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Examining the Influence of Cultural and Societal Factors on Networking and Socializing Challenges: A Study of Female Entrepreneurs in Pakistan

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Abstract

The current research explores the experiences of female entrepreneurs in Pakistan, offering a detailed exploration of their networking and socializing efforts, the motivational factors driving their ventures, and the unique challenges they face throughout their entrepreneurial journeys. Qualitative data was gathered through semi-structured interviews of 25 female entrepreneurs from diverse sectors. Thematic analysis was performed via NVivo14, which revealed the pervasive obstacles encountered, including deeply ingrained societal norms, gender biases, and limited access to established business networks. The findings revealed how traditional cultural expectations, including rigid gender roles and expectations of modesty, impede women's active participation in networking opportunities, further marginalizing them in business circles. This research also uncovers the innovative strategies female entrepreneurs use to navigate through these challenges, including utilization of online platforms as an alternative to in-person networking. The research also highlights the significance of fostering supportive networking environment for women to ensure professional growth. It provides a contextualized understanding of how societal pressure shapes the experience of female entrepreneurs in Pakistan, while drawing parallels with similar challenges faced by women in the world which adds to the broader literature on gender and entrepreneurship. The study offers actionable insights for policymakers and stakeholders. These insights are essential for creating an inclusive entrepreneurial environment for female entrepreneurs to help them flourish and contribute towards the economic growth and gender equality objectives of the country.

Keywords: socializing and networking challenges, societal and cultural factors, women entrepreneurship

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Introduction

Entrepreneurship is a complex process that involves identifying opportunities and taking advantage of them through calculated risks to start new ventures with the aim of creating wealth and improving the economy (Cunningham & Lischeron, 1991). The quest for profit and growth is driven by creativity and innovation of people. Entrepreneurship is considered respectable around the globe, especially in developing countries as it is accepted as a powerful catalyst for economic growth. Entrepreneurship has a significant impact on economy by establishing new businesses, creating job opportunities, and promoting growth through competition and innovation. According to Acs and Szerb (2007), it primarily benefits emerging economies since it helps them achieve their major economic development and job-creation milestones, offering answers to social and environmental problems.

This research focuses on women's entrepreneurship, aiding female entrepreneurs in starting businesses. Women bring unique perspectives that can drive innovation and identify overlooked customer segments (Galsanjigmed & Sekiguchi, 2023). Despite facing obstacles, such as limited resources and networks, an increasing number of women are starting businesses and contributing to economic growth (Nawaz et al., 2023). Government initiatives in Pakistan have significantly expanded the entrepreneurship landscape, as evidenced by a consistent increase in newly registered businesses. According to World Bank data from 2004 to 2020, 19,791 new businesses were registered in Pakistan in 2020, indicating a positive trend in entrepreneurial activity (World Bank Group, n.d.-a; World Bank Group, n.d.-b). The Global University Entrepreneurial Spirit Students' Survey for 2021 discovered an upward shift in students' inclination towards entrepreneurship after their studies. Specifically, the survey found that 27.5 percent of students aimed to pursue entrepreneurship immediately upon completion of their studies—an impressive surge compared to previous years. Furthermore, the GUESSS (Global University Entrepreneurial Spirit Students' Survey) report for 2021 revealed that long-term commitment to entrepreneurship is evident among Pakistani students with approximately 36.5 percent intending to become entrepreneurs in five years after graduating (Samo & Channa, 2021). These trends suggest that Pakistan is experiencing a transformational shift towards an entrepreneurial culture, as evidenced by the increase in newer businesses and the growing enthusiasm

for entrepreneurship despite the ongoing issues, such as small funds and instability in regulations.

Women's entrepreneurship in Pakistan is significant, as an increasing number of female-owned enterprises are stimulating innovation in Pakistan's business environment (World Bank, 2018). The survey showed that women in Pakistan are more likely to start businesses in traditionally female-dominated industries, such as beauty, fashion, and handicrafts. The Pakistani government has established programs, namely the Small and Medium Enterprises Development Authority and the Women Entrepreneurship Development Program to support female entrepreneurs. These programs provide counseling, training, and financial assistance to Pakistani women entrepreneurs.

Challenges for female entrepreneurs in Pakistan include cultural biases, limited social networks, restricted access to markets, and limited funding opportunities (Nasir & Iqbal, 2019). Pakistani women are making significant strides in business, yet they face obstacles as well, such as limited social networks, restricted market access, societal bias, and lack of finances. Addressing these issues with tailored support networks and funding opportunities can encourage more women to engage in entrepreneurship and positively impact the economy (Sajid et al., 2024).

Significant changes in perception occur among women entrepreneurs operating in the country due to networking and socializing, which are influenced by cultural and societal differences in Pakistan (Autio et al., 2013; Roomi & Parrott, 2008). These gender-based traditions inhibit effective leadership in business, as well as credibility, which complicates relationship-building among partners and clients. Moreover, supportive regulations and programs are missing, making it even more difficult for female entrepreneurs to establish networks of confidence with other businesswomen.

After analyzing the current literature, it is evident that there is limited exploration of networking and socializing challenges faced by female entrepreneurs in Pakistan (Manzoor et al., 2022). Additionally, there is a scarcity of research on coping mechanisms employed by such female entrepreneurs to overcome networking challenges that are influenced by cultural and societal norms (Mutsindikwa & Gelderblom, 2023).

Therefore, this research aims to fill the gaps by exploring how networking challenges impact female entrepreneurs. It also offers insights applicable to both corporate and entrepreneurial contexts. By examining root causes, the study seeks to provide practical solutions for empowering women in their professional development. The main goal is to advance academic understanding of the obstacles faced by female entrepreneurs in Pakistan, considering socioeconomic and cultural factors. Following are the questions that will be addressed in this research.

- How do cultural and societal factors influence the networking and socializing challenges encountered by female entrepreneurs in Pakistan and what is their impact on the effectiveness of their networking efforts and entrepreneurial success?
- What coping mechanisms do female entrepreneurs in Pakistan adopt to overcome the networking and socializing challenges influenced by cultural and societal factors?

This literature uniquely contributes to the existing literature by focusing on the underexplored area of how cultural and societal factors specifically impact the networking and socializing challenges faced by female entrepreneurs in Pakistan.

Literature Review

Networking has become essential in the digital era, especially for female entrepreneurs in Pakistan. However, societal and cultural factors heavily influence their networking efforts. This literature review explores how these challenges affect women's networking and how they navigate them. The research hypothesizes that cultural and societal norms limit networking opportunities, pushing women to rely more on digital platforms.

Social networks provide opportunities for entrepreneurship by facilitating idea generation, resource mobilization, market access, and knowledge dissemination, fostering economic development (Kolhe, 2023). Female entrepreneurs rely more on social network support, positively affecting their opportunity intention shows the significant impact of networking on women's entrepreneurship (Akpuokwe et al., 2024).

Networking is essential for helping women entrepreneurs overcome challenges such as limited access to capital and discrimination. Previous research on women entrepreneurs in Pakistan showed that networking

provides several benefits, including increased exposure to opportunities, advice from experienced counterparts, and connections with potential customers and partners (Ahmad & Naimat, 2011).

By actively participating in these networks, female entrepreneurs are able to connect with fellow entrepreneurs and tap into a wealth of information and resources crucial for their enterprises' success while simultaneously strengthening their own brand presence (Oke, 2013). Social networks play a crucial role in facilitating access to markets, resources, and knowledge sharing among women entrepreneurs. The social networks are especially valuable for female entrepreneurs operating in developing nations in Africa where they may encounter greater difficulties when accessing conventional forms of support (Dawa & Namatovu, 2015). Similarly, Obiero et al. (2018) and Ademola (2020) examined the impact of social networks on female entrepreneurs in Kenya and discovered that they contribute significantly to enhancing the performance of businesses owned by women.

Zeb and Kakakhel (2018) emphasized on the vital role of formal networks, such as chambers of commerce and industry associations in empowering women entrepreneurs. These networks facilitate access to crucial resources, valuable connections, and opportunities for knowledge acquisition, ensuring entrepreneurs stay updated on emerging prospects.

Mitra and Basit (2021) emphasized the vital role personal networks play in shaping the growth aspirations of women entrepreneurs in Pakistan. Family and friends provide crucial support, offering emotional encouragement, financial aid, and essential guidance. Networking patterns are influenced by motivations, industry, professional background, education, and family responsibilities. Female entrepreneurs often navigate and leverage gender role stereotypes to build strong business relationships, which can influence the formation and development of their networks (Constantinidis, 2021). Research also proposed that limited networking opportunities and restricted access to influential networks can impede the growth of women-owned small businesses. Women entrepreneurs often have difficulty accessing business networks, which limits their access to information, training opportunities, and strategic partnerships. This lack of networking can hinder their ability to acquire necessary resources, such as financial support and raw materials (Shahija, 2021)

Psychological factors influence women's entrepreneurship behavior, affecting networking and social opportunities. Resource acquisition shapes the networks they seek, with social relations crucial for providing resources, cooperation avenues, and knowledge (Xie & Lv, 2016). Gender discrimination can adversely affect their networking experiences, limiting access to vital networks and financial resources (Constantinidis, 2021).

Social Role Theory by Eagly (1987) suggests that social behavior is influenced by expected societal roles, offering insight into the challenges faced by women entrepreneurs in networking and social interaction. Another research highlighted the impact of social roles and identities on their actions (Madsen et al., 2008). Female business owners frequently face socio-economic challenges, such as limited support and recognition, societal biases, resistance from family and community (Suchitra & Pai, 2022; Tahir et al., 2023). Societal and cultural expectations often shape female entrepreneurs' networking behaviors. Women are expected to prioritize family and domestic duties, limiting their time and opportunities for building professional relationships (Bullough et al., 2022).

Gender bias and discrimination further exacerbate these challenges faced by female entrepreneurs in accessing valuable networks and forging meaningful connections (Constantinidis, 2021). The pervasive existence of male-dominated networks might marginalize women, making it harder for them to be taken seriously or included within such circles (Marlow & McAdam, 2013). The scarcity of representation and role models among successful female entrepreneurs affects networking behaviors among aspiring women in entrepreneurship. This hindrance limits mentor-mentee relationships and connections with supportive peers (Alomar, 2023). Similarly, balancing work and personal life poses a challenge for female entrepreneurs, impacting networking efforts due to competing responsibilities (Pareek & Bagrecha, 2017). Furthermore, self-confidence and self-perception play pivotal roles in shaping one's networking behaviors. It is not uncommon for women to grapple with feelings of self-doubt or the imposter syndrome, both of which have the potential to impede their capacity to establish and sustain meaningful connections within professional networks (Surangi, 2018).

Female entrepreneurs often lack role models to help with unique challenges, especially balancing life responsibilities. Their greater caregiving duties complicate time management and lead to anxiety and guilt.

In less gender-equal societies, women struggle to leverage networks for business growth. Limited access to financial resources, materials, and technologies also hampers their venture growth compared to men (Batjargal et al., 2019).

Zeb and Kakakhel (2018) identified several challenges for female entrepreneurs in Pakistan, including difficulty accessing formal networks for practical, ethical, and financial support. Many are unaware of resources, namely the Women Business Development Centre, Small and Medium Enterprise Development Authority, NGOs, and Chambers of Commerce. Limited access to these networks impacts guidance and opportunities. Societal and cultural factors also affect networking, resulting in fewer connections compared to male-owned businesses. Additionally, time constraints hinder access to informal networks, leading to higher failure rates and slower growth.

Hence, this study emphasizes addressing cultural and social challenges for female entrepreneurs in Pakistan, particularly in networking and socializing, to promote gender equality and support women-led businesses. Policymakers and business leaders can use these insights to develop targeted interventions, empowering female entrepreneurs and driving economic growth.

Research Methodology

The current study employed a qualitative approach to thoroughly explore individual experiences, viewpoints, and cultural factors in women's entrepreneurship, particularly in Pakistan's diverse context. Semi-structured interviews were the primary data collection method, allowing guided questioning while enabling participants to share freely. This approach facilitated a deeper understanding of participants' viewpoints and emerging themes. The decision to use qualitative methodology was supported by the study's exploratory nature and the need to accommodate diverse experiences effectively, providing a comprehensive understanding of the phenomena.

Data Collection

The employed research design captured the multifaceted experiences of female entrepreneurs in Pakistan, particularly regarding networking and socializing challenges. The interviews were carefully crafted to balance the

expressions and focus of participants through guiding questions (Grbich, 2012).

Semi-structured interviews allow participants to share their stories and perspectives openly providing a deeper understanding of cultural and societal influences on entrepreneurship. Thoughtfully crafted guiding questions ensure the systematic exploration of networking and socialization obstacles, enhancing the reliability of the collected information. Ethical considerations are vital for maintaining research integrity (Miles et al., 2014). All participants provided consent, understanding of the study's objectives, voluntary participation, and confidentiality assurance. Pseudonyms were used to protect identities and maintain anonymity in reporting findings, ensuring privacy and confidentiality while communicating narratives and viewpoints (Creswell & Creswell, 2019). A member-validation system was implemented to enhance data trustworthiness. Participants verified their answers, ensuring accuracy and genuineness. This feedback mechanism boosts participant engagement, credibility, and result reliability (Lincoln et al., 1985). Furthermore, the research is a record of all decisions and actions made to ensure transparency and enhance the credibility of the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2019). This process, along with comprehensive documentation of the research process, serves to improve the reliability of collected data and build trust in the research results.

The semi-structured interview questions were derived after careful examination of the existing literature, ensuring alignment with the study's research objectives. For instance, questions about the social support (Dawa & Namatovu, 2015) and the impact of societal norms (Karasi, 2018; Lindvert et al., 2017) were informed by previous studies, which provided valuable insights into the specific challenges and opportunities faced by women in entrepreneurial settings.

Table 1

Interview Questions

Interview Questions	Purpose of Questions
How many employees are currently working under you? Can you specify the gender?	Understanding gender composition of workforce under female entrepreneurs.

Interview Questions	Purpose of Questions
Did you have a mentor/someone to guide you in your business? If YES, please specify their gender.	Exploring the role of mentorship and the gender dynamics in the support.
Please specify who it was (e.g., father, aunt, legal advisor, etc).	Identifying the role of the mentor or guide in the entrepreneurial journey.
What kind of challenges have you faced being an entrepreneur?	Gain insight into the specific challenges.
How often do you have to socialize for your business activities?	Assessing frequency and importance of socializing in the business.
How often do you interact with male members?	Understanding frequency and nature of interactions with male counterparts.
Have you faced gender discrimination being an Entrepreneur?	Exploring experiences of gender discrimination in the entrepreneurial journey.
Please share any experiences where your gender (being female) acted in your favor in your entrepreneurial endeavors.	Identifying the instances where being female has been advantageous in business.
Do you think women experience more red tape compared to men being an entrepreneur?	Assessing the perceptions of bureaucratic challenges faced by female entrepreneurs compared to their male counterparts.
Do you think Society encourages and supports women to take on the challenges of the business world?	Understanding the societal support or lack thereof for female entrepreneurs.
Do you think being an entrepreneur/business owner has changed people's perception/behavior towards you?	Exploring how entrepreneurship influences social perceptions and behavior towards female entrepreneurs.
Do you think societal and cultural norms have limited your opportunities?	Examining the impact of societal and cultural norms on business opportunities for female entrepreneurs.

Interview Questions	Purpose of Questions
Do you think you could have achieved more if society were more open towards accepting women as independent business owners? How?	Gauging perceived impact of societal openness on the success of female entrepreneurs.
Do you feel safe moving in society as a female business owner?	Assessing personal safety concerns related to gender and entrepreneurship.
How do you feel you are treated by your family, relatives, and friends as an entrepreneur compared to the opposite gender when you socialize?	Understanding differences in social treatment based on gender.
Are you allowed to interact with a member of the opposite sex etc.?	Exploring the cultural and social restrictions on gender interaction in business.
What were the barriers that you are encountering/encountered as a female entrepreneur?	Identifying specific barriers faced by female entrepreneurs.
Does the legal and regulatory environment support women entrepreneurs?	Assessing the adequacy of legal and regulatory support for female entrepreneurs.
Do you belong to any business network? When did you join the network? Was it easy for you to gain access to the network?	Exploring participation of female entrepreneurs in business networks and their accessibility.
Do you think you are of equal status with people in your network? Do you receive social support from your network?	Understanding status and support dynamics within business networks for female entrepreneurs.
How has being a member of the network benefited your business?	Evaluating benefits of network membership for female entrepreneurs.
Have you faced any challenges or barriers while participating in the network?	Identifying any challenges encountered in network participation.

Interview Questions	Purpose of Questions
How do you think cultural norms and expectations affect your networking opportunities and interactions?	Examining the influence of cultural norms on networking opportunities for female entrepreneurs.
How does the lack of female representation in certain industries or sectors impact your networking experiences?	Assessing impact of female representation on networking experiences.
Have you faced any cultural or societal pressure that discourages you from actively participating in networking events?	Exploring cultural and societal pressures affecting networking participation.
What strategies have you employed to overcome cultural barriers while networking?	To identify strategies used by female entrepreneurs to overcome cultural barriers in networking.

Thematic Analysis

The thematic analysis identified patterns or themes within data by assigning codes to meaningful concepts or ideas and grouping them based on similarities. It utilized the constant comparative method, developed by sociologists Barney and Anselm Strauss, which involves comparing new data with previously coded data to refine themes (Glaser, 1965). It helps ensure that the themes accurately reflect the data and are grounded in participants' experiences. Through this approach, large volumes of qualitative data, patterns, and themes were organized, as well as a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under study was developed.

Population

This study targeted female entrepreneurs in Pakistan's clothing, food, and handicraft industries who have established their businesses. This focus was based on recent credible findings. Participants were reached via business contacts from their official pages, and interviews were conducted by phone. The sample of 25 entrepreneurs was chosen based on theoretical saturation and purposive sampling to ensure diverse and relevant insights. This approach allows for a detailed exploration of the topic. This sample

size is consistent with similar qualitative studies in the field, such as Hayati and Arini (2023), who used 15 participants to explore challenges faced by female entrepreneurs. The saturation point was obtained at 21 interviews, where no new themes emerged. The Pakistan Microfinance Survey 2021 conducted by the State Bank of Pakistan revealed that food processing, textiles and clothing, and handicrafts are the most prevalent sectors for female entrepreneurship in Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs), which supports the choice of apparel, food, and handicrafts as the focus areas for this research.

Data Analysis

The data collected through semi-structured interviews was translated and transcribed for further analysis. NVivo 14 facilitated efficient data coding, identifying themes and subthemes. Interviews revealed insights into entrepreneurs' networking and socializing experiences, highlighting vibrant participation in entrepreneurial markets, such as Daachi and Haryali. A pattern of regular socializing for raw material acquisition emerged, emphasizing hands-on business management.

Participant P5 mentioned her affiliation with both online and offline platforms for networking in following words:

> *I am a part of both offline and online networking platforms. I have joined Daachi, Haryali and some other community event organizers which has been a great help to create exposure about my products. I have gained many new customers and followers on my social media through them.*

The interviews also unveiled the dual nature of social interactions, both online and in-person. Female entrepreneurs navigate between these modes, with some relying more heavily on online channels due to conservative family values. Participant P16 mentioned:

> *'I don't go out for anything; my husband gets the material I need and I use it for making products. I only interact with my customers and even that through my business pages on Instagram and Facebook.'*

Female entrepreneurs in Pakistan strategically use digital platforms to overcome societal restrictions, expanding their audience reach and challenging traditional gender roles. They engage male customers online and offline, participating in events and interfacing with diverse clientele

despite networking challenges, showcasing societal adaptability and perseverance.

However, the above Table 1 shows the major themes derived from nodes and codes.

Table 2

Themes and Codes

Major Themes	Nodes	Codes
	Knowledge and Information	Staying informed about opportunities, market trends, and supplier information
	Support System	Encouragement from peers, shared experiences, and collaborative problem-solving
	Access to Business Opportunities	Exposure to profitable ventures, partnerships, and collaborations
Prospects of Networking and Socializing	Professional Development	Continuous learning, innovative problem-solving, and skill refinement
	Enhance Business Credibility	Visibility, positive perceptions, and long-term relationships
	Resource Discovery	Finding reliable suppliers, understanding market dynamics, funding sources, and connection with customers
	Overcoming Isolation	Sense of belonging, dealing with solitude, and sharing experiences and struggles

| Major Themes	Nodes	Codes
Challenges in Networking and Socializing	Gender-Based Discrimination	Family mocking, lack of trust, unequal treatment compared to male relatives
	Constraints Faced in Public Dealing	Safety concerns, mobility restrictions, and time restraints
	Gender Roles	Prioritizing family over professional aspirations and scrutiny for challenging traditional roles
	Cultural and Societal Expectations	Modesty, stereotypes, and limited interactions with men
	Limited Acceptance of Women as Business Owners in Networking	Societal skepticism, unequal treatment in business dealings, and reluctance to welcome new female entrants
	Safety Concerns and Personal Development	Need for personal growth, building self-confidence, and overcoming societal norms
	Lack of Supportive Legal and Regulatory Environment	Limited legal understanding, absence of tailored initiatives, and preference for informal entrepreneurship
Strategies to Overcome Cultural Barriers in Networking	Prefer Online Networks	Accessible and flexible environments, connecting across geographic barriers, and adapting to societal restrictions
	Balancing Professionalism and Cultural Expectations	Blending traditional customs with modern standards, creating a

Major Themes	Nodes	Codes
		respectful environment, and maintaining modesty
	Ignoring Discouragement	Developing inner strength, withstanding negative comments, and maintaining dedication to networking goals
	Focusing on Personal Growth	Self-improvement, acquiring new skills, and enhancing networking capabilities

Prospects of Networking and Socializing

Interviews with female entrepreneurs in Pakistan offered profound insights into the benefits of networking and socializing, underscoring their crucial role in shaping professional endeavors. Figure 1 shows the hierarchy map of prospects of networking and socializing for female entrepreneurs.

Figure 1

Hierarchy Map of Prospects of Networking and Socializing
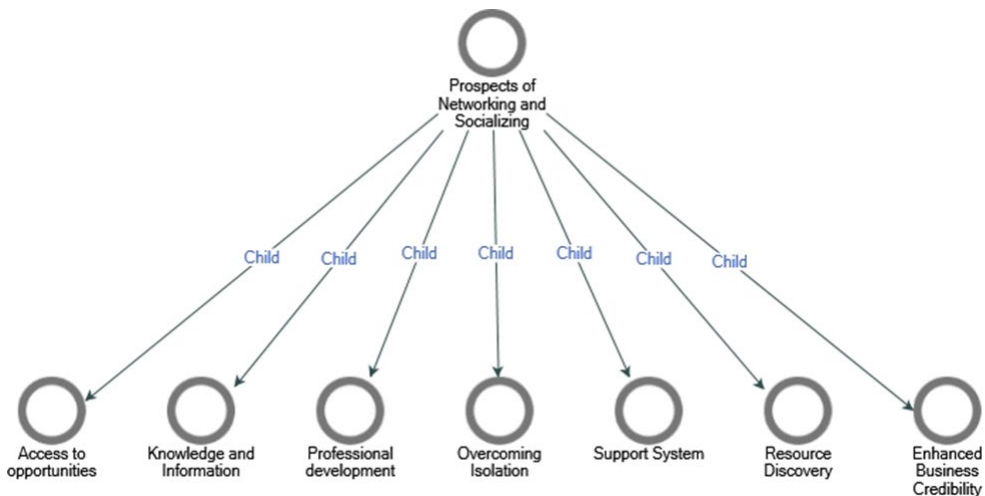
Knowledge and Information

A key theme, obtained from the interviews is the importance of networking for gaining valuable information. Fifteen entrepreneurs

highlighted that staying informed about opportunities, market trends, and potential vendors drives their decisions. The gained information shaped their strategies, fostered innovation, and contributed to their ventures' growth and success.

P21 stated: *'I found valuable information after I started networking in the business community. People who are a part of these networks openly share information with new entrants and help them with tasks like sourcing and delivery etc.'*

Participant P1 said:

> *...when I started my business, I had no experience and zero information about the market dynamics, especially online selling. When I started networking, I met many female business owners who helped me understand these concepts and also introduce me to various suppliers which was very helpful.*

Despite limited experience and market knowledge, the speaker gained valuable insights and resources through networking. Connecting with other female business owners enhanced their understanding of online selling and expanded their supplier network. Collectively, all participants recognized networking as a vital source of market information.

Support System

About 15 entrepreneurs highlighted the importance of connecting with like-minded peers who understand their challenges. They noted that such networks provide encouragement, shared experiences, and collaborative problem-solving, fostering camaraderie and mutual support that enhances their entrepreneurial journey. As P23 said:

> *'Networking helped me build a support system for other female entrepreneurs as well. When facing challenges, it's reassuring to have a network of fellow entrepreneurs who understand and provide valuable insights.'*

Female entrepreneurs expressed the critical importance of networking in building a strong and supportive community. This network not only provides encouragement but also serves as a platform for sharing experiences and engaging in collaborative problem-solving, fostering a sense of unity and empowerment among its members.

Access to Business Opportunities

The interviews also revealed that networking is crucial for opening business opportunities, exposing profitable ventures, and fostering partnerships. All participants agreed that networks—whether through direct connections or recommendations—are transformative, greatly aiding business growth and diversification.

P19 stated:

'Being part of a network exposed me to various business opportunities. Whether it's finding new clients, discovering potential collaborations, or staying informed about market trends, networking broadens the horizon.'

She emphasized the practical advantages of networking, such as gaining access to a variety of business opportunities that support the growth and longevity of their ventures.

Participant P8 mentioned the significance of collaboration by saying:

'…networking also opens doors to collaboration. By connecting with others in my industry, I've found opportunities to collaborate on projects, share resources, and collectively enhance our businesses.'

Collaborative endeavors emerged as a recurring theme, illustrating the power of networking to cultivate an environment where female entrepreneurs can come together, tapping into each other's unique strengths and expertise for mutual benefit.

Professional Development

Another theme that emerged showed that networking is a dynamic platform for professional growth, offering entrepreneurs access to collective wisdom and innovative problem-solving approaches. About 12 participants emphasized that the interconnected exchange of ideas fosters continuous learning, enriching participants with diverse perspectives and driving substantial professional development.

Participant P11 said:

'Engaging with professionals in my field through networking has been like ongoing professional development. I learn about industry trends, innovative practices, and continuously refine my skills.'

The interviews underscored the importance of networking in continuous professional growth, serving as a dynamic avenue for learning, improving skills, and staying updated on industry progress.

Enhance Business Credibility

About 19 participants stressed upon the importance of professional networks and socializing events for enhancing female entrepreneurs' credibility. Building strong connections within the business community elevates visibility and fosters positive perceptions among stakeholders, attracting new opportunities and nurturing long-term relationships crucial for success.

As P9 mentioned:

'Networking contributes to building credibility. When people see you actively involved in your industry, attending events, being endorsed and collaborating, it adds to the legitimacy of your business.'

Hence, active involvement in industry events and partnerships was emphasized by female entrepreneurs as crucial for enhancing the credibility of their businesses.

Resource Discovery

All participants emphasized the crucial role of networking in gaining access to vital funding and resources. They mentioned that a strong network serves as an invaluable bridge to financial resources that can drive business expansion and foster development. This can be achieved by nurturing direct connections with potential investors or staying well-informed about various funding opportunities. As P7 mentioned:

'Through networking, I've discovered valuable resources—whether it's finding reliable suppliers, understanding market dynamics, or accessing funding sources. It's a treasure trove of resources.'

Therefore, networking is depicted as a valuable platform for entrepreneurs to uncover and utilize essential resources necessary for various aspects of business activities.

Overcoming Isolation

For the participating entrepreneurs, networking served as a crucial remedy for the isolation often experienced in male-dominated sectors. It

provides a sense of belonging and community, combating feelings of solitude and alienation. Around 13 participants mentioned that through events and online platforms, they share experiences, successes, and struggles, fostering solidarity and mutual encouragement. P11 mentioned it as:

'Networking helps overcome the isolation that can come with entrepreneurship. Connecting with like-minded individuals provides a sense of belonging and combats the solitude of running a business.'

Female entrepreneurs stressed the psychological benefits of networking, which help women feel less isolated in their entrepreneurial journey.

Challenges in Networking and Socializing

The interviews with female entrepreneurs in Pakistan shed light on the multifaceted challenges they encountered when it comes to networking and socializing, uncovering the intricate dynamics influenced by cultural and societal norms.

Figure 2 shows the hierarchy map of the theme challenges in networking and socializing.

Figure 2
Hierarchy Map of Challenges in Networking and Socializing
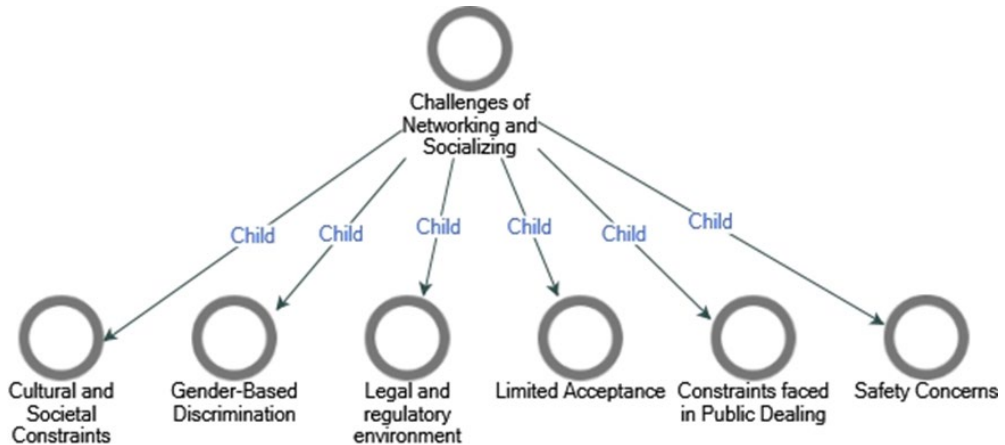
Gender-Based Discrimination

Gender-based discrimination is a recurring and multifaceted issue, deeply impacting many entrepreneurs and influencing their journey in

diverse ways. Despite some leveraging gender for opportunities, women commonly face several obstacles and biases not encountered by men in entrepreneurship. About 22 participants mentioned that they faced discrimination in formal networks.

P8's personal experience adds depth as she said:

> *I faced gender discrimination from my family. When I discussed with my family that I am starting my own business, they mocked me. Even though I have been working in the field for such a long time, I was being laughed at.*

Participant P20 discussed her experience as:

> *...my family was not willing to give their money to a girl. They were not ready to invest in my business either. And one of their biggest concerns was they did not trust me, a girl, to go out in a male-dominated market, because if something happened it would taint their name in the society. But at the same time, they had no issue with my brother, who actually faced loss in his business who is now working with me.*

P8 and P20's personal experiences highlighted the ongoing gender biasness within families impacting entrepreneurship, stressing the need to challenge traditional gender roles and value women's abilities in business. This discrimination not only restricts networking opportunities but also perpetuates inequality for female entrepreneurs.

Constraints Faced in Public Dealing

Female entrepreneurs encounter bureaucratic barriers due to societal expectations, restricting their mobility and hindering participation in events and networking opportunities. Interviews showed unanimous agreement on women facing more constraints, especially in evening activities and traveling beyond their city.

Participant P6 expressed that:

> *I have to be careful and think multiple times before going to a certain place. Accessing raw material, reaching out to suppliers in far-fetched wholesale areas is very tough as there are mostly men out there and it brings in discomfort being the only female in that place. I have to be vigilant before meeting a supplier or wholesaler.*

Additionally, time restraints, I cannot do a meeting after 8:00 pm due to security reason which delays our operations.

Participant P3 mentioned that:

I tried doing a business that was a safer option for me. I was restricted to go out and look for opportunities, or to meet with people. There is a constant fear of being misled and being in a sensitive situation. That is why I only resorted to a business comprising of females, dealt by females and led by females. If I want to go any further in exploring business opportunities, I would have to be very careful about a number of things, which I think a man could get away with very easily.

The above-mentioned quotes underscored how societal norms and gender limitations posed obstacles for female entrepreneurs, restricting their freedom and prompting them to opt for female-only business models. They emphasized upon the unequal challenges women encounter in entrepreneurship compared to men.

Gender Roles

Married female entrepreneurs participating in the research mentioned that they confront persistent gender role expectations from familial and societal sources, prioritizing family and domestic duties over their professional aspirations. These norms discourage late-night work commitments and subject women challenging traditional roles to scrutiny, hindering open networking and social engagement.

Participant P18 mentioned the impact of gender roles as:

…when I started working after marriage, my goal was to start my business after a few years of experience. But my husband and my mother were against the idea. They emphasized that I should focus on my family. It was so discouraging that I gave up and started my business after my kids were grown up.

This highlights the significant societal expectations that prescribe specific responsibilities for women, especially the idea that they should prioritize family obligations over their professional pursuits. The concept of '*gender role*' encompasses the wider societal anticipations imposed on women, influencing their involvement in entrepreneurial activities.

Participant P14's experience unveiled a nuanced perspective on support within the context of gender roles.

> *My husband and mother told me I could do anything I want, pursue my business dreams, but in the end, they emphasized that my primary duties are at home. It dawned on me that while they expressed support for my business, the expectation to fulfill all domestic responsibilities myself created a significant challenge.*

This shows that verbal support for entrepreneurial ambitions is offered, but the expectation to manage domestic duties perpetuates traditional gender roles, hindering focus on business. This also highlights the need for inclusive assistance to address challenges faced by women entrepreneurs due to societal norms. Societal expectations intensify the burden on female entrepreneurs, impeding their business growth.

Cultural and Societal Expectations

The narratives of the participants highlighted the significant impact of cultural and societal expectations as major challenges in networking and socializing, particularly regarding modesty and traditional gender roles. These women must carefully balance pursuing their professional goals and adhering to societal norms. Participant P3 said:

> *'Growing up in this society as a woman, we're designed to think in a certain way, not breaking any boundary or going out of our way to achieve a goal.'*

Participant P3's perspective illustrates the entrenched societal norms that restrict women from challenging established boundaries. Expectations of modesty and prevailing stereotypes pose formidable barriers, limiting their participation in networking, especially with male colleagues. Participant P13 articulates the struggle as:

> *'...just like me, other women aren't expected to interact with men a lot or go out all the time for events or else their character is questioned according to our societal and cultural values unfortunately.'*

Prevailing stereotypes pose obstacles, particularly in interactions with male colleagues and attending events, as noted by Participant P13. Societal norms discourage extensive interaction with men, thus compounding the challenge. Fear of judgment further complicates networking for female

entrepreneurs. The impact of cultural expectations extends into the family sphere and it was highlighted by Participant P15 as:

'…even in my family there are people who judge me as immoral because I interact with men.'

Family pressure to avoid men illustrates how societal norms impact personal relationships, complicating networking for women entrepreneurs. Undoubtedly, balancing personal goals and family expectations adds complexity to their networking experiences.

Participant P18 described her experience with societal expectations as:

'…people used to comment on me going out for work, I was often told that I should not go out and run a business because I am a woman.'

Participant P18's experience highlights the impact of external criticism on female entrepreneurs, reinforcing societal norms that discourage women from pursuing non-traditional roles. These challenges reflect broader cultural expectations that question the legitimacy of women's leadership in business. Overall, participants' accounts underscored the multifaceted nature of obstacles stemming from cultural and societal norms.

Limited Acceptance of Women as Business Owners in Networking

Society's biasness against women as independent business owners poses a significant networking challenge. Interviews revealed how the biased approach of society undermines women's pursuit of financial independence and leadership roles, leading to skepticism from others and hindering their acceptance and recognition within established business networks. Participant P5 noted that:

'Limited acceptance as a female business owner affects how I'm perceived. Skepticism from others hinders my professional growth.'

This statement highlights the impact of societal skepticism on the career paths of women in business, influencing their self-assurance and chances for progress. Participant P3 shared her experience in these words:

I went to this market in Lahore where I could buy materials in bulk wholesale. I went with my mom, all of the shopkeepers were male of course. Most of them did not want to do business with us or give us anything in bulk, as they only trust men to do this kind of work. They would not give discounts as how normally men would get if they

bought in bulk, moreover, they tried to up their prices even more to scare us away, so they do not have to deal with us. Wouldn't comply with our requirements, tried to hurry things up, less flexibility and lack of respect.

This illustrates the tangible impact of societal biases, where women face unjust treatment in business dealings and are discouraged from certain commercial endeavors, hampering their operational efficiency and business growth. Participant P19 mentioned that:

'In established business networks, there's a reluctance to welcome new female entrants. It's a missed opportunity for learning and growth.'

Gender bias in professional networks has far-reaching consequences. Excluding women from business networks hinders the success of individual entrepreneurs and limits collective learning and progress. Doubts and hesitations, such as those voiced by P5, stifle personal career growth and reflect broader gender-related networking challenges. Addressing these barriers is crucial to creating an inclusive environment that empowers female entrepreneurs.

Safety Concerns and Personal Development

Furthermore, the interviews suggested that safety concerns and personal development are intertwined challenges for female entrepreneurs. Many prioritize personal growth to feel secure in their professional endeavors, breaking free from societal norms. Fostering self-confidence and navigating social expectations often require significant sacrifices and compromises. Participant P13 shared that:

'I had to work on my personal development to feel confident enough to feel safe. Overcoming societal norms required building self-confidence.'

The above quote highlights the speaker's journey of growth and empowerment, stressing the need to overcome societal norms and gender-based restrictions. It underscores the role of self-confidence in navigating challenges for female entrepreneurs, especially where societal expectations limit opportunities. By prioritizing personal development, the speaker transcended constraints, fostering empowerment to pursue entrepreneurial aspirations.

Lack of Supportive Legal and Regulatory Environment

Female entrepreneurs in Pakistan expressed deep dissatisfaction with the legal and regulatory environment. About 17 participants mentioned that the absence of comprehensive support makes them feel overlooked, limiting their networking potential and increasing obstacles to success.

Participant P7 expressed dissatisfaction by saying:

'Legal support for women entrepreneurs is lacking. There aren't enough initiatives addressing our specific needs.'

This underscores the necessity for tailored legal support to address obstacles faced by female business owners. Moreover, phrases, such as 'limited knowledge' and 'lack of active organizations' highlighted the complexities within the legal framework. Participants showed a limited grasp of the judicial system and insufficient awareness of laws, hindering their ability to navigate the business environment proficiently. Participant P3 said:

> *I have not been able to scale up to the level of being dealt with laws and regulations, so I am not sure of what happens once we do get to that level. I have studied it however, and there are many discriminatory laws that need to be addressed.*

This reveals that there is a lack of legal understanding or guidance, which hinders business expansion due to unclear laws and regulations, thus, fostering fear in relationship-building. Participants showed lack of awareness of vital organizations, such as women's chambers of commerce and NGOs. Hence, dissatisfaction with formal legalities often steers them towards informal entrepreneurship, limiting growth prospects in female-led businesses amidst a lack of supportive policies.

Strategies to Overcome Cultural Barriers in Networking

In Pakistan's challenging business environment for women, specific measures are necessary due to social norms and societal expectations. Women often use digital spaces to connect with like-minded individuals while honoring their cultural beliefs. Despite facing discouragement, they prioritize personal development, demonstrating adaptability and resilience. Thus, the current study examines their strategies, highlighting their resourcefulness and determination in blending tradition with modernity to

build connections. Figure 3 illustrates the hierarchy of strategies female entrepreneurs use to overcome cultural barriers in networking.

Figure 3

Hierarchy Map of Challenges in Networking and Socializing
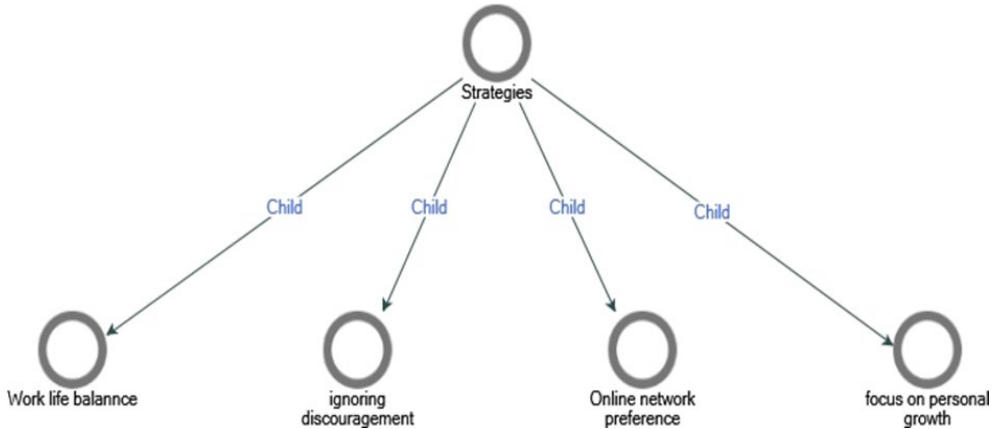
Preference for Online Networks

Female entrepreneurs shift towards digital platforms for networking as a strategic adaptation to societal restrictions on physical interactions. Around 21 participants mentioned this transition which acknowledges the need for more accessible and flexible environments, recognizing the changing dynamics of interaction, and communication in today's society.

Participant P7 emphasized that:

'Online platforms are my gateway to networking. It's not just a preference; it's a necessity in a society with so many constraints on women for in-person interactions.'

Online platforms for networking allow female entrepreneurs a practical way to overcome societal barriers and connect beyond geographic barriers. They prioritize digital platforms which reflects an adaptable strategy to navigate cultural norms while remaining committed to professional growth.

Balancing Professionalism and Cultural Expectations

Navigating the balance between professionalism and cultural expectations is crucial for female entrepreneurs in Pakistan. It involves

blending traditional customs and modern professional standards in a respectful and effective manner.

Participant P22 mentioned that:

> *...I try to maintain a professional outlook when dealing with people especially with male members of the network. This creates a respectful environment for me to work in. Moreover, if you have a professional approach, people start understanding that you have maintained modesty and that I am not doing something unethical.*

Cultural norms and professional standards are carefully considered in the strategy of networking, particularly for female entrepreneurs who demonstrate flexibility as they navigate traditional expectations.

Ignoring Discouragement

About 17 participants mentioned that ignoring discouragement involves developing the inner strength and mental fortitude to withstand negative comments or societal skepticism. It is a strategic decision to maintain unwavering dedication towards one's networking goals, even in the face of external challenges and adversity. All the participants mentioned it as an integral part of their survival in extremely biased society. Participant P21 mentioned:

> *...discouragement is something I face all the time, and not just from men but from women as well. I would say women are more discouraging than men, talking about modesty and character. But I think the only way to deal with it is ignoring them.*

The approach of disregarding negative feedback is based on a mindset of persistence. Women in business make a deliberate decision to confront and overcome pessimism, directing their efforts towards achieving networking objectives despite societal doubt.

Focusing on Personal Growth

Interviews suggested that prioritizing personal growth involves a conscious and deliberate focus on self-improvement, actively seeking out opportunities to acquire new skills, and continually enhancing one's capabilities as an integral part of the broader networking strategy.

P9 said that:

'...I asked myself why I am doing this? I am not doing this to please others. And networking is not just about business; it's about personal growth. I focus on developing myself.'

The strategy of focusing on personal growth goes hand in hand with integrating networking and individual development. For female entrepreneurs, the recognition that personal growth enhances their networking capabilities leads to a more holistic approach to professional success.

Discussion

Interviews with female entrepreneurs in Pakistan revealed their complex networking experiences within a cultural framework shaped by societal norms (Giwa & Babakatun, 2019). Women actively participate in small business events to showcase products and build connections, but simultaneously, struggle to balance online and face-to-face interactions due to conservative family values. Despite these challenges, they strategically use digital platforms to overcome societal restrictions and expand their reach. The findings, therefore, highlighted how traditional gender roles limit women's participation in in-person networking, leading them to rely more on online platforms (Khan et al., 2021).

The interviews further revealed networking's pivotal role, providing valuable resources, opportunities, and support for entrepreneurs. Through networking, they enhanced credibility, fuel growth and overcame societal barriers, demonstrating resilience and determination in their professional journey (Kawulur, 2022). Additionally, they faced significant challenges due to the lack of support from the legal and regulatory environment as female entrepreneurs in Pakistan.

The interviews echoed established motivational factors found in global and local literature on female entrepreneurship. Themes of independence, passion, cultural ties, social responsibility, and personal growth emerged as significant drivers for these entrepreneurs (Chaikin & Kirieieva, 2020). This underscores how these intrinsic motivations are universally powerful catalysts that shape the entrepreneurial journey of women from both local and global setting (Khuwaja et al., 2022).

However, contrary to the challenges highlighted by Marlow and McAdam (2013) regarding women's limited participation in male-dominated networks, some participants in this study managed to leverage

online platforms effectively to expand their networks, despite societal constraints. This divergence suggested that while traditional gender roles are barriers in the success of female entrepreneurs, the strategic use of digital tools can help overcome some of these challenges, as supported by Khan et al. (2021). These insights can inform policymakers and stakeholders in developing initiatives to address challenges faced by female entrepreneurs in Pakistan.

Conclusion

This study reveals the complex challenges and opportunities faced by female entrepreneurs in Pakistan within a socially and culturally influenced environment. It emphasizes the crucial role of networking and socializing, not just as professional activities but as vital tools for overcoming societal barriers and driving business growth.

The findings revealed that cultural and societal norms in Pakistan heavily influence networking experiences of female entrepreneurs. Traditional gender roles, modesty expectations, and biases limit their participation in business networks. Despite these barriers, women show resilience by using strategies, such as embracing online platforms, balancing professionalism with cultural norms, and prioritizing personal growth. These findings align with global studies, including those from Sweden and Kenya, which also emphasized the critical role of networking in gaining resources and credibility for female entrepreneurs. The challenges and motivations observed in Pakistan reflect common experiences among women entrepreneurs worldwide.

Implications

Practical Implications

This research emphasizes the need for practical solutions to the challenges faced by female entrepreneurs in Pakistan. Business groups should create women-focused forums and mentorship programs for tailored support. Digital platforms can offer flexible networking opportunities, helping women connect, share resources, and build relationships. By investing in digital literacy and encouraging online engagement, female entrepreneurs can overcome barriers, such as time and mobility, enhancing their visibility and access to essential business resources.

Policy Implications

This research underscores the urgent need for government initiatives to promote gender equality in entrepreneurship. Policymakers should focus on creating programs that offer financial support, training, and network access for female entrepreneurs. Collaboration with international organizations is vital for effective resource allocation. Additionally, revising regulations that perpetuate gender disparities and promoting inclusive policies are essential. Addressing cultural norms through awareness campaigns and reforms can further empower female entrepreneurs, contributing to the country's economic growth.

Theoretical Implications

This research deepens gender and entrepreneurship theories by revealing how cultural norms, societal expectations, and networking challenges shape women's business experiences in Pakistan. It highlights the need for gender-specific perspectives, especially in understanding how marital status affects women's networking. These insights enrich existing frameworks and emphasize the importance of considering marital status in analyzing women's networking dynamics (Surangi, 2018).

Networking challenges are especially tough for unmarried women, emphasizing the need to consider different life circumstances in analyzing women's networking. This research explores how gender and marital status intersect in entrepreneurial networking and shows how women use online platforms to adapt to social constraints. It also contributes to debates on digital entrepreneurship by highlighting how technology helps women overcome traditional barriers (Hammad & El Naggar, 2023). The dissatisfaction with legal and regulatory frameworks highlights the importance of institutional factors in entrepreneurship. Research shows that legal systems heavily impact women entrepreneurs' experiences. Theoretical exploration should examine how these institutional contexts intersect with gender-specific challenges in entrepreneurship.

Limitations and Future Research Implications

Future studies should address the evolving networking challenges faced by female entrepreneurs, taking a long-term and broader view. This study's focus on Pakistan limits its wider applicability and potential data collection biases may exist. While the interpretivist approach offers detailed insights, it might overlook larger structural influences. Future research should

include diverse participants, consider male perspectives, and examine how technology intersects with cultural barriers. It should also explore legal structures and advocate for gender-sensitive policies.

Recommendations

Female entrepreneurs in Pakistan are turning to online platforms due to cultural constraints, making digital literacy crucial for their networking and growth. Collaborations between business organizations and educational institutions can provide essential entrepreneurship training for women. Promoting successful female entrepreneurs as role models can challenge societal norms and inspire others. Creating dedicated online and offline platforms for knowledge exchange and supporting grassroots initiatives can offer community support and address specific needs. Implementing these recommendations can build a more supportive ecosystem for female entrepreneurs, thus, fostering their success.

Conflict of Interest

The authors of the manuscript have no financial or non-financial conflict of interest in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

Data Availability Statement

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