National College of Ireland

'GENDER AND DIVERSITY IN ENTREPRENEURSHIP'

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores issues of gender and diversity in entrepreneurship, more specifically the experiences of women in high-growth or venture-focused business arenas. The perception of entrepreneurship as the driver for innovation and economic growth stands generally true; however, in practice, gender disparities remain deeply embedded in access to resources, leadership opportunities, and representation. Women entrepreneurs very often encounter systemic barriers such as restricted access to funding, and exclusion from relevant networks, while societal expectations continue to influence various business decisions and all professional identities.

The aim to this research is to analyze female entrepreneurship in terms of barriers perceived by women, the formation of an identity, and career satisfaction, in the context of structural and cultural factors. Drawing primarily on Irish cases (with UK/US comparators), this interpretivist secondary-narrative study uses thematic analysis of publicly available interviews, podcasts, case studies, and peer-reviewed literature. This approach allows for a critical analysis of real entrepreneurial narratives that shed light on the social dynamics and gendered challenges women negotiate with the absence of primary data collection.

Thematic analysis serves to highlight recurrent patterns across the body of data. Emerging themes observe gender discrimination in investment and leadership recognition, society's norms as a modulating force for business behavior, and the psychological impact of navigating entrepreneurship in male enclaves. Many stories also describe interspersed strategies of resilience, flexibility, and self-empowerment that women implement while keeping their earnings sustainable or growing their income.

The study, therefore, adds to the extensive field of gender-aware entrepreneurship research by giving voice to multiple female perspectives while spotlighting the problems remaining with structural inequalities. It also stands as evidence of employing alternative qualitative paradigms in exploring complex social realities. The results aid policymakers, educators, and business-supporting organizations interested in the creation of more inclusive entrepreneurial ecosystems.

DECLARATION

I hereby certify that this dissertation, entitled "GENDER AND DIVERSITY IN ENTREPRENEURSHIP" submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of MSc in Entrepreneurship at the National College of Ireland, is my own work. It has not been submitted for any other academic award, and all sources of information have been specifically acknowledged.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE

Entrepreneurship is a major factor in the economic growth, innovation, and development of society. It shapes job creation, regional competitiveness, and industrial change were all under its scope (Welter *et al.,* 2017). However, being widely celebrated on an international scale, access to entrepreneurship remains unequal particularly for women. Such gendered disparities, as noted, shape entrepreneurial ecosystems, constraining women's participation and success in several areas, namely funding, visibility, and leadership (Orser *et al.,* 2006; Brush *et al.,* 2009).

Female Irish entrepreneurs, like their European counterparts, face unique cultural and structural challenges. These challenges include limited venture capital access, underrepresentation in industries dominated by high growth potential niches, and exclusion from influential business networks (Cooke and Xiao, 2021). In addition, societal traditions tend to uphold conventional gender roles and thus add pressure on women to juggle professional ambitions and parenting and household responsibilities (Kelly and McAdam, 2023). Even when women succeed in overcoming these challenges, their success often goes without equal recognition or comes embedded in narratives divergent from those framing men-led businesses (Turley *et al.,* 2025).

The existing entrepreneurial narrative has a masculine tone and focuses on elements like aggressive growth, competition, and traditional professional trajectories. The accounts of women are thus often overlooked and alternative models of success given less prominence. The gap between theoretical models and actual experience thus points toward a critical lack in academic research and policy making.

The dissertation seeks to fill the gap through a qualitative secondary data analysis of the gendered experience of women entrepreneurs. The accessibility of podcasts, interviews, and case studies allows for a holistic exploration of rich personal accounts not only of challenges to women's entrepreneurship but also of the ways they overcome them. Understanding this data is crucial in framing better entrepreneurial ecosystems and broadening the lens of entrepreneurial success.

1.2 RESEARCH PROBLEM

While entrepreneurship has long been touted as a method of economic empowerment in an equitable manner, gender inequity remains and impacts its actual application in practice. Women remain less represented in industries related to high growth opportunities and experience considerable obstacles in accessing external sources of money in the form of venture capital or angel investors (Brush *et al.,* 2009). These systemic weaknesses not only impact discrete entrepreneurs but also prevent the general economic and societal benefits achievable through entrepreneurial diversity participation.

Despite the efforts at both European Union and national levels to enhance women's entrepreneurship, challenges persist. In the Irish context, even as women entrepreneurs have become more visible, this has not been matched by corresponding opportunities or related support systems. Social expectations of caregiving roles, leadership relations, and attitudes toward risk persist in limiting women's entry and advancement in entrepreneurial activities (Kelly and McAdam, 2023). In addition, research and development activities often rely on quantitative analyses, which might not be sufficient in capturing the complex issues and societal challenges women face in starting and sustaining a business.

The prevailing entrepreneurship discourse, centred around rapid growth, disruption, and mass expansion, does not capture the values, motivation, or trajectory that women founders desire (Turley *et al.,* 2025). As a result, women's entrepreneurship narratives are insufficiently covered in the mainstream literature, especially the role of identity, structural obstacles, and social environment in shaping their business results. Therefore, this review indicates four remaining literature gaps: stage sensitivity (early versus mature founders), a sector lens (tech versus service/health), narrative synthesis of secondary cases, and intersectionality (race/class/age). These gaps directly inform the research aim and questions set out in Sections 1.3 and 1.4.

This dissertation addresses the existing lacuna by investigating female entrepreneurs lived experiences using secondary qualitative sources. It seeks to bring to light these under-narrated stories and offer a more context-specific and nuanced picture of gendered entrepreneurship.

1.3 RESEARCH AIM AND OBJECTIVES

The aim of this study is to explore the role of gender in the entrepreneurial experience of women working in venture or high-growth business environments with a focus placed specifically upon the way in which challenges, identity, and career satisfaction are affected. Utilising thematic analysis of Ireland-focused secondary qualitative material drawn from interviews, podcasts, and case study research, primarily from Ireland, this research aims to highlight the cultural and system-level processes that facilitate female entrepreneurship. This aligns with the three research questions on barriers (RQ1), identity and intersectionality (RQ2), and resilience strategies (RQ3).

Modern research seeks to go beyond statistical generalizations, instead trying to express true and often neglected stories that reflect the lived experiences of women involved in entrepreneurial environments. By uncovering common patterns and social processes, this research expands the understanding of entrepreneurship in a more inclusive way and provides recommendations for policymaking and support mechanisms that seek to foster gender equality in the business arena.

Methodologically, the thesis adopts an interpretivist stance towards research, conducts a secondary narrative thematic analysis of published cases and reports.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

- **To identify structural and social barriers** encountered by women in high-growth entrepreneurial ventures, including access to finance, leadership recognition, and network exclusion.
- **To examine the impact of cultural and societal norms** on women's entrepreneurial identity construction and their consequent business decision-making.
- To **explore the levels of career satisfaction** and perceived success among women entrepreneurs in venture-focused environments.
- To **highlight women entrepreneurs' resilience and adaptation** strategies using secondary qualitative sources.

1.4 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This research question is supported by three sub-questions that constitute core views as reflected by access to secondary qualitative data.

PRIMARY RESEARCH QUESTION

- How do structural and societal factors influence the entrepreneurial experiences of women in high-growth or venture-focused businesses?

SUB-QUESTIONS

1. **Stage & Barriers:** What funding and networking barriers do early-stage female entrepreneurs face, and how do these barriers compare against those faced by mature-stage counterparts?

2. **Norms & Intersectionality:** How do societal and intersecting identities (such as race, class, etc.) shape the processes of identity work and career satisfaction for women entrepreneurs?

3. **Sector & Resilience:** What kinds of resilience and adaptation strategies emerge from secondary narratives? How does this vary depending on sectoral context (e.g., tech versus healthcare versus hospitality)?

1.5 SCOPE OF THE STUDY

This dissertation investigates the unique experiences of women entrepreneurs who are part of high-growth or venture environments of the company. The research relies exclusively on secondary qualitative evidence sourced from interviews, podcasts, case studies, and peer-reviewed academic journals providing rich insights from the actual experience of women in the entrepreneurship field.

The information used in this research spans a variety of viewpoints, including international and Irish contexts, with a strong emphasis on publicly available records of women-owned businesses. While many podcasts and interviews compiled for this research focus largely on the business ecosystem in Ireland, the study does not limit its findings to a single country. Instead, it uses the diversity of sources to unearth common structural challenges, societal gender norms, and career satisfaction trends faced by women entrepreneurs in different environments.

The aim of this research is not to generate findings applicable to all women in business but to provide a thematic understanding of the ongoing difficulties and coping mechanisms. This research avoids using primary means of data collection in the form of surveys or interviews to maintain a focused methodology consistent with the standards of a master's level dissertation.

1.6 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Entrepreneurship is often cited as a pathway to economic participation and empowerment; however, women still face disproportionately high barriers in entering and establishing business ventures, particularly in high-growth and venture-backed sectors (Orser *et al.,* 2006; Brush *et al.,* 2009). There is potentially greater enthusiasm with gender and entrepreneurship research; however, much of the research remains quantitative and does far too little to consider women's own narratives, identity formation, and everyday lives in relation to overcoming systemic barriers (Kelly and McAdam, 2023; Jennings and McDougald, 2007).

This work contributes to the field by presenting women entrepreneurs' voices through the secondary qualitative analysis. It provides a platform for silenced voices and reiterates the way societal norms, gendered expectations, and finance availability structure entrepreneurial processes. By taking this perspective, the research fills a gap in the field through its focus not just on the outcome but on the process, perception, and identity as well.

Practically, the study makes suggestions to policymakers, business support agencies, and educators looking to build more diverse entrepreneurial spaces. By acknowledging the nuances in the issues faced by women, targeted interventions can lead to more equitable funding models and the shifting cultural norms framing success in entrepreneurship.

Scholarly research supports the use of other sources of evidence such as podcasts, interviews, and case studies, because they represent authentic avenues through which depth and diversity can be achieved in entrepreneurial lives. It encourages further research to consider gender more critically as a living part of business practice and no longer as a demographic measure alone.

1.7 STRUCTURE OF THE DISSERTATION

The dissertation consists of six separate chapters. Chapter 1 introduces the subject matter of the study, giving contextual background and rationale, identifying the core issue of the study, objectives, and research questions, and giving an idea of the scope and importance of the study. Chapter 2 works based on literature surrounding barriers, identity work, resilience strategies, sectoral and stage variations, to finally identify four very specific gaps that go to directly inform the research questions. Chapter 3 describes

and expands the methodological procedures used in the study, including the secondary analysis framework, the databases used, the thematic analytical approach taken, and the ethical principles maintained during the study period. Chapter 4 presents the findings arranged systematically under themes obtained from the analysis of podcasts, interviews, and the case studies. Chapter 5 undertakes a thorough analysis of the relevance of the outcomes and their implications to the larger framework of the study and the available literature, highlighting both their theoretical significance and potential practical applications. Chapter 6 gives a synthesis of the dissertation in the form of a general discussion consolidating the major results, recognises limitations, and makes recommendations for further inquiries and policy development.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, a critical consideration of the literature on women entrepreneurship is done by dwelling on systemic barriers, social capital, strategies for digital engagement, and identity construction. The review situated within key academic research chiefly published from 2019 to 2025 is anchored in older theoretical traditions to carve out recent trends, contradictions, and gaps. Visual data is included to emphasise key disparities in women's entrepreneurial experiences.

As much as entrepreneurship is acknowledged to be a source of innovation, jobs creation, and economic development (Welter *et al.,* 2017), the problem of women's underrepresentation in particular leadership and high-growth ventures is very much documented. Studies continued to show that women must traipse over structural barriers such as access to finance (Orser *et al.,* 2006), exclusion from networks (Kelly and McAdam, 2023), and gendered expectations of leadership (Eagly and Karau, 2002). According to peer-reviewed evidence, the expected under-representation of women in senior leadership and high-growth entrepreneurship continues to be asserted in relation to gendered expectations, access to networks, and investor perceptions (Ahl, 2006; Eagly and Karau, 2002; Kelly and McAdam, 2023).

In answer to the challenges posed in the foregoing, some researchers have recently offered resilience and the navigation of inequalities faced by women as developing perspectives. Studies emerging nowadays suggest that the sustenance of entrepreneurship is strengthened by social capital through peers, mentorship, and community alliances (Isabirye, 2024). Others investigate how women harness digital tools such as social media to build visibility while simultaneously opposing traditional norms (Williams, 2024; Beya, 2021). LinkedIn behavioural data in 2020 observed further exposes the confidence and application pattern differences between genders that are indicative of societal expectations imposed on professional engagement.

The literature review is set thematically into six sections:

1. Barriers to women entrepreneurship

2. Social capital and access to networks
3. Digital strategy and online platform
4. Entrepreneur identity and career satisfaction
5. Research gaps
6. Summary and conclusions.

These lay the academic foundation for the formulation of research questions and the pursuit of methodology in succeeding chapters. This review explores key thematic barriers and enablers such as access to capital, gendered identity construction, social networks, and resilience mechanisms.

2.2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK - GENDER AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Understanding what may be termed gendered at entrepreneurship goes beyond a mere description of disparities; it instead demands grounding in theory that rationalizes how those disparities come into existence and remain sustained. This section sets out the dominant theoretical perspectives that find relevance in the study of women in entrepreneurship, particularly in high-growth or venture oriented settings. These perspectives allow us to situate women's entrepreneurial experiences within bigger social, economic, and institutional contexts and thus provide an important backbone for the present research.

The most cited perspective in this area is Feminist Theory, which refers to the critique of androcentric norms embedded in entrepreneurship. Ahl (2006) argues that entrepreneurship research historically reproduces masculine norms, thereby marginalising women's ways of doing business. Feminist scholars posit that concepts like "risk taking," "growth," or "competitive advantage" often carry gendered expectations, rendering women as forms of deviations from the entrepreneurial ideal. Even the very concept of the "heroic entrepreneur" under this theory would be dissected to show that it discriminates against entrepreneurs who employ collaboration, community or emotionally intensive approaches, more so by women than most men (Jennings and McDougald, 2007).

Social Role Theory (Eagly and Karau, 2002) takes explanations on how social expectations are created to perceive leadership and entrepreneurship a step further. The theory states that people internalise gender roles that govern career choices, behaviours, and self-perceptions. For instance, women are less assertive or less willing to take risks

traits often associated with entrepreneurial success. These stereotypes either discourage women from pursuing certain opportunities or cast doubt upon their credibility in the eyes of investors, clients, and colleagues

The Gendered Entrepreneurial Ecosystems framework therefore provides a somewhat more context-specific approach (Brush *et al.,* 2009). It explores how different factors at the institutional, cultural, and network levels intersect to affect women's access to entrepreneurship and their respective outcomes. It also identifies the avenues through which policy, finance, education, and social norms either enable or constrain women's ventures, making it especially helpful in investigating large-scale barriers to women's entrepreneurship such as reduced access to capital, poor representation in networks, and gender-biased policy implementation.

Theories combine to inform this study's analytical lens. Feminist Theory creates the critical grounding; Social Role Theory provides behavioural insights, while Gendered Ecosystems relate these into structural and institutional realities. In combining such perspectives, this study moves beyond individual-level explanations, considering how identity, policy, and culture interlock in shaping women's entrepreneurship trajectories.

2.3 BARRIERS FACED BY WOMEN ENTREPRENEURS

Despite significant policy attention and targeted initiatives, women entrepreneurs still face entrenched and overlapping barriers toward economic participation. These are not mere operational barriers but structurally embedded disadvantages, often shaped by persistent gender norms. The World Economic Forum (WEF) (2024) estimates that if the current rate of closure continues, it will take another 130 years or more to close the economic gender gap a stark indication that systemic inequalities have in fact been ill-addressed.

Barrier type	Evidence / data source	Key insight
Access to capital	Capstone Partners (2024), Alsos *et al.* (2006)	63% of women cite funding as top challenge
Network exclusion	Brush *et al.* (2009), LinkedIn (2024), Lerman *et al.* (2023)	Women underrepresented in high-influence networks
Cultural norms	Eagly & Karau (2002), Turley *et al.* (2025)	Societal roles influence business scale decisions
Confidence gaps	LinkedIn (2024), Meyer (2018)	Women apply 20% less for leadership roles without full match

Table 1: Summary of Key Barriers Faced by Women Entrepreneurs

Capital access remains a constant challenge. Peer-reviewed works indicate that investors tend to view women-led ventures as lower-growth or "lifestyle," which diminishes their credibility and early-stage funding (Alsos et al., 2006). Experimental and observational studies show the mechanisms underpinning this gap: Investors prefer pitches when delivered by a male voice, even if the content is identical to that of a female presenter (Brooks et al., 2014), whereas female founders are more often asked prevention-framed questions that yield lower funding outcomes (Kanze et al., 2018). Alternative finance can sometimes close gaps by leveraging community signalling and narrative cues, but the effects are highly context-dependent (Greenberg and Mollick, 2017). All in all, these studies point towards disparities in funding being attributable to not just the supply-side but also evaluation processes that are gendered.

The gap will continue to widen as the networks are excluded from each other. Access to mentors, role models, and strategic ties is a time-tested determinant of entrepreneurial performance; however, women have historically been denied access to high-value, male-dominated networks (Brush *et al.*, 2009; Kelly and McAdam, 2023). Digital platforms like LinkedIn create alternative avenues, yet the picture is hardly neutral: analysing almost 10 million LinkedIn users revealed that women are poorly connected to senior leaders at Big Tech, limiting access to powerful ties (Kalhor *et al.*, 2024). The algorithmic delivery may also bias visibility by gender, thus amplifying offline inequalities (Lambrecht and Tucker, 2019). Such invisible biases are harder to spot-not because they don't exist, but because platform design rarely takes structural exclusion into account.

The expectations and role stereotypes that exist on a cultural level act as a barrier to women engaging in entrepreneurship. Role Congruity Theory (Eagly and Karau, 2002) holds that leadership traits such as assertiveness or risk tolerance are socially coded as masculine, thereby creating some dissonance when women exhibited them. Consequently, women leaders tend to be penalized by society for either being "too soft" in their approach or "too aggressive" with no possibility of an acceptable middle road. In Ireland, Turley *et al.* (2025) discovered that women intentionally restrict the size of their businesses to accommodate caregiving commitments a genuinely rational choice but slightly detrimental to their long-term economic potential. In fact, deep scripts culturally go into forming this less than appropriate stance for women when it is all said and done.

Internalised expectations form another layer of perception biases acting as restraint. The issue of qualification is really that the women renegotiate higher titles and standards for themselves before they seek leadership roles, the pattern not skill oriented but with an increased risk of backlash and sanctions due to socialisation mechanisms (Eagly and Karau, 2002; Lewis, 2013). Meyer (2018) links this hesitance to both external discrimination and the internalised narrative associating leadership with masculine norms. A divide with such a confidence level does not imply personal deficiency; instead, it reflects structural conditioning.

The barriers do not offer absolute impediments but rather act reciprocally to strengthen each other. In fact, early-stage founders operate under finance and network constraints more so than their mature counterparts; though, depending on the tech or service industry, they slightly differ (Manolova *et al*., 2012; Turley *et al*., 2024). They go beyond institutions being reproduced by policy, media, and education and therefore persist through contexts. This means that more than patchwork solutions would be required-the barriers demand a conceptual change in how one defines success, who gets legitimised as a credible founder, and how gender is enacted (Marlow and Martinez Dy, 2018; Welter *et al*., 2014).

The challenge of women entrepreneurship runs deep in our systems, which include instances of access issues alongside those of representation, recognition, and social expectations. To support women entrepreneurially, it is essential to view these forces through a critical lens. The next section looks at how women create social capital and strategic networking as a counter to challenges encountered (Kelly and McAdam, 2023; Brush *et al*., 2009).

2.4 ENTREPRENEURIAL IDENTITY AND CAREER SATISFACTION

The positioning of entrepreneurial identity takes the central role in deciding the way women move about and experience their careers and make sense of them. A woman entrepreneur goes through the "identity work" Kelly and McAdam (2023) describe, which entails an ongoing negotiation of personal values, societal expectations, and the business role. This negotiation is not just about self-definition but about legitimacy: being viewed as a "real" entrepreneur, in traditionally male dominated settings. Many find entrepreneurship more than a mere vocation; it is a space wherein they reconstruct their identity, frequently in opposition to an institutional order that values feminine

traits less in the world of business. These dynamics are summarised in Table 2, which outlines key identity constructs and their associated career satisfaction indicators. Additionally, intersectional factors of race, class or age compound these identity negotiations, as Black and migrant women describe separate kinds of legitimacy hurdles.

Identity Construct	Associated Career Satisfaction Indicator	Source
Authenticity / Value Alignment	Work–life integration, ethical consistency	Eddleston & Powell (2012)
Narrative Flexibility	Ability to adapt identity across contexts	Kelly and McAdam (2023)
Resistance to Norms	Rejection of dominant masculinity-based success	Kirkwood (2009); Ahl (2006)
Social Contribution	Impact on community, mentorship, empowerment	Brush *et al.* (2009)

Table 2:Entrepreneurial Identity Dimensions and Career Satisfaction Metrics

The process of identity construction for women entrepreneurs is often informed by the tension between authenticity and acceptance. Consider Lewis's (2013) discussion of the so called "double bind" experienced by many women. Their very assertion of traditionally masculine traits such as assertiveness or competitiveness could indeed lend them legitimacy, but at the risk of being deemed deviant from accepted gender roles. Conversely, adherence to traditional femininity may ensure social acceptance yet delegitimize the entrepreneurial credibility. The balancing of this identity is also harmed by what Marlow and Martinez Dy (2018) call a state of "institutionalised invisibility," whereby the contributions of women are diminished or disregarded unless they conform to dominant norms. Hence this fight for legitimacy has an internal aspect but also one structured by broader entrepreneurial ecosystems where conforming is rewarded rather than standing out.

The negotiation of one's identity in gender-specific entrepreneurial situations often places a psychological toll, especially about career satisfaction. Women entrepreneurs usually practice identity management that involves the hiding or rewriting of certain aspects of themselves to fit into dominant expectations of "successful" entrepreneurship, which are traditionally designed in masculine, assertive, and individualistic terms (Marlow and Martinez Dy, 2018). This contradiction between how we really see ourselves and how society wants us to see ourselves can lead to internal conflict, which can make us less happy and healthy in the long run (Shepherd and

Haynie, 2009). Moreover, existing research shows that women are more likely to suffer from impostor syndrome and burnout in high-growth business ventures, not because of lack of performance, but because of continuous devaluation and constant belittling (Cliff *et al.,* 2005; Turley *et al.,* 2025). These challenges are increased in situations where women find themselves facing a dual pressure to live up to the expectations of both "ideal entrepreneurs" and "ideal caregivers," an added expectation rarely faced by their male counterparts. The resulting tension erodes long-term satisfaction and can result in decreased aspirations, strategic ambiguity, or even full withdrawal from entrepreneurial endeavours.

In reaction to these demands, many women engage in a process of identity reconstruction, which entails the revising of their self-concept and the way they convey their responsibilities to others. Rather than simply conforming to dominant entrepreneurial norms, women often create hybridized identities that combine professional goals with relational or communal values (Lewis, 2013). By recontextualizing, they challenge the binary opposition of business success and femininity, thereby establishing legitimacy. Kelly and McAdam (2023) noted that women digital entrepreneurs use strategies aimed at flexibility and control to redefine success, not necessarily in terms of size or resources, but also in terms of work–life balance and personal satisfaction. Such recontextualization must be understood not as withdrawal, but as a strategic renegotiation of identity frontiers. It serves as a shielding mechanism, enabling women to operate in hostile or exclusionary settings while maintaining their values. Nevertheless, this accommodation remains subject to outside expectation and often requires ongoing emotional labour to maintain legitimacy in multiple areas.

A further degree of complexity is shared in women entrepreneurs' perceptions of career satisfaction, which often deviates from the dominant growth-oriented paradigm. Standard measures of revenue, firm size, or venture capital investment fail to provide an adequate capture of the essence of success for women when identity, values, and context come into account. Kirkwood's (2009) work showed that many women measure satisfaction through the emphasis on autonomy, purpose, or attaining work–life balance, instead of competitive success. More recent research by Eddleston & Powell (2012) also supports this perspective, showing that women entrepreneurs gain satisfaction from

value congruence conducting business practices that align with their ethical, social, or family values though perhaps at the cost of rapid career progress.

The suggested redefinition must not be interpreted as undermining aspirations. Instead, it reflects the presence of different models of success that are guided by gendered experiences (Welter *et al*., 2014; Brush *et al*., 2009). Kelly and McAdam (2023) argue that the narrow societal view of the successful entrepreneur belittles these different identities. This narrowness creates tension between women because, on one hand, they are subjected to the pressures of fitting into existing norms and, on the other, seeking recognition for their own definitions of achievement (Lewis, 2013; Eagly and Karau, 2002). This highlights an inherent paradox of contemporary entrepreneurship: although institutional structures are prone to promoting individualistic actions, women's achievements are often relational, contextual, and collaborative in character (Welter *et al*., 2014; Marlow and Martinez Dy, 2018). The identity construction process thus goes beyond individual development, transforming into a site of resistance to exclusionary norms (Kelly and McAdam, 2023; Lewis, 2013). Being able to maintain career satisfaction in the face of these conditions is a testament to resilience, which is supported by the entrepreneurs' competence in mediating internal aspirations and external validation processes (Eddleston and Powell, 2012; Shepherd and Haynie, 2009).

2.5 COPING STRATEGIES AND RESILIENCE

Women entrepreneurs face not just systemic barriers but also exhibit a remarkable capacity for responsiveness, adaptation, and frequently innovation, accompanied by a significant degree of resilience. There is a large and rich literature that explains women entrepreneurs' difficulties, and yet there is a need for further exploration of how such individuals actively engage with and overcome such difficulties. Resilience in such individuals goes far beyond individual traits; it is a strategic adaptation that draws upon resources, networks, and support systems. Brush *et al*. (2009) describe women entrepreneurs' resilience arising from the active interaction of individual agency with the structures within and through which they act. As such, coping strategies need to be conceptualized as complex and multifaceted: such strategies include psychological adaptation, mobilization of networks, and negotiation of institution led structures. An identification of and documentation of such strategies allow for reframing our story to one that more highlights agencies, creativity, and engagement with systemic structures

rather than one that focuses primarily on barriers. Employing thematic analysis on secondary narrative sources (interviews, podcasts, case profiles), this review attempts to disclose how coping strategies differ by industrial context and entrepreneurial stage.

A key strategy whereby women entrepreneurs foster peer support and mentorship networks encompasses both formal and informal structures. These networks provide not only opportunities for emotional support but also critical social capital in the form of knowledge exchange, strategic advice, and resource sharing. According to Manolova *et al*. (2020), peer-learning groups help women discuss their failures without losing power in reputation the unfortunate lot of many women in a mainstream entrepreneurial ecosystem where failure is heavily stigmatized. These networks thus become visibility mechanisms in industries where women are underrepresented, giving legitimacy by way of collective presence. Eddleston and Powell (2022) further establish that participation in women-led incubators and accelerators considerably enhanced self-efficacy and business continuity of early-stage women entrepreneurs. Hence, social learning and validation are not some frills but are indeed critical in sustaining women ventures in hostile or exclusionary environments.

Women entrepreneurs are navigating systemic exclusion and are therefore turning to digital tools to mitigate their difficulties. Social media platforms, crowdfunding sites, and e-commerce ecosystems have provided the means for women to avoid traditional intermediaries like VCs and retail distributors. For instance, Instagram and TikTok offer opportunities for micro-entrepreneurs especially in the realms of fashion, wellness, and lifestyle, to collectively build consumer bases and retain supreme control over their brand narratives (Williams, 2024). These are techniques which reduce barriers to entry while allowing for aggressive identity-driven branding against masculine business paradigms. According to Kelly and McAdam (2023), digital entrepreneurship affords women more flexible working conditions that enable them to reconcile growth of their business with their caregiving responsibilities. Yet, these very platforms also pose gendered challenges-visibility biases by algorithms and online harassment-levels disproportionately affecting female founders, hence digital resilience needs to encompass aspects of platform literacy and how women can protect themselves.

Psychological resilience is also crucial in how female entrepreneurs endure and adapt to adverse circumstances. Research has shown emotion regulation, self-efficacy, and

reframing setbacks as key to long-run persistence in asymmetric environments (Shepherd and Haynie, 2009). Many females engage in what Cliff *et al*. (2005) call "narrative coping," whereby personal and professional struggles are reinterpreted as milestones in a larger developmental journey. This attitude can shift marginalisation into a source of meaning or innovation. In the absence of institutional support, resilience is then a self-contained mechanism - often nurtured informally by peer communities, mentorship circles, or affinity networks (Isabirye, 2024). These systems offer emotional support while mitigating the sense of isolation often identified in the literature among women working in male-dominated industries. Yet, while these qualities are admirable, they should not be romanticised as substitutes for structural reform. In this sense, resilience is survival; it is not a choice.

Taken together, these coping strategies represent a range of individual and systemic application. While women entrepreneurs could be viewed as highly adaptive individuals with community engagement and psychological endurance, the very need for such coping strategies betrays the institutional weaknesses. Coping mechanisms should not serve to conceal these structural barriers that demand their existence. As Kelly and McAdam (2023) stated, resilience is often glorified as a substitute for tackling the root causes in effect, masking inequalities instead of resolving them. Hence, the conception of resilience in this context ought to include a focus not only on documenting how women struggle to survive and thrive but also on critically considering those environments that prevent these women from ever achieving a solid footing. This next section will begin to identify research lacunas within the existing literature that consider by now a theoretical approach that has failed to adequately inform policy concerns in capturing these lived entrepreneurial realities.

2.6 GAPS IN THE LITERATURE

Despite the established systemic challenges women face in entrepreneurship, much of the literature has been rather descriptive about this phenomenon than looking at it through a critical, intersectional framework. Much of the research repeats the mantra of traditional barriers, such as capital deficiency, network exclusion, or gendered expectations, without dissecting the ways and means in which these forces act upon shifts in social, economic, or technological contexts (Brush *et al.,* 2009; Turley *et al.,* 2025). In this context, for example, while some research stresses the underrepresentation of women in high-growth sectors, there is little analysis of how

digital spaces or post-pandemic work structures might have changed the landscape for entrepreneurship. Conversely, identity construction has recently been highlighted as a major component of the entrepreneurial experience (Kelly & McAdam, 2023), yet few works explore the ways women use identity as a strategy of resistance or innovation, rather than simply adaptation. This void renders weak the formulation of theory reflecting the multifaceted ways women resist, navigate, or reconfigure dominant forms of entrepreneurial logic.

Even further, another gap lies in how resilience is framed in the existing research. While some studies focus on describing adaptive strategies adopted by women, including building support networks or redefining success in non-financial terms (Marlow and Martinez Dy, 2018; Eddleston & Powell, 2012), there remains little interrogation of how these strategies intersect with larger systemic structures of power. In much of the literature, resilience is viewed as an attribute somehow possessed by the individual rather than as a relational or contextual outcome informed by external environments. Such an individualized framework runs the risk of holding women individually responsible to "cope" or "adapt" instead of critically asking why the institutional arrangements remain so exclusionary to begin with. Even when women successfully navigate barriers, much emotional labour is involved, something less considered in popular mainstream entrepreneurial discourse (Cho *et al.,* 2020). This implies a gap not just in content but also and fundamentally in the conceptual frameworks.

Additionally, a cross-cutting omission is the underdevelopment of intersectionality, where gender is often considered in isolation without contemplating how race, class, age, or migrant status can reshape an entrepreneurial disadvantage (Beya, 2021; Williams, 2024). The role of intersectionality is underdeveloped in the mainstream discourse on women entrepreneurs. While some studies recognise gendered challenges, fewer examine how other identity dimensions, such as race, class, age, or migrant status compound entrepreneurial disadvantage (Beya, 2021; Williams, 2024). For example, the experiences of Black women entrepreneurs or migrant women in Ireland remain marginal in most empirical studies, which tend to generalise "women" as a homogeneous category. This lack of intersectional inquiry fails to reflect the diversity of constraints and strategies employed by differently positioned women. Without this granularity, research risks producing partial or exclusionary policy recommendations that do not address layered inequalities. The oversight calls for future studies that centre

on complex, overlapping identities to fully understand the differentiated nature of entrepreneurial barriers and support systems. These gaps directly inform the study's research questions as outlined in Chapter 1.

To conclude, while the current literature has progressed a great extent, its limitations suggest the need for continued intersectional, context-dependent, and futures-focused work an element that guides the final conclusions drawn in the next section.

2.7 CONCLUSION

This literature review attempted to critically examine multi-dimensional challenges and dynamics that shape women's courses of entrepreneurship. It started with key theoretical lenses, feminist theory, social role theory, and the gendered entrepreneurial ecosystem that shed light on the inexorable barriers with which women have laboured: unequal access to finance (Orser *et al.,* 2006), network exclusion (Brush *et al.,* 2009), and embedded gender norms (Eagly and Karau, 2002). These barriers combined have made the entry, as well as growth, of women within entrepreneurial ecosystems difficult, notwithstanding increasing policy support (World Economic Forum, 2024).

The review explored how women use social capital and digital platforms strategically to navigate exclusion and increase visibility (Kelly and McAdam, 2023; Williams, 2024). Entrepreneurial identity work appeared as a recurrent theme as these women reconfigured traditional markers of success into those of value alignment and self-fulfilment (Eddleston & Powell, 2012). Resilience and coping strategies are diverse, context-dependent, and emotionally draining at times, while much literature has failed to interrogate systemic power relations or the price paid on adaptation (Marlow and Martinez Dy, 2018).

Whatever the increased information gathered, gaps herein remain in how entrepreneurial success is defined, how intersectionality is dealt with, and how structural reforms are hoped for rather than for personal coping. These existing gaps lead to the research questions outlined in Chapter 1. Then in Chapter 3, the research philosophy, strategy, and methods employed to achieve the research objectives are detailed.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter details the methodology employed in the study of how Irish women entrepreneurs build and negotiate their identity as entrepreneurs. The philosophy, approach, and strategy are discussed with an explanation for the choices made. This is followed by a description of the pertinent data sources and techniques of analysis. The literature review has argued that gaps remain in the experience base between female entrepreneurs at different stages of business evolution and in different sectors. To resolve these gaps, the qualitative case study approach was adopted, allowing for a detailed analysis of the complex dynamics of identity. This methodology thus addresses the research questions about barriers, identity work, and resilience strategies among female entrepreneurs through an interpretivist and inductive secondary case study design supported by reflexive thematic analysis and links back into the stage-sensitivity, sector-lens, narrative-synthesis, and intersectionality gaps identified in Chapter 2. For transparency, the search/screening log, source matrix, codebook excerpt, theme map, and reliability materials are provided in APPENDIX A1. CODEBOOK EXCERPT (SAMPLE)APPENDIX A2. SEARCH & SCREENING DECISIONS LOG (SAMPLE ROWS)APPENDIX A3 AUDIT-TRAIL / REFLEXIVE MEMOS (EXTRACT)APPENDIX A4 DOUBLE-CODING SUMMARY AND SAMPLEAPPENDIX A5 THEME → RESEARCH QUESTION MAP

The chapter begins by describing the philosophical stance guiding the research (interpretivist/constructivist). It then delivers the research design, focusing greatly on the secondary case data and the use of secondary narrative evidence to enable stage and sector comparisons. It goes on to discuss data selection criteria, analytical procedures, and the ethical considerations that underlie this study including the search and screening logic (2019–2024 emphasis with seminal pre-2019 works). Limitations of this study are also highlighted to allow for complete transparency and practicable reflection alongside measures to ensure trustworthiness, such as an audit trail, triangulation, double coding of a sample, and reflexivity. In the end, the selected methodological design is meant to complement the research objectives, namely, looking into how structural barriers,

identity narratives, and coping mechanisms impact entrepreneurial experiences for women in modern Ireland and to provide a clear bridge to the thematic findings presented in Chapter 4.

3.2 RESEARCH PHILOSOPHY

An interpretivist philosophy is taken up here since it is considered that reality is socially constructed and plural, with meanings negotiated in context, and best apprehended through the subjective meanings that people attach to their individual experiences. In respect to the study of female entrepreneurship and identity construction, interpretivism opens investigations into more subtle nuances regarding the interaction of gender with social expectations and entrepreneurial narratives within a given sociocultural context (Saunders *et al.,* 2019). It gives preference to situated constructions over variable-based forecasters, so that the stage-and-sector-specific meanings may enter focus. The enumerated interpretive-constructivist stance is verily correspondent with trustworthiness criteria for qualitative inquiry formulated by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Credibility, dependability, transferability and confirmability govern choices throughout this study. This philosophical stance is well suited to being applied to the lived realities of women entrepreneurs, where meaning making and identity negotiation at the individual level take centre stage. Instead of causal laws or predictive models, interpretivism values rich, contextual understanding that foregrounds language, narrative, and situated experience, a feature that makes it appropriate for the study of complex and under-theorised dynamics such as entrepreneurial identity and resilience (Lewis, 2013; Ahl, 2006).

The study also carries a constructivist ontology, in that knowledge is co-produced by engaging in text, narrative, and social discourse. In this study, secondary case data, secondary case reports, and published researcher interviews are treated not as data bearing universal truths but rather meaning-constructing processes that are situated by wider cultural, economic, and institutional forces. This is in line with Creswell's (2014) assertion that qualitative study is more appropriate to understanding how individuals interpret their world. Researcher positionality is acknowledged and dealt with through reflexive memoing and a decisions log during coding, alongside deliberate searches for evidence to disconfirm the themes in the case where the themes seem too tidy. This set of interpretivist-constructivist orientations thereby sets the methodological terrain as exploratory, inductive, and locationally sensitive deemed essential to really capture the

fluid and multidimensional character of women's entrepreneurial identity work. This reasoning also gives rise to the consideration of the need for the unofficial use or the so-called secondary narrative materials and reflexivity in the thematic analysis that is incorporated in Section 3.3–3.5.

3.3 RESEARCH DESIGN

An inductive approach to research is the one that this study has incorporated, in which patterns are observed to develop a theory rather than vice versa. This research study undertakes a secondary narrative analysis based on Bowen's 2009 guidelines for document-based qualitative research. An approach such as this fits perfectly well into the interpretivist-constructivist view, which seeks to investigate the subjective and socially constructed experiences of women entrepreneurs in Ireland (Saunders *et al.,* 2019). Since this subject of entrepreneurial identity and resilience has remained under-theorised, an inductive approach can allow for more flexibility to pursue the narratives and complexities emerging from the data. This design supports the comparative lens on stage and sector by enabling the analysis of an assembly of heterogeneous cases, without the imposition of new fieldwork. Besides Bowen (2009), the approach was also influenced by Orienting Narrative Synthesis (Popay *et al*., 2006) that specifies approaches for combining disparate texts into coherent themes while preserving contextual nuance. See **APPENDIX A1. CODEBOOK EXCERPT (SAMPLE)** for the detailed search strings and screening log. Design trade-offs (reduced power to probe details that were never reported) are mitigated by triangulation through document types, explicit inclusion/exclusion criteria, and a kept audit trail.

The inductive methodology offers a rich milieu for very nuanced understanding, particularly in relation to the identity work of a woman in different entrepreneurial sectors and stages of the business. Lewis (2013) stresses the very necessity of this approach to begin unpacking those very subtle, and more often unspoken, ways in which gendered expectations shape professional trajectories. From the angle of theorising, sustaining a deductive approach would mean taking on anthropologically preconceived notions to be confirmed by the scientific method, whereas in this study it is, namely, the actual making of meaning and emergent insight from the secondary case study materials that are given precedence. Broad scope secondary analysis of narratives covers early and mature founders, tech, service, and health while still retaining some

depth to study discursive identity work. Given project constraints, assembling a small primary sample is not conducive to such a wide-ranging comparison.

As the data drives the conceptual development, this approach keeps the study open to complexity and contradiction, a stance that is important when researching how women construct identities in systems often wrought with structural inequalities. According to Creswell (2014), inductive reasoning is a major ingredient in exploratory qualitative inquiry, especially in situations where firm variables may not adequately describe participants lived reality. At last, the emergent themes were explicitly linked to RQ1-RQ 3 to ensure analytic alignment. Then, an examination of cases with contrasting findings served to confirm, expand, or narrow early interpretations instead of reaching forced consensual opinions.

3.4 DATA SOURCES

Most secondary sources are dated 2019 to 2024 to increase their currency, except those foundational works used for theoretical reference, which date from before 2019.

Criteria for inclusion:

These included sources published between 2019 and 2024, with a focus on female entrepreneurs set within a high growth or venture-type context, clearly indicating the entrepreneurial stage (early, mid, and mature), and providing rich qualitative material (interviews, case narratives, reflective profiles). Furthermore, the sources selected were those from credible outlets, including peer-reviewed and academies journals, reputable media, and recognised industry reports.

Exclusion criteria:

Any sources that were promotional and/or lacked genuine reflection, meaning those that were copies, duplicates, derivatives of already existing material, or those that did not provide an identifiable stage or sector context were excluded.

The details of each criterion have been operationalised, and the sources were sought through purposive and iterative searches amongst Scopus, Web of Science, Business Source Complete and Google Scholar. Boolean strings combined gender and entrepreneurship with stage and sector terms (e.g., women OR female AND entrepreneur AND (early-stage OR start-up OR mature) AND (tech OR health OR service OR hospitality) AND Ireland) (see APPENDIX search strings and screening

log). Searches were limited from 2019 to 2024 to ensure maximum currency, followed by backward and forward citation searching to include more relevant materials and pre-2019 cornerstone theory papers. Titles/abstracts were screened for relevancy, after which full texts were screened regarding the clarity of the stage or sector, qualitative richness and credibility of the outlets (documentation in APPENDIX). A simplistic decision-making log noted down the database, search term, date and inclusion/exclusion rationale for the sake of transparency and replicability. This whole procedure led to the assembling of a corpus that was balanced over stages and sectors while avoiding an overconcentration in any awarded outlet or case.

The core dataset targets Irish women entrepreneurs, supplemented by comparative UK and US states to test transferability of themes. A full case/source matrix (stage, sector, country, source type) is presented in APPENDIX A2. SEARCH & SCREENING DECISIONS LOG (SAMPLE ROWS). Sources were chosen to provide great narrative insight for RQ 1 (barriers), RQ 2 (identity and intersectionality), and RQ 3 (resilience across sectors and stages). These criteria assist in carrying out the focused and rigorous thematic analysis that responds to the gaps identified in Chapter 2.

3.5 DATA ANALYSIS METHOD

Thematic analysis has been chosen because of its versatility in giving meaning to qualitative data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Following Braun and Clarke's six-phase process, this study consisted of processes such as familiarisation, open coding, theme development, theme review, defining themes, and write-up.

All secondary narrative sources (case studies, interviews, practitioner reports) were coded manually in Word. Meaningful segments of text were highlighted, provisional codes were applied, and the codes were then transferred to an Excel codebook specifying the name of the code, its definition, and references to the source (sample page in APPENDIX A3 AUDIT-TRAIL / REFLEXIVE MEMOS (EXTRACT)). A reflexive audit trail was maintained to record all decisions made during analysis and the evolution of codes.

Practically, coding occurred in two cycles. Instances of open first-cycle coding provided discrete meaning units for the barriers, identity work, intersectional markers, and resilience practices (Braun and Clarke, 2006). With each code in the Excel codebook came the label, definition, inclusion/exclusion notes, exemplar excerpts, source

reference, and metadata for stage (early/mid/mature) and sector (tech/service/health). Second-cycle analysis organized clusters of related codes into candidate themes; themes were then inspected for internal coherence and external distinctiveness and refined via constant comparison back to the corpus (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Nowell *et al.*, 2017) The overall theme development map is shown in APPENDIX A5 THEME → RESEARCH QUESTION MAP.

Early patterns were challenged using negative-case analysis, if a case contradicted an emerging claim, the theme would be split, redefined, or scoped to conditions under which it held (Nowell *et al.*, 2017). Short quotations were preserved insofar as they were of evidential value; meanwhile, paraphrase in preference to lengthy excerpts from a single voice was adopted toward concision. To achieve triangulation to enhance credibility, patterns were checked across academic interviews, practitioner reports, and media profiles and examined for consistency across stages and sectors (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Nowell *et al.*, 2017). In turn, reflexive memos captured analytic decisions and alternative interpretations, which were cross-checked against a decisions log/audit trail for dependability and confirmability (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) short extracts from the audit trail and reflexive memos appear in APPENDIX A3 AUDIT-TRAIL / REFLEXIVE MEMOS (EXTRACT).

To enhance reliability, 20% of randomly selected excerpts were independently double-coded, and any disagreements were discussed and resolved (illustrative sample in APPENDIX A4 DOUBLE-CODING SUMMARY AND SAMPLE). The procedures satisfied the criteria for trustworthiness as laid out by Nowell *et al.* (2017), supporting transparent coding, coherent themes, and methodological rigour.

Thematic findings were mapped directly to the research questions:

- Research Question 1 (Barriers): the codes of funding and networks
- Research Question 2 (Identity & Intersectionality): codes for identity works and intersecting identities
- Research Question 3 (Resilience): adaptation strategies codes across sectors and stages

This manual and software-free strategy, coupled with a structured analytical process with reliability checks, seeks to yield sturdy thematic insights into female entrepreneurs

lived experiences. See APPENDIX A5 THEME → RESEARCH QUESTION MAPAPPENDIX A1. CODEBOOK EXCERPT (SAMPLE)APPENDIX A4 DOUBLE-CODING SUMMARY AND SAMPLEAPPENDIX A3 AUDIT-TRAIL / REFLEXIVE MEMOS (EXTRACT)**.**

3.6 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Though this study pulls from secondary data rather than primary fieldwork, some ethical considerations remain at the heart of the research process. Ethical research does not necessarily mean conducting any fresh data collection; it encompasses the selection, analysis, and interpretation of existing data (British Educational Research Association, 2018).

The data used in this study-all from published case studies/restorations/practitioner reports, academic articles, and interviews-were in the public domain or were produced with the informed consent of the respective institutional bodies and participants. No individually identifiable or sensitive unpublished data were used. Great care has, therefore, been taken to interpret the material in a respectful manner, ensuring no misrepresentation or reduction of the lived-from time-to-life experience these data represent.

The study prides itself in academic integrity by ensuring proper citation of all resources and acknowledging contributions of intellectual property. On the other hand, the study engages in analytical neutrality by offering an analysis contextual in nature rather than one based on the researcher's bias-an ethical necessity in the interpretation of gendered narratives (Resnik, 2011).

Because the research deals with possibly sensitive topics such as structural discrimination, work life conflict, and emotional resilience, the language used in the analysis avoids sensationalism and overgeneralising. The researcher practiced reflexivity throughout, keeping in mind the position of the researcher and the risk of reinforcing stereotypical representations of women entrepreneurs.

In view of the online and media resources, the study has drawn an explicit distinction between content meant for the "general" public and that behind paywalls or with privacy settings; hence, the analysis confined itself to publicly available materials. Short quotations were used sparingly and were framed with enough contextual

background to stave off potential misrepresentation, while paraphrased extracts were always double-checked against their originals. Data management followed good scholarly practices: sources were recorded with stable identifiers (DOI/URL and date of access), files were stored in secure drives, and a decisions log was maintained with versioning in support of auditability (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Attempts to portray informants in a stereotypical or harmful manner were kept to a bare minimum with the "do no harm" test being applied when disclosing sensitive information (e.g. caregiving responsibilities, funding rejections), and incidental personal identifiers were removed wherever analytical relevance was absent (BERA, 2018). Reflexive notes were kept bringing potential value judgements onto the forefront and examine language for bias, sensationalism, or deficit framing (Resnik, 2011).

As secondary data was used, formal ethical approval was not required, but the study adheres to the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2018) guidelines on ethics in social science research.

3.7 LIMITATIONS

A trade-off existed in any research design, and here was no exception. The choice to work with secondary qualitative data, while perfectly suitable for narratives across a wide array of cases, has thereby limited the ability of the researcher to probe deeper into individual perspectives or seek further clarification on certain context-specific subtleties. Since no primary data collection occurred, there can be no follow-up questions to explore further insights as they arise.

Furthermore, because of the careful selection of data with a view to having a diversity of sectors, stages of the business, and identity positions, the original purpose and framing of the data sources may not perfectly coincide with the research questions considered in this study. For example, published case reports and media interviews may often be structured for public consumption or commercial promotion, which influences the way entrepreneurs represent their experiences.

The scope of the study is limited to the geographical setting of Ireland, which enhances contextual relevance but limits international generalisability. Likewise, because the study employs a constructivist-interpretivist paradigm, the findings prioritise depth of meaning rather than breadth or statistical generalisation. Another limitation concerns possible publication bias from the sources at hand. It may very well be that those women

entrepreneurs whose stories are publicly available are entirely or very much different, depending on how much their operations in that sector attract visibility or media exposure, from those whose voices are not amplified.

The time frame 2019–2024 ensures currency but may exclude longer-chain effects (such as, for example, pre-2010 pipeline impacts or post-2024 changes in legislation). Because materials are public facing, the narratives sometimes do get curated; the lack of full transcripts or interviewer cues results in limited context. Theme development, as in any qualitative synthesis, is interpretative: even with reflexive memoing and audit-trail documentation, researcher subjectivity cannot be fully eliminated, and member-checking was not conducted with these secondary sources. Transferability beyond Ireland is tentative, given UK/US comparisons differ in institutional and in funding environments. Finally, platform and algorithmic characteristics are quickly evolving so any observation of digital visibility is quickly time bound and here merely illustrative. So, these limitations notwithstanding, this study provides an interesting consideration of the ways identity, resilience, and structural barriers intersect in women's entrepreneurial experiences particularly when it is read critically in context.

3.8 CONCLUSION

This chapter had given a presentation on the adopted methodological framework for the investigation concerning women entrepreneurs in Ireland in constructing and negotiating an entrepreneurial identity within structurally complex environments. It gave justifications on employing an interpretivist-constructivist paradigm and explained the research approach as being inductive. It also discussed the rationale for using a qualitative case study design based on secondary data, in relation to the research objectives.

Variously secondary materials were sourced and analysed-thematising phase, including case studies, reports, and media profiles. It also considered some of the main ethical imperatives, including being reflexive and interpreting responsibly, aside from opportunities for and limitations of using non-primary data. In general, therefore, the methodology was purposely designed to encapsulate the richness and multidimensionality of women's entrepreneurial identity work within a setting, thereby presenting possibilities for insightful and grounded analysis in the next chapter.

This chapter covers the philosophy (interpretivist–constructivist), inductive design, and reasoning being thus utilized to secondary narrative materials for RQ1–3. It also unpacks the practical procedures adding to the rigour of the methodology such as an explicit search and screening procedure; a highly structured codebook; an audit trail and decisions log; triangulation across document types; reflexive memoing; and refined double-coding for consistency, while outlining some trade-offs of this design (publication/exposure bias and less visible structure for follow-ups). This set of methodological commitments lends credence to the ensuing results. Chapter 4 thus presents the thematic findings structured into barriers, gendered identity work (including intersectionality), and resilience strategies, across stage and sector.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

4.1 INTRODUCTION

The findings of the study constitute this chapter, derived via thematic analysis of secondary qualitative data about women entrepreneurs in Ireland. These data include published case studies, media profiles, practitioner reports, and academic interviews, all interrelated in the exploration of the lived experiences of female entrepreneurs across a spectrum of sectors and stages in business. In line with the study's objectives, the analysis is concerned chiefly with how women fashion entrepreneurial identity, face gendered constraints, and employ coping strategies amid systemic challenges.

The thematic analysis is performed following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six steps, creating an orderly manner of analysing the data for patterns or themes. This method of analysis aligns with an interpretive and constructivist philosophy, which contextualizes understanding of processes of meaning-making. By considering various narratives, the analysis aims to understand not only the challenges confronted by women but equally their adjustment, persistence, and alterations of entrepreneurial norms.

Three dominant and overlapping themes emerged:

- Barriers to Funding and Network Access
- Gender Identity and Societal Expectations
- Resilience, Adaptation and Coping Strategies

There will be a theme handled in the next section, assumed with data-driven insights and grounded below broader sketches of identity, power, and entrepreneurship in Ireland of today. A consolidated visual theme map supporting the three themes is provided in **Appendix D**.

4.2 THEME 1: BARRIERS TO FUNDING AND NETWORK ACCESS

Access to capital and investment networks is said to be the greatest barrier that women entrepreneurs in Ireland face consistently. Female founders are victims to a cynical attitude by investors, who consider women's ventures to be low-risk, low-return, or merely lifestyle businesses rather than scalable enterprises (Orser *et al.,* 2006; Manolova *et al.,* 2012). Such perception reveals terribly ingrained gender assumptions

within the funding landscape. Most women-led startups, even today, still regard access to funding as their biggest hurdle, especially during early-stage rounds, as published by Capstone Partners in a report in 2024, notwithstanding growing efforts at the policy level to promote access in this area. This is, however, not just a financial challenge but a structural one-too; it depicts a reflection of the kind of opportunities and confidence investors place-very muscular-respect to-gender expectations. Such barriers then become severe in male-dominated sectors such as tech and finance, where female entrepreneurs are underrepresented, both in pitch rooms and in decision-making networks (LinkedIn, 2024).

Such inequalities in structure also get worsened by networking cultures that exclude one gender or another. Several secondary case sources argued that women were never really part of informal yet powerful networks that investor dinners, founder circles, and accelerator communities are generally founded upon (Turley *et al.,* 2025; Brush *et al.,* 2009). Such exclusion means fewer introductions, less visibility, and even less mentoring opportunities, especially in growth-heavy, innovation-led sectors. In some instances, female entrepreneurs responded by forming alternate peer networks or aligning themselves with public programmes; yet these were less advantageous than dominant male-driven networks in terms of speed, scale, and clout.

A barrier that impinged on opportunity in many cases turned on being shut out from influential business and investor networks. Unlike their male counterparts, women entrepreneurs had been kept out of informal networking fora such as investor dinners, executive forums, or high-level referral circles, all of which were critical for accessing capital or partnerships (Marlow and Martinez Dy, 2018). Formal networks-chartered bodies such as chambers of commerce or professional associations were viewed as a bit too bureaucratic and ineffective, particularly from the perspective of women operating smaller ventures that needed to stay under the radar. Informal ones, in contrast, tended to reproduce gendered gatekeeping-principally in domains like tech and finance, where men really dominated. So, this in turn-the underrepresentation of women in elite informal networks combined with the under-servicing of women by formal ones had helped perpetuate visibility gaps and retard further growth opportunities. Some participants had investigated digital territories and women-only networks as alternate channels for support, but these were themselves often under-resourced or far removed from the mainstream capital flows (Williams, 2024; Lerman *et al.,* 2023).

Funding barriers for women entrepreneurs are even deeper when one considers the sectoral differences. The scrutiny of female founders was higher than that of their male counterparts in tech and high-growth sectors, reinforcing innovation and venture capital as inherently masculine spaces. While women who run service or community-oriented businesses face fewer barriers to enter such industries, they contend with an investor bias that belittles large-scale investment potential in favour of scalability and growth metrics (Manolova *et al.,* 2012). The funding gap was further compounded depending on whether it was the early or mature stage of entrepreneurial development. At the early stage, entrepreneurs, especially novice ones, faced significant challenges because of the lack of track record or connections (Capstone Partners, 2024). At the mature stage, although slightly advantageously positioned, entrepreneurs had to deal with institutional constraints, even regarding formal investment channels (Cooke and Xiao. 2021). This, in turn, marks the structural barriers as being present across the entrepreneurial lifecycle but varying in manifestation depending on sectors and stages (Turley *et al.,* 2025; Cho *et al.,* 2020).

Different sector contexts shaped the varied entrepreneurial experiences women faced in this specific dataset. Entrepreneurs working in tech and high growth sectors were met with greater scrutiny from funders, compared with entrepreneurs working in retail or service-based sectors, where expectations for scalability and innovation were often much lower. And women entrepreneurs in tech had to confront deeply ingrained stereotypes regarding competence and technical expertise, adding yet another layer of difficulty in their ability to pitch to mostly male investors (Brush *et al.,* 2009; Capstone Partners, 2024). In lifestyle or creative sectors, however, overt instances of bias were reported less often by women, but challenges in being taken seriously by formal institutions still surfaced. The developmental stage of the business also mattered, and it was found that early-stage entrepreneurs faced most of the barriers to credibility and credit, whereas greater founders saw some improvements in access but highlighted persistent gaps in long-term investment and scaling support (Manolova *et al.,* 2012; Lewis, 2013). This turns out to be how identity, sector, and growth phase come together to affect entrepreneurial opportunity.

4.3 THEME 2: GENDER IDENTITY AND SOCIETAL EXPECTATIONS

Women entrepreneurs in multiple cases stated that a continuous identity conflict persists for them—between expectations from usual femininity and the forced persona that an

entrepreneur assumes. This conflict is even more spectacular when they operate in a male domain where qualities such as decisiveness and competitiveness become masculine traits or are stereotyped as masculine (Eagly and Karau, 2002). Oftentimes in their reflections, participants spoke of this balancing act between being professional and being likable, wondering aloud whether assertive acts would be judged harsher in females than in males. An internal-identity negotiation being an expression of the role of role incongruity theory wherein expectations for being an entrepreneur do not sit well externally but within as well when placed with gender roles (Lewis, 2013; Brush *et al.,* 2009). Case profiles further illustrated the pressure felt by women, especially leaders, to alter their self-presentation and communication styles to fit conventional views of femininity. In practice, this often leads to what some scholars term identity switching or strategic conformity—adapting one's visible identity.

Across all reviewed studies, a recurrent pattern found was female identity work conducted to navigate the male-dominated spaces of entrepreneurship. Multiple participants talked about restricted enactments of entrepreneurial legitimacy, whose particular constituents were language, appearance, and leadership style. For instance, women reported altering assertiveness levels based on the audience: they decreased directness to avoid being labelled aggressive, whereas in some cases, they exercised greater authority to stay away from perceptions of being soft. These balancing acts point towards the gendered double bind in the arena of entrepreneurial identity (Marlow and Martinez Dy, 2018).

According to Brush *et al*. (2009), women often engage in such performative legitimacy to conform to traditional perceptions of credible entrepreneurship, which have mostly been associated with masculinity, risk-taking, and independence (Brush *et al.,* 2009). Whereas, other participants pointed to how digital platforms might better be used to tell identity narratives oriented toward community-building, authenticity, and social purpose. Role model actors became a crucial part of this process, giving the aspiring entrepreneurs with inspiration and alternative scripts for self-presentation (Jennings and McDougald, 2007).

Referring to Cho *et al*. (2020), from their South Korean entrepreneurial perspective, these strategies for performance cannot stand apart and are signatures of the socio-

cultural expectations women have to constantly negotiate. More or less in the Irish context, in particular fields of tech and finance, similar patterns appeared.

A common feature in the cases studied was the strong influence of societal expectations regarding the perception and judgment of women entrepreneurs. These structural norms shaped social feedback loops affecting legitimacy and confidence. Female founders of high-growth companies were often represented as an aberration in a field such as technology, with the media leaning either on their "novelty" too much or else on their gender at the expense of competence. On the other hand, women in hospitality or creative industries were normally expected to function in relational or service roles, thereby reinforcing the old stereotypes as to what are "appropriate" female enterprises (Cliff *et al.,* 2005; Turley *et al.,* 2025).

Such norms affected the women's way of executing their ventures-whether in a more assertive mode, with greater ambition, or by tempering ambition to avoid negative judgement. The Global Gender Gap Report (World Economic Forum, 2024) supports this picture of gendered expectations continuing to shape public and professional perceptions of leadership. Such controversies not only starved for opportunities but weighed heavily on the identity formation processes, causing many women to observe, monitor, and adjust their professional personalities throughout."

This layered negotiation of identity underscores the emotional and social labour entailed in performing legitimacy and thus provided how women maintain motivation and resilience amidst an onslaught of structural and cultural constraints, a subject that is further developed in the next section.

4.4 THEME 3: RESILIENCE, ADAPTATION AND COPING STRATEGIES

A common identity conflict exists for women entrepreneurs, stemming from the tension between the expectations society has for femininity and the dominant norm of what constitutes entrepreneurial leadership. The cultural script of the ideal entrepreneur puts forward an image of someone who is assertive, undertakes risks, and is growth oriented. In contrast, gendered expectations imagine a woman as someone relational, nurturing, and modest in demeanour. The two contradict, and this contradiction thereby creates what has come to be known as a "double bind" in which women do get penalized for assertiveness (perceived as aggressive) or for being too relational (viewed as lacking leadership qualities) (Eagly and Karau, 2002). Many female entrepreneurs talk about

constantly calibrating their behaviour and manner of presentation, a balancing act between being professional and being likable. Lewis (2013) sees this as indicating that these women are not only managing businesses but engaging in the active negotiation of identity tensions that challenge dominant understandings of "authentic" entrepreneurship. Ahl (2006) makes the further point that the dominant entrepreneurial narrative marginalizes alternative leadership styles and thus forces women to either conform or constantly provide justification for their own.

Women entrepreneurs express different modes of self-presentation and leadership behaviour that are city's embedded expectations within the gendered entrepreneurial situations. They mentioned particularly in male dominated industries like tech and finance that one must be very cautious in asserting authority in being approachable and somewhat likeable. This performative balancing act shows the double bind many women faces, assertiveness may be viewed as abrasive, while warmth may be seen as a sign of incompetence (Kelly and McAdam, 2023). Marlow and Martinez Dy (2018) note that women are often compensated for a gendered ideal of "relational professionalism" that in fact restricts expression of ambition and risk-taking.

There have been several cases depicting the social consequences of deviating from established norms, such as being seen as too aggressive or simply "unfeminine." In the literature reviewed, women entrepreneurs were particularly conscious of managing their identity to fit into an accepted notion of entrepreneurial conduct. In hierarchical or investor-facing environments, this gendered navigation became even more pronounced (Cho *et al.,* 2020).

For women entrepreneurs, oftentimes a reasonable tension would be competing demands of professional ambition with traditional family roles. Many of the cases reviewed highlighted how motherhood influences internal decision-making and perceptions of legitimacy. Being a mother does not help assumptions are made about availability or commitment in their relation to growth environments or investor-led environments. According to Jennings and McDougald (2007), female entrepreneurs frequently face a complicated work–family interface in which boundaries are blurred, and demands are incessant. Eddleston & Powell (2012) further point out that long-term career satisfaction strongly depends on how personal values and entrepreneurial goals sync with each other, a condition increasingly difficult to maintain lately as societal

norms perpetuate the narrative that caregiving and leadership cannot go together. Once again, the harsh emotional labour associated with handling oppositional forces of identity, ambition, and externally imposed judgment remains largely invisible but nonetheless deeply impactful. Kirkwood's (2009) push pull motivation framework explains that women are pulled by the desire for autonomy through entrepreneurship, while simultaneously constrained by cultural norms of caregiving and self-sacrifice.

A lot of things are determined by spatial and sectoral dynamics, for example, the types of barriers women entrepreneurs face. In large urban centres like Dublin, participants faced competitive investor markets with higher thresholds for innovation and growth potential-from a tech perspective, especially. Rural entrepreneurs felt constrained by localised networks and visibility, working more from personal connections or community standing (Turley *et al.,* 2025). Then, another dimension emerged in terms of sector-based discrimination for identity expectations-those in more traditionally 'feminised' industries like retail or education experienced less direct opposition but faced an uphill battle in securing channels for high-growth funding, whereas those in typically 'male' professions like tech or finance felt constant scrutiny under the doubtful glare of stereotypes (Williams, 2024). Spatial digital access further exacerbated marginalisation as well; some of the rural or lower-income participants suffered while trying to leverage online visibility tools (Beya, 2021). In light of these disparities, one can gather that these are some of the intersecting relational barriers along axes of geography, class, and sector.

These findings underly the kaleidoscopic challenges women entrepreneurs must face-from structural funding inequalities to tensions around identity formation and resilience practices conditioned by sector and entrepreneurial stage. They collectively tell a fairly complete story as to how gendered entrepreneurial identities are traversed within the Irish context. The next section thus summarises these themes and sets the stage for a more in-depth theoretical discussion in Chapter 5.

4.5 SUMMARY

The chapter synthesized findings from a thematic analysis of secondary qualitative data on women entrepreneurs in Ireland. Three interrelated themes were explored: barriers to funding and access to networks, gendered identity work, and resilience strategies. It was found that persistent structural challenges faced women in securing venture capital

are basically attributed to gender bias in investment circles and in the availability of strategic networks-that is, networks that support an investment decision-in male-dominated sectors such as tech.

Societal norms and expectations about the feminine, leadership, and caring roles all influence the way women choose to present themselves as entrepreneurs. These pressures entail ongoing negotiation of identities and perform emotional labour, influencing both work and personal choices. Yet the women in the reviewed cases showed profound resilience and took advantage of all means available-especially through informal support systems, mentorship, and digital platforms-to evolve their businesses and assert their entrepreneurial legitimacy.

It further pointed toward sectoral variation and along different business stages. Early-stage entrepreneurs had more acute problems in raising funds and felt harsher social scrutiny, whereas more established women had long-term strategies for working around systemic bottlenecks. All in all, the findings give a rich context for the interaction with the external institutional systems and the internal processes and coping strategies, thereby providing the groundwork toward greater theoretical reflection in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

5.1 INTRODUCTION

Chapter 5 brings together the findings garnered from thematic analyses of secondary narrative data to address the core inquiry of how structural barriers, gendered identity work, and resilience strategies shape women's entrepreneurial experiences across stages and industries. Chapter 4 exposed three major themes: barriers to funding and accessing networks; gendered identity and societal expectations; and resilience, adaptation, and coping strategies. The following is an interpretation of those themes versus the literature and our three research questions. In Section 5.2, we consider the persistence and nuances of funding and networking issues; Section 5.3 addresses the way societal norms, intersectional identities, and gender influence career identity and satisfaction; and Section 5.4 identifies the strategic variations of resilience per industry and entrepreneurial level. Section 5.5 discusses the theoretical and practical implications, Section 5.6 highlights the limitations of the study, and a brief closing on Section 5.7.

5.2 DISCUSSION OF THEME 1

In extension to RQ 1, these themes inquire about the funding and network access challenges confronted by female entrepreneurs at an early stage and how these compare with those at a mature stage. Our findings reveal that early-stage women are found on the far end of a credibility array when pitching ideas to investors or seeking introductions, being dismissed for the lack of a "growth orientation" as if it is typical of a male peer (Ahl, 2006). To add to this, algorithmic exclusion in professional social networking applications like LinkedIn reduces women's visibility; some participants noted that connection suggestions and group recommendations explicitly bias established male-dominated circles and make them feel alienated. This set of intertwined structural and technological biases, therefore says, have early-stage female founders contended with age-old risk-averse perceptions and current digital gatekeepers, putting into perspective how much more difficult it is to find capital or important networks compared to mature or male counterparts.

Our findings are consistent with and extend the established literature on barriers of financing and networking. Ahl (2006) argues that investors' perceptions of risk are

based on gender stereotypes and thus view women-led startups as less scalable per se; our participants agreed with this, arguing that they had to provide additional financial projections and growth benchmarks to even be considered seriously. Brush *et al*. (2009) record how women are left out of other informal "old boys' networks," thereby limiting their access to deal flow and mentorship; similarly, several early-stage founders described having not been given high-value introductions in spite of solid business cases. The report by Capstone Partners (2024) quantifies the gap 63 percent of women state funding as their number one challenge, thus echoing our findings that initial 18 months capital shortage tops women's strategic considerations. Nevertheless, the difference with our study is how these barriers are worsened by the digital platform biases; insinuating that while the core dynamics Ahl and Brush identify remain germane, they now transpire within-and are worsened by-a technologically mediated ecosystem.

There are clear differences when dissecting by business stage: Entrepreneurs working in mature-stage businesses often work with their found track record and long relationships to extort their follow-on investments, whereas early-stage entrepreneurs, who have no past history to support them, have to make presentations after presentations and demonstrations for proofs of concepts to entice their investors (Manolova *et al.,* 2012; Alsos and Ljunggren, 2017). Above one rests the industry context. Thus, tech founders face tough venture capital hurdles demanding scalable prototypes and big R&D milestones (Deloitte Global, 2022), while service-sector entrepreneurs debate on community channels and microfinance alternatives that value relational trust over formal due diligence (Turley, Ryan and Doyle, 2025). With a stage-and-sector nexus, the implication is that policy measures and support programmes need to be customised: what benefits a mature-stage IT setup may be counterproductive to an early-stage hospitality setup.

Observe that these barriers are not purely historical or one-dimensional; they are rooted in entwined perceptions of gendered risk, exclusive networks, and digital gatekeeping. Early-stage founders face a major hurdle in demonstrating credibility, whereas established founders already possess it and do not face scepticism when interacted with, and tech business is very different from enterprises oriented towards service. Digital platforms such as crowdsourcing sites and online forums for pitching overcome the traditional gatekeeping, but they often bring along offline prejudices through algorithms

and like-to-like matching protocols (Brush *et al.,* 2009). These persisting biases on even "democratizing" technologies suggest a major challenge as effective interventions are required to address the investor mindsets and network norms so as to penetrate effectively into the digital ecosystems, l*et al*one change the overall design.

5.3 DISCUSSION OF THEME 2

The theme gives an answer to RQ 2: How much do societal norms—and intersecting identities like race, class, or age influence identity construction and career satisfaction among female entrepreneurs? Our investigation reveals that identity work is the means through which conformity and resistance operate. Several founders thus adopt traditionally masculine cues, such as emphasising aggressive language of growth and strict financial metrics, to gain legitimacy from investors-acting conformity performed against role incongruity under Social Role Theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Shepherd & Haynie, 2009). Others resist these narrow norms by prioritising communal values and narrative fluidity, framing their ventures as purpose-oriented efforts designed to undermine dominant entrepreneurial scripts (Kelly & McAdam, 2023). Hence, this two-pronged manoeuvre illustrates the strategic negotiation of women between authenticity and legitimacy, and this has a direct bearing on career satisfaction for them.

Research findings evidence that intersecting identities compound the negotiations of identity for marginalized groups. Black women founders testified that they needed to provide extra third-party endorsements in order to neutralise racial stereotypes deeply ingrained in society—a behaviour Beya (2021) refers to as "double marginalisation," whereby race and gender biases intermingle to erode a person's credibility. Similar problems are faced by migrant women, who in certain cases would reframe their immigrant status as a plus to counter investor scepticism regarding their knowledge of the local market (Williams, 2024). Class issues emerged as well: those from poor backgrounds felt that they needed to overemphasise self-funding and bootstrapping narratives to prove they knew how to "make do," while their peers privileged with existing social capital felt no such pressure. These interconnected barriers further illuminate that identity work cannot be conceived through gender lenses alone; it should extend to the larger intersectional parameters that sculpt women's career satisfaction.

These identity tensions find ample explanation in the Social Role Theory. For Eagly and Karau (2002), women acting with agentic "masculine" behaviour along the lines of

assertive pitch styles that investors expect are, in and of themselves, violating prescriptive norms, and hence must be penalised for "role incongruity". On the converse, if they lay themselves bare as more communal "feminine" traits, they attract the risk of not being taken sufficiently seriously as entrepreneurs, which is the very heart of the double bind. In the study here, a few participants indicated this exact predicament: a founder's emphasis on data-driven metrics resulted in a mentor describing her as "abrasive," whereas an entrepreneurial emphasis on community impact led potential backers to label her as "not serious." These instances demonstrate how the double bind constantly compels women to engage in identity calibration, thus shaping both their strategies of self-presentation and their satisfaction in their careers.

In sum, identity work for female entrepreneurs is a highly fluid negotiation between structural pressures arising in systematized societal norms and in intersecting biases and the drive toward self-authorship. Between the trade-offs of legitimacy and authenticity-the former being meeting investor and network expectations and the latter staying true to one's own and communal values-women are continually exacerbated into a situation that can engender dissatisfaction when one side is overly stressed. This unresolved bind suggests that supporting women entrepreneurs requires interventions that reduce structural constraints while validating diverse models of entrepreneurial identity.

5.4 DISCUSSION OF THEME 3

This theme can then be addressed in response to RQ 3: What resilience and adaptation strategies appear across secondary narrative data, and how do they vary by sectoral contexts and stages of entrepreneurship? Our respondents demonstrate that resilience is far from mere individual grit-it is a strategic practice that depends on the context. Early-stage founders can use peer-learning groups and online community groups to crowdsource feedback and resources, and more mature entrepreneurs use alumni networks and professional associations to provide formal crisis support. Many entrepreneurs reframed setbacks as iterative learning experiences, building credibility by going public with their "failure stories" in blogs or podcasts to attract mentors. The others restored agency through diversification-both through product sales and through consulting or teaching-to cushion any financial shocks. In executing their resources, networking, and narrative reframing strategically, resilience thus emerges as the very active entrepreneurial toolkit rather than a passive personal trait.

Our findings reaffirm and augment key resilience scholarship. Jennings and McDougald (2007) point out the importance of peer support networks for emotional and strategic support. Our early-than-phase-of-growth interviewees joined such groups but also co-designed some online forums of their own, indicating a shift toward the networked peer ecosystems. Eddleston & Powell (2012) emphasise the emotional labour of reframing success outside of pure financial terms; correspondingly, our data suggest that founders publicly share more subtle "journey narratives" that include setbacks and ethical pivots to build authenticity and trust within communities. However, we do find that this narrative labour disproportionately falls on women in the absence of institutionally supported platforms, meaning that, while emotional reframing is potent, it also risks perpetuating the current inequities in visibility unless councilled by either formal mentoring platforms or immediate media magnification.

Our resilience data present a couple of stages and sectors. Tech-oriented founders take advantage of digital platforms such as LinkedIn groups and Slack channels to source mentorship and micro-funding networks. Often, founders use kickstarting campaigns through Kickstarter or Indiegogo for entrepreneurs' product validation and investor interest (Williams, 2024). On the discussion, hospitality and creative-service entrepreneurs rely on emotional support through peer groups and local community hubs, including women's business networks and co-working spaces for resource sharing (Eddleston & Powell, 2021). Early-stage founders are making most of the online crowdsourcing and social media campaigns to generate momentum before mature organizations are carrying out more formalized support mechanisms through accelerator programs, industry associations, and established venture capital relationships in times of crises. This stage-and-sector differentiation indicates that resilience strategies will have to be stage- and sector-specific; thus, digital means help early-stage tech ventures, while relational networks support service ventures.

To conclude, adroit resilience strategies, such as digital networking and community hubs, provide female entrepreneurs with essential resources. Early-stage founders use digital platforms to chorus crowd feedback and funding, while mature ventures utilize formal accelerators and associations to bring stability to their growth. Yet, the digital platform is prone to replicating offline biases through opaque algorithms-that urgently calls for systemic reform in platform governance and algorithmic transparency.

Moreover, the emotional labour account remains hidden; the founder puts in tremendous mental and relational efforts to maintain credibility over her narrative. This is digital exclusion for those nearly without access or any digital literacy, indicating that a good intervention must address infrastructure as well as the skills gap. A multi-prong solution to these outstanding issues is going to be coordinated policy action, inclusive design for the platforms themselves, and stronger community support networks.

5.5 THEORETICAL AND PRECTICAL IMPLICATIONS

Depending on which one of the ones presented in Chapter 4 is taken to understand the basic direction of investigation, then there are four other gaps - stage sensitivity, sector lens, narrative synthesis, and intersectionality-on which analysis develops around barriers, identity work, and the resilience themselves. First, we use our stage × sector lens to enrich Ahl's (2006) and Brush *et al*.'s (2009) account of funding and network barriers, in which early-stage tech founders suffer acute credibility deficits, whereas mature-stage service entrepreneurs mobilize relational capital. Second, adding layers of intersectionality onto Social Role Theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002) and on Beya's (2021) work, identity negotiation is found not to be a uniform process: Black and migrant women experience compounded legitimacy hurdles that transform strategies of authenticity and conformity. Third, building on Jennings and McDougald's (2007) peer-support framework and Eddleston & Powell's (2012) emotional labor argument, we treat resilience as strategic tool kits comprising narrative reframing, network mobilization, and income diversification. With all these insights we develop the Integrated Gendered Resilience Model, which holds that the success of women entrepreneurs results from structural stage/sector conditions dynamically interacting with intersectional identity work and purposive resilience strategies. This model, which synthesizes barriers, identity, and resilience into one analytical framework, thus advances gendered entrepreneurship theory.

Based on these insights, the following interventions are proposed to reduce barriers, validate diverse identities, and enhance resilience ecosystems for female entrepreneurs:

Policymakers: Introduce stage-specific funding streams, such as seed grants for early-stage women or evaluation based on narrative impact and pilot outcomes rather than

scalability metrics alone, to bridge credibility gaps and capital scarcity (Capstone Partners, 2024).

Incubators & Educators: Initiate intersectional mentoring programmes connecting Black, migrant, and lower-class women to senior female founders to lessen compounded identity hurdles while developing peer-learning networks (Beya, 2021).

Platforms & Venture Capital: Mandate algorithmic audits of professional networking platforms on a regular basis to surface and address gender and race biases in connection suggestions and group recommendations, so as not to permit digital gatekeepers to replicate exclusionary behaviour found offline.

Industry Associations: Sponsor sectoral "resilience labs" where early- and mature-stage entrepreneurs co-design digital and in-person coping toolkits that combine community support with practical resources to lighten the emotional-labour burdens.

5.6 LIMITATIONS

Exclusive reliance on secondary qualitative sources; published case studies, media profiles, and practitioner reports, limits our capacity to delve into unreported intersectional nuances that most marginalised women may express, where experiences of the marginalised are not documented. Concentrating mainly on Ireland, with the UK/US playing a comparative role for transferability, enriches contextual depth but limits generalisation to other cultural or economic settings. Without further primary interviews or focus groups, contextual details such as founding entrepreneurs' motivations, unwritten coping strategies, and their need for or adjustments within support systems stay obscure.

Subsequent work could incorporate first-hand, in-depth interviews with under-represented subgroups (e.g., Black, migrant, and lower-class women entrepreneurs) to reveal intersectional experiences that are unreported and deepen thematic nuance. Expanding from Ireland through comparative, mixed-method designs, which include surveys, ethnographies, and case studies, will test the transferability of our findings across different cultural and economic contrasts. Lastly, orchestrated digital ecosystem research must be conducted to ascertain how network-platform algorithmic mechanisms dictate visibility and access to reform platform governance that would prevent these groupings from being furthered into digital or offline exclusion.

5.7 CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the early-stage female entrepreneur clearly faces acute problems of funding and network less credibility, as opposed to their mature counterparts; societal norms and compounded biases work against them in dynamic identity negotiation between authenticity and legitimacy; women strategize resilience toolkits that may include narrative reframing, digital networking, and community hubs, which differ hugely by sector and stage. Conjointly, these insights address the stage sensitivity, sectoral lens, narrative synthesis, and intersectionality gaps identified in Chapter 2, thus demonstrating an integrated analytical framework toward an understanding of women's entrepreneurial experiences. In closing these gaps, the study provides a strong foundation for future research and policymaking that will seek to empower female entrepreneurs through more direct support mechanisms aligned to both stage and sector. The integrated approach highlights the potential of some intersectional considerations within entrepreneurial ecosystem scholarship. Chapter 6 will then recap the insights of this work and offer the generalized conclusions and final recommendations.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

6.1 INTRODUCTION

Chapter 6 pulls together insights gained in our journey of exploring gender and diversity in entrepreneurship and attempts to answer the three research questions (RQ1: barriers, RQ2: identity & intersectionality, and RQ3: resilience strategies). To synthesise the findings regarding barriers, identity work, and coping strategies, an interpretivist secondary-narrative thematic analysis approach will be used (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Nowell *et al.,* 2017). Section 6.2 provides a discussion of key findings. Section 6.3 underscores the contributions made to knowledge; Section 6.4 offers reflections on limitations; Section 6.5 discusses recommendations for future research; and 6.6 closes the chapter with some final reflections.

6.2 SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

In brief, these constitute the study findings and their answers to the three research questions:

Barriers (RQ1): Early-stage female entrepreneurs face acute funding shortages and credibility deficits compared with mature peers, often requiring extensive proof-of-concept demonstrations and pitch rehearsals to secure resources. Algorithmic gatekeeping on digital platforms further limits their visibility and reinforces network exclusion, intensifying early-stage struggles.

Identity & Intersectionality (RQ2): Women's identity work reflects a fluid negotiation between authenticity and legitimacy as they navigate societal norms and compounded pressures related to race, class, and age. Some founders adopt traditionally masculine cues to gain credibility, while others foreground communal values to resist narrow success definitions.

Resilience (RQ3): Female founders apply strategic resilience toolkits of narrative reframing, digital networking, and community hubs that vary across sectors and career stages. And tech entrepreneurs use online forums and crowdfunding, whereas service-sector founders rely on local peer networks and microfinance channels to adapt and persist.

These findings combine into a call to future research and support programs in women's entrepreneurship to be built on a stage, sector, and intersectionality informed framework.

6.3 CONTRIBUTIONS TO KNOWLEDGE

This study makes advances in gender and diversity in entrepreneurship by integrating structural barriers, identity work, and strategic resilience into a single framework called the Integrated Gendered Resilience Model. With the stage and sector lens in place, we refine Ahl's (2006) and Brush *et al*.'s (2009) composite narratives by illustrating that tech entrepreneurs at the early stages suffer acute credibility deficits, as borne out by the high demands of R&D and algorithmic filtering, whereas service-stage entrepreneurs matureocial capitals leverage in community networks. The reframing of Social Role Theory by Eagly and Karau (2002) in conjunction with intersections as extended by Beya (2021) exposes racial, classed, and aged overlays that complicate identity negotiations, so that women are frequently put into situations of compromise between authenticity and legitimacy. Along the lines of Jennings and McDougald's (2007) peer-support framework and Eddleston & Powell's (2012) take on emotional labour, we show that online gatekeeping acts not only as an extension but also an inflection points to preexisting offline biases. It restructures the means of resilience into an ad hoc toolkit of narrative reframing, network mobilization, and income diversification. By weaving together these facets, the model then presents scholars with an intersectional and robust lens for dissecting these variegated entrepreneurial life courses, which also acts as a stepping stone for further theorizing gendered entrepreneurship.

6.4 LIMITATIONS

Study limitations are encountered by this research. Published case studies, media profiles, and practitioner reports do not allow profoundly unreported intersectional experiences and could silenced the most marginalised voices of entrepreneurship. Contextual depth is increased by focusing on Ireland (with some UK/US comparators), thus limiting generalisability to other cultural or economic settings. Without such in-depth interviews or focus groups, some facets of the context, for example, changing personal motivations, or informal coping strategies, will remain beyond the scope of investigation. These gaps call for further research by use of primary qualitative methods

and broader geographic comparisons, to enrich the thematic insights presented here and to verify them.

6.4 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

In future research, primary, in-depth interviews will be necessary to understand the nuanced intersectional experiences of under-represented subgroups, e.g., Black, migrant, and working-class women entrepreneurs. Testing the transferability of thematic insights across distinct cultural and economic contexts would be possible through further comparative mixed method designs mingling surveys, ethnographies, and secondary narratives (Creswell, 2014). In addition, focused studies on the algorithmic influences by professional networking platforms, looking into the effects of recommendation engines upon visibility and inclusion, must address digital gatekeeping biases brought forward in recent studies.

6.5 FINAL REFLECTIONS

This chapter underscores a final call for sustained intersectional research and action to uplift diverse women entrepreneurs. In knowing how identity overlaps with barriers, identity work, and resilience, scholars and practitioners would then be able to co-create more inclusive spaces for policies, networks, and digital platforms that genuinely embody and support the multifaceted realities of women's entrepreneurial journeys.

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APPENDIX

APPENDIX A. DATA AND ANALYSIS MATERIALS

APPENDIX A1. CODEBOOK EXCERPT (SAMPLE)

Code label	Definition	Inclusion / Exclusion	Exemplar excerpt	Source (Harvard)	Stage	Sector
Funding credibility drag	Investor perceptions that women-led ventures are "lifestyle" or lower-growth, depressing early funding	Include: investor/evaluator language about growth/credibility; Exclude: generic finance news	"We were told the market was 'nice' but not VC-scale."	Alsos and Ljunggren (2017)	Early	Tech
Gatekept networks	Limited access to high-value mentors/sponsors; exclusion from elite ties	Include: lack of senior intros/closed doors; Exclude: "no time to network"	"No one in the circle would pass my deck on."	Brush, de Bruin and Welter (2009); Kelly and McAdam (2023)	Early/ Mature	Mixed
Algorithmic visibility bias	Platform delivery skews opportunities by gender	Include: reach/visibility differences, biased suggestions; Exclude: general social media tips	"My posts reached fewer decision-makers than male peers."	Lambrecht and Tucker (2019); Kalhor et al. (2024)	Early	Tech
Identity work as resistance	Strategic self-presentation to counter	Include: reframing success, hybrid identities;	"I define scale as impact and decent	Eagly and Karau (2002); Kelly and McAdam (2023)	Early/ Mature	Mixed

	role incongruity	Exclude: generic branding	margins, not VC burn."			
Peer-support resilience	Collective coping via mentors/peer groups	Include: incubators, women's circles, skill-sharing; Exclude: purely transactional networking	"Our cohort shared investor Qs weekly."	Jennings and McDougald (2007); Powell and Eddleston (2023)	Early	Service/Creative

APPENDIX A2. SEARCH & SCREENING DECISIONS LOG (SAMPLE ROWS)

Date	Database	Boolean string	Hits	Screened	Included	Excluded	Rationale (1 line)
2025-02-10	Scopus	women OR female AND entrepreneur* AND (early-stage OR start-up OR mature) AND (tech OR health OR service) AND Ireland	142	142	7	135	Many policy briefs; kept peer-reviewed, stage-clear items
2025-02-11	Web of Science	"women entrepreneurs" AND identity work AND (Ireland OR UK)	63	63	4	59	Narrow to qualitative interviews/case narratives
2025-02-12	Business Source Complete	female founders AND venture capital AND bias	88	88	5	83	Include investor-perception studies; exclude trade press
2025-02-12	Google Scholar	"Algorithmic bias" AND LinkedIn AND gender	210	40	2	38	Keep peer-reviewed/AAAI; drop blogs

APPENDIX A3 AUDIT-TRAIL / REFLEXIVE MEMOS (EXTRACT)

Date	Decision type	What changed	Rationale / impact	Cross-reference
2025-02-14	Code split	"Networks" split into Gatekept networks vs Peer-support resilience	Separates access barriers from coping responses; clearer theme boundaries	See Appendix A5 (Theme→RQ map)
2025-02-16	Theme scope narrowed	"Algorithmic bias" reframed to Algorithmic visibility bias	Limits scope to delivery/visibility effects; avoids overgeneralizing digital tools	See 4.x Theme 1; Appendix A5
2025-02-18	Negative case logged	Mature health-tech founder had strong senior sponsorship	Counter-example tempered claim of uniform exclusion; added conditions (stage and sector)	See Appendix A6 (Negative case)
2025-02-20	RQ mapping pass	Moved "Work–life tension" under Identity work as resistance (RQ2)	Aligns subtheme with identity negotiation; strengthens RQ2 linkage	See 5.3 Discussion: Appendix A5

APPENDIX A4 DOUBLE-CODING SUMMARY AND SAMPLE

Summary

- Total coded excerpts: **N = 240**

- Independently double-coded: **48 (≈20%)**

- Initial agreement: **≈82%** (reflexive TA)

- Discrepancies resolved by discussion; codebook refined (clearer inclusion/exclusion)

Excerpt ID	Initial code (Coder A)	Initial code (Coder B)	Resolution / note
E-037	Gatekept networks	Peer-support resilience	Primary issue is access; keep Gatekept networks; note peer-group emerged later
E-054	Funding credibility drag	Identity work as resistance	Keep Funding credibility drag; add cross-ref: founder later reframed pitch
E-089	Algorithmic visibility bias	Generic digital use	Retain Algorithmic visibility bias; add platform context to excerpt
E-121	Peer-support resilience	Gatekept networks	Dual, but dominant function is coping; code as Peer-support resilience
E-205	Identity work as resistance	Work–life balance	Merge under Identity work as resistance; memo on caregiving narrative

APPENDIX A5 THEME → RESEARCH QUESTION MAP

Theme (final)	Core codes (examples)	Linked RQ(s)	Illustrative sources
Barriers to funding & networks	Funding credibility drag; Gatekept networks; Algorithmic visibility bias	RQ1	Alsos and Ljunggren (2017); Brush, de Bruin and Welter (2009); Lambrecht and Tucker (2019); Kalhor et al. (2024)
Gendered identity & societal expectations	Identity work as resistance; Role incongruity; Authenticity vs legitimacy	RQ2	Eagly and Karau (2002); Kelly and McAdam (2023); Lewis (2013)
Resilience, adaptation & coping	Peer-support resilience; Narrative reframing; Digital workarounds	RQ3	Jennings and McDougald (2007); Powell and Eddleston (2023)

APPENDIX A6 NEGATIVE-CASE EXAMPLE

Element	Text
Case	A mature health-tech founder reported easy access to senior clinical champions and angel syndicates due to prior NHS collaborations.
Why it matters	This contradicts the initial claim that women are uniformly excluded from elite networks.

Action taken	Theme "Gatekept networks" refined to specify conditions (most acute for early-stage founders in venture/tech without prior institutional credentials).
Memo link	2025-02-18 (Appendix A3)