitch events to WhatsApp-powered peer-mentoring groups, could also prove instrumental for future studies. Regions with robust broadband access, high smartphone penetration and supportive e-government portals will find the study's recommendations on hybrid networking models directly transferable. In contrast, areas where connectivity is intermittent or where digital platforms are tightly regulated may require alternative modalities – such as SMS-based information sharing or community radio forums – to recreate the blend of formal and informal ties that underpinned women's network growth in the MENA context.

Taken together, the potential to generalise these findings beyond the MENA region rests on the presence of analogous cultural, regulatory, human, economic and technological ecosystems. Scholars and practitioners seeking to apply this framework elsewhere should first conduct a diagnostic mapping of these five domains. Only where the target environment satisfies or can replicate these core conditions, such as family-based funding and trust, targeted policy instruments, minimum human capital thresholds, adequate capital pools and digital-network infrastructures, and contribute to the formal and informal networking strategies uncovered in this study and yield comparable outcomes. Where divergences exist, adaptation rather than wholesale adoption will be necessary, underscoring the importance of local pilot studies to validate and refine the framework in new socioeconomic landscapes.

6.4 Research Limitations

The qualitative approach, based on semi-structured interviews, provided rich, detailed narratives but involved a relatively small sample size. Although the sample was purposively

selected to include diverse perspectives, the findings may not fully capture the full spectrum of experiences among women entrepreneurs in the region. In addition, while a few male perspectives were included for comparative purposes, the primary focus remained on women's experiences, potentially overlooking the broader interplay between gender dynamics within entrepreneurial networks. As with all qualitative research, there is an inherent risk of researcher bias in both data collection and analysis. The interpretivist nature of the study means that the findings are influenced by the researcher's perspectives and interpretations. While efforts were made to maintain objectivity, such as triangulating data sources and employing thematic analysis, subjectivity cannot be entirely eliminated. Transparency regarding these biases was maintained throughout the research process, but future studies might consider incorporating mixed methods to balance qualitative insights with quantitative data.

The research was conducted over a specific period, and the dynamics of networking and entrepreneurial support systems are continuously evolving, especially in rapidly changing markets such as the MENA region. As such, the findings represent a snapshot in time and may need to be re-evaluated as socioeconomic conditions and technological advancements progress. Given the sociopolitical complexities of the MENA region, accessing a wide range of participants, particularly from certain conservative or underrepresented communities, posed challenges. The sample may therefore not fully represent the most marginalised segments of women entrepreneurs, who might face even greater networking challenges. In addition, due to the sensitive nature of some of the questions regarding gender bias and institutional barriers, there is a possibility of social desirability bias influencing the responses.

6.5 Future Research Recommendations

Future studies should consider broadening the geographical scope to include a wider range of countries within the MENA region and beyond. Comparative studies between different regions could help identify universal challenges as well as region-specific networking dynamics. This would contribute to a more global understanding of how gender and networking interact in diverse cultural and economic contexts. While the qualitative approach has provided deep insights into the lived experiences of women entrepreneurs, incorporating quantitative methods would allow for a more robust analysis of the relationships between networking characteristics and business performance. Surveys and statistical analyses could validate the findings of this study and offer a clearer picture of the causal relationships between formal/informal networking and entrepreneurial success.

Entrepreneurial ecosystems are complicated and dynamic; therefore, a longitudinal study could monitor the position of women entrepreneurs and obtain data on their progress over time. In this way, the contribution of networking changes and shifts in regulations and cultures could be clearly defined in terms of how they relate to women's success in the fields of business and financing. Such an inquiry could also significantly clarify the planning and operational changes needed within the networking framework. Among the activities of the digital technological tools, redefining the social structure of the network is one, and women entrepreneurs are the main targets of the impact. Future research could investigate how digital platforms, social media and virtual mentorship programmes are changing traditional networking methods. The technological investment question is pertinent to other parts of the research, such as the possible solutions and benefits of digital data acquisition methods.

With regard to the multifaceted nature of networking and entrepreneurship, future research should adopt interdisciplinary approaches that integrate perspectives from sociology, economics, gender studies and information technology. Such a holistic approach would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing women's entrepreneurial success and could inform more effective, cross-sector interventions. There is a need for empirical studies that assess the impact of specific policy interventions aimed at promoting women's entrepreneurship. Future research could focus on evaluating the effectiveness of government programmes, public-private partnerships and investor education initiatives in enhancing the networking capabilities of women entrepreneurs. Such evaluations would provide concrete evidence of the efficacy of different strategies and help refine policy measures accordingly.

Although this study highlights the importance of informal networks, further research is needed to explore the nuances of these relationships. Investigating the types of support that informal networks provide, including emotional, informational and instrumental support, and how these elements interact with formal networking channels would offer deeper insights. It will be important to understand these dynamics as they can inform the design of hybrid networking models that better serve the needs of women entrepreneurs. Future studies should also consider the intersectionality of gender with other identity factors such as age, socioeconomic status, education and ethnicity. Future research can explore how these intersecting factors influence networking opportunities and entrepreneurial outcomes, which will provide a more nuanced understanding of the challenges faced by different groups of

women entrepreneurs. This approach would enable the development of more targeted and inclusive networking frameworks.

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8 Appendices

8.1 Appendix A: Consent Form

Dear Participant,

Thank you for agreeing to do this interview. I am a doctoral student, who is exploring the research of women entrepreneurship and networking in the MENA region. The goal of this conversation is to learn about your thoughts, viewpoints, and experiences about being an entrepreneur and how your gender plays a significant role in that. The goal of this project is to learn more about women entrepreneurship and how they network with other people for being successful in the MENA region. Your contribution to this study is very important as your perceptions and experiences will help in understanding the topic better and may help guide future study. Also, the interview will go for 40 to 45 minutes and it can be conducted remotely or physically depending on your convenience. The interview will be recorded (audio recording or through note taking) with your permission only without any discussion about your personal details. The recording / notes will be converted to transcript, which will be further used for subjective analysis.

Before we begin, I would like to assure you that:

- Your participation in this study is voluntary, and you may withdraw from the interview at any time.
- The information collected will be kept confidential and used for research purposes only. Your identity will remain anonymous, and your personal information, if shared, will not be shared or disclosed without your explicit consent.
- In this interview, I will be asking you some open-ended questions related to the research topic.
- Please feel free to share your thoughts and experiences, as your insights are highly valued.
- If at any point you feel uncomfortable or do not wish to answer a question, please let me know.

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. Your contribution is greatly appreciated, and we hope to gain valuable insights from your responses.

In case you have any concerns or questions regarding the interview or its process, you can connect with me on the following e-mail address nimdba@gmail.com.

8.2 Appendix B: Interview Protocols

For Women Entrepreneurs

1. If you don't mind me asking, what is your age?
2. What is the highest level of education you have completed?
3. How long have you been running your own business?
4. What industry is your business in?
5. How many employees do you have in your business?
6. What is the annual revenue of your business (approximate)?
7. Where is your business located?
8. What motivated you to become an entrepreneur?
9. What challenges did you face when you started as an entrepreneur?
10. What challenges have you faced in managing or growing your business?
11. How did you obtain funding for your business?
12. Have you faced any challenges while obtaining funding? If yes, could you please elaborate?
13. What are the key factors that impact your business activities in the MENA region?
14. What are the unique challenges faced by women entrepreneurs in the MENA region?
15. How do you currently network with other entrepreneurs or professionals in your industry?
16. How do you think networking helps your business grow?
17. Have you ever faced any challenges while networking with others? If yes, could you please share them with us?
18. Do you think there are any unique challenges that women entrepreneurs face when it comes to networking? If yes, could you please elaborate?
19. How do you think women entrepreneurs can overcome those challenges and build effective networks?
20. What types of networking events or activities do you prefer? Formal or informal? Why?
21. How do you think a networking structure/framework could help women entrepreneurs in the MENA region?
22. How might a networking framework specifically address the challenges faced by women entrepreneurs in the MENA region?
23. What are some of the key features that you would like to see in a networking structure/framework for women entrepreneurs?

24. How do you think women entrepreneurs can be encouraged to participate in more networking events/activities?

For Male Entrepreneurs

1. If you don't mind me asking, what is your age?
2. What is the highest level of education you have completed?
3. How long have you been running your own business?
4. What industry is your business in?
5. How many employees do you have in your business?
6. What is the annual revenue of your business(approximately)?
7. Where is your business located?
8. What motivated you to become an entrepreneur?
10. How do you currently network with other entrepreneurs or professionals in your industry?
11. Have you ever faced any challenges while networking with women entrepreneurs? If yes, could you please share them with us?
12. What are some of the unique challenges that women entrepreneurs face when it comes to obtaining venture capital and developing start-ups in the MENA region?
13. How do you think networking can help women entrepreneurs grow their businesses in the MENA region?
14. In your experience, what role can male entrepreneurs play in establishing or enhancing formal and informal networking opportunities for women entrepreneurs in the MENA region?
15. What challenges, if any, do you think exist in mixed-gender networking events or environments? How can these be addressed?
16. How do cultural and social norms in the MENA region impact networking opportunities for women entrepreneurs? What changes would you recommend to address these?
17. What are some of the benefits of having a networking structure/framework for women entrepreneurs in the MENA region?
18. If you were to design a networking structure/framework for women entrepreneurs, what key elements would you include to ensure its effectiveness and inclusivity?
19. What are some of the specific activities or events that you would recommend for women entrepreneurs to network effectively in the MENA region?

20. Do you think networking challenges and opportunities for women entrepreneurs differ across industries? If yes, could you provide examples or recommendations specific to your industry?
21. How do you measure the success or impact of your networking efforts or initiatives to support women entrepreneurs?
22. How do you think a networking structure/framework for women entrepreneurs could contribute to the economic growth and development of the MENA region?
23. In your experience, have you noticed any differences in the networking and funding practices of male and female entrepreneurs in the MENA region?