

National College of Ireland

Project Submission Sheet

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Date: 15th august 2025

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AI Acknowledgement Supplement

Dissertation

In what ways do soft skills enhance entrepreneurial resilience and foster business growth in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs)?

Your Name/Student Number	Course	Date
24100030	MSc in Entrepreneurship	15 th august 2025

This section is a supplement to the main assignment, to be used if AI was used in any capacity in the creation of your assignment; if you have queries about how to do this, please contact your lecturer. For an example of how to fill these sections out, please click [here](#).

AI Acknowledgment

This section acknowledges the AI tools that were utilized in the process of completing this assignment.

Tool Name	Brief Description	Link to tool
Chat GPT	Grammar and spell checking, advice how to overcome redundancy in sentences as well as in the flow of sentences in thesis written by the researcher.	https://chat.openai.com/

Description of AI Usage

This section provides a more detailed description of how the AI tools were used in the assignment. It includes information about the prompts given to the AI tool, the responses received, and how these responses were utilized or modified in the assignment. **One table should be used for each tool used.**

Chat GPT
The ChatGPT platform was relied on to obtain ideas and good practice suggestions that can be applied to my thesis in terms of methodological aspects, ethical protection, and risks that are associated with my thesis. I queried ChatGPT to describe my intended qualitative research, namely, questions regarding the possible problematic issues in thematic analysis and interviews with SME entrepreneurs, how to overcome thematic analysis nodes on sensitive topics when conducting an interview, and ways to enforce confidentiality in a small business setting.
Further, ChatGPT was used as language reviewer to spot check grammar, spelling, and punctuation that I had previously composed. It did the same in terms of repeated things as well as proposing synonyms and ideas to eliminate redundancy.
The data I was getting and the proposals I received with the help of ChatGPT were analyzed, verified, and checked against scholarly sources and official recommendations and modified into my manuscript.

Sample prompt: What ethical considerations should be taken into account when interviewing entrepreneurs about sensitive topics such as business failure or financial stress?	Sample response from ChatGPT: Ensure informed consent is comprehensive and clearly outlines the nature of the discussion, potential emotional impacts, and participants' right to withdraw at any time. Use anonymisation methods to protect identities, particularly in small communities where individuals may be recognisable even without names.
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Evidence of AI Usage

This section includes evidence of significant prompts and responses used or generated through the AI tool. It should provide a clear understanding of the extent to which the AI tool was used in the assignment. Evidence may be attached via screenshots or text.

Additional Evidence:

ChatGPT 5

Compartir

What are common challenges in conducting qualitative thematic analysis with SME entrepreneurs?

When you do **qualitative thematic analysis** with SME entrepreneurs, there are some recurring hurdles—both from the nature of qualitative research and from working with this particular group.

1. Access and Recruitment

- **Busy schedules** – SME owners often juggle many roles, making it hard to secure interview time.
- **Trust barriers** – Some may hesitate to share sensitive details about finances, failures, or internal operations.
- **Getting diversity** – It's not always easy to reach entrepreneurs from different sectors, sizes, and backgrounds, which can limit how broadly your themes apply.

2. Data Collection

- **Social desirability** – Entrepreneurs may paint a more positive picture of their business than reality.
- **Strong personal narratives** – They might tell "success stories" that downplay uncertainty or luck.
- **Tangents** – Conversations can drift into personal or unrelated topics, making it harder to focus on research questions.

ChatGPT 5

Compartir

- ### 3. Depth and Richness
- **Short or rushed answers** – Time pressure can limit detail.
 - **Context-specific stories** – What's relevant in one local market or sector may not be in another.
 - **Jargon** – Industry-specific language can obscure meaning unless you're familiar with their field.
- ### 4. Analysis Challenges
- **Themes that overlap** – In entrepreneurial life, topics like networking, resilience, and opportunity spotting often blur together.
 - **Researcher bias** – Prior experience or assumptions about entrepreneurship can influence coding.
 - **Large amounts of text** – Even a small sample of interviews can create long transcripts that require discipline in coding.
- ### 5. Ethics and Reflexivity
- **Confidentiality** – In small business communities, identities can be guessed even without names.
 - **Power dynamics** – Some entrepreneurs may expect you to offer business advice in return for their participation.
 - **Influence of the interviewer** – Your presence, tone, and questions can shape how stories are told.

List potential limitations I should consider when using semi-structured interviews in SME research.

Here's a clear list of **potential limitations** when using **semi-structured interviews** in SME research:

1. **Time constraints** – SME owners often have limited availability, which can shorten interviews or delay scheduling.
2. **Social desirability bias** – Participants may emphasise successes and minimise problems or failures.
3. **Sensitivity of information** – Topics like finances, strategy, or internal conflicts may be withheld.
4. **Limited generalisability** – Small, context-specific samples may not represent all SMEs.
5. **Variability in data** – Flexible questioning can lead to inconsistencies between interviews.
6. **Researcher influence** – Tone, phrasing, or personal assumptions can shape responses.
7. **Interpretive bias** – The researcher's own perspective may affect coding and theme development.
8. **Confidentiality risks** – In small business networks, identity can sometimes be guessed from context.
9. **Narrative dominance** – Entrepreneurs may focus on personal "success stories" over detailed operational insights.
10. **Resource demands** – Transcription and qualitative coding require significant time and effort.

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Additional Evidence:

prompt to ChatGPT:

My thesis explores how soft skills contribute to the resilience and growth of SME entrepreneurs using a qualitative thematic analysis. What potential risks might arise for participants when discussing personal resilience and coping strategies, and how could these be mitigated?

prompt to ChatGPT:

My thesis examines how soft skills support entrepreneurial resilience and growth in SMEs. What strategies can help ensure credibility and dependability in qualitative research involving small business owners?

Additional significant prompts

- List potential risks to participant wellbeing when discussing stress and coping mechanisms in entrepreneurship.
- What measures can be taken to secure qualitative interview transcripts?
- Suggest ways to reduce researcher bias in interpretive thematic analysis.
- Identify redundant phrases in this paragraph about leadership and propose alternatives.
- Check grammar and punctuation in this methodology section.
- What free alternatives can I use for NVivo in qualitative coding?

ABSTRACT

This paper evaluates the importance of soft skills in inspiring entrepreneurial tenacity and prosperity in socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. With small and medium-sized firms (SMEs) in mind, it discusses the development, interpretation and implementation of non-technical skills into actual practices of entrepreneurship. Two to three entrepreneurs in charge of activities in Ireland (n=2), Chile (n=3) and Brazil (n=1) were interviewed with semi-structured interviews lasting approximately 180 min each. A qualitative, interpretivist approach was used, and thematic analysis determined the patterns in the mix of uncertainty, adversity, and change the participants experienced.

Results have shown that soft skills especially resilience, emotional intelligence, adaptability, creativity, communication and leadership are dynamic, relational and developed mostly through life experience as opposed to training. Most of the times their formations were as a result of critical incidents like market changes, business reverses, and social cultural hitches. Contextual issues (such as gender norms, migration background, and the accessibility of resources) also played a significant role in the influence that participants have on these competencies and executed them. The concepts of social learning, mentorship and peer networks were identified as crucial to the development and maintenance of such skills.

By connecting the social aspect of entrepreneurship studies, the study contributes to a better comprehension of entrepreneurship as an identity-forming, socially embedded process, the emotional regulation and adaptive and interpersonal skills of which are as critical as strategic and financial skills. It has a contribution to the theory and practice by indicating why entrepreneurship education and policy should be reflective, experiential and inclusive to develop human-centred capabilities.

Keywords: soft skills; entrepreneurial resilience; qualitative research; experiential learning; cross-cultural entrepreneurship

Submission of Thesis and Dissertation

National College of Ireland Research Students Declaration Form (Thesis/Author Declaration Form)

Name: Macarena Andrea Rivera Aguirre

Student Number: 24100030

Degree for which thesis is submitted: MSc in Entrepreneurship

Title of Thesis: In what ways do soft skills enhance entrepreneurial resilience and foster business growth in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs)?

Date: 15/08/2025

Material submitted for award

- A. I declare that this work submitted has been composed by myself. X
- B. I declare that all verbatim extracts contained in the thesis have been distinguished by quotation marks and the sources of information specifically acknowledged. X
- C. I agree to my thesis being deposited in the NCI Library online open access repository NORMA. X
- D. ***Either*** *I declare that no material contained in the thesis has been used in any other submission for an academic award.
Or *I declare that the following material contained in the thesis formed part of a submission for the award of

Master of Science in Entrepreneurship

(State the award and the awarding body and list the material below)

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I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to all the entrepreneurs who generously participated in this study. Your openness in sharing your time, experiences, and personal reflections has been invaluable. The richness of this dissertation lies in the authenticity of your voices and the trust you placed in me to tell your stories.

To my beloved family in Chile, thank you for your unwavering love and support from across the ocean. Every message, call, and word of encouragement reminded me that distance cannot weaken the bonds of love. Your belief in me has been my anchor and my greatest source of strength.

To my friends in Ireland and Chile, thank you for being my balance during this demanding journey, for your laughter, encouragement, and constant reminders that life exists beyond the thesis.

And to myself: thank you for holding on through long nights, doubt, and distance. This dissertation is not only an academic milestone, but also a testament to resilience, growth, and perseverance.

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CHAPTER 1 – INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background and Context

Entrepreneurship has taken on a new meaning today as it not only promotes economic growth but also places a person on a path of change and even social change. This has seen the growing need of entrepreneurs operating in Volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) environments where they directed their business activities by taking risks and leading innovations to drive business operations in an environment where speed of change is the determinant (Lans et al., 2014; Pittaway & Cope, 2007).

Previously, the level of entrepreneurial competence was mostly linked to hard skills: the ability to manage finance, conduct analysis of the market, and run an efficient operation. As much as these continue to apply, evidence shows that they are inadequate in the modern business world (Baron & Markman, 2003). Soft skills such as emotional intelligence, flexibility, resilience, and good communication have gained importance in the present scenario to overcome uncertainty, inspire people and deal with crisis situations (Bullough & Renko, 2013; Brundin et al., 2008; Hayward et al., 2010).

Table 1. Comparison of Traditional and Emerging Entrepreneurial Skill Sets

Traditional Entrepreneurial Skills	Emerging Entrepreneurial Soft Skills
1. Financial planning, market analysis, operational management	1. Emotional intelligence, adaptability, effective communication, resilience
1. Focus on efficiency, structure, and control	2. Focus on flexibility, learning, and relational dynamics
2. Operates in stable and predictable environments	3. Navigates VUCA (Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, Ambiguous) conditions
3. Developed through formal business training and technical education	4. Developed through experience, reflection, and social interaction
4. Success measured by profitability and performance metrics	5. Success includes sustainability, adaptability, and long-term resilience

Source: Adapted from Baron and Markman (2003); Bullough and Renko (2013); George et al. (2012).

The recent crises on the planet have even increased the significance of these competencies. An example can be given of the COVID-19 pandemic, when entrepreneurs had to make emotionally charged, high-stress decisions under time pressure, redesign business models within several days, and keep teams motivated on the edge of utter stress, all of which are directly related to the issues of emotional intelligence and resilience (Sharma et al., 2022). Likewise, the high rate of digitalisation

and automation has led to the phenomenon which brought competitive advantage to the mere technical skills rather to creativity, versatility, and human decision-making (George et al., 2012).

The effects are more so on the small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) that dominate the business world but generally have fewer resources than large companies. SMEs are predisposed to the sudden disruption of the market, the change of identity, and a situation that requires emotional management. Everything is more than simply beneficial in these circumstances; soft skills in this case are the key to survival and longevous development (Williams & Shepherd, 2016).

1.2 Rationale for the Study

Whereas awareness of the topicality of soft skills in connection with the success of the entrepreneur has been increasing in the last few years, the research on the topic is still scarce and divided. Most of the available literature is based on quantitative studies that focus much on measurement and statistical correlations, excluding the life experiences of the entrepreneur. This leaves a big question mark on how one is able to nurture, strengthen and transform these skills in the course of the entrepreneurial process (Unger et al., 2011).

In addition, mainstream entrepreneurship research has paid excessive attention to high-growth entrepreneurship (start-ups) and Silicon Valley-type ecosystems, tending to ignore the experiences of working entrepreneurs in small economies or resource-scarce environments. Emotional labour, flexibility, and interpersonal negotiation is arguably, more important to long-term growth and survival in such an environment, i.e. local SMEs, social enterprises, necessity driven businesses (Al-Dajani & Marlow, 2010; Brush et al., 2009).

The necessity to analyze the sense of perception, acquisition, and use of soft skills, especially during the period of crisis, personal upheaval, or identity transition among entrepreneurs, has been emphasized by the scholars as they call to more situational, context-specific, narrative-based research on the topic (Cope, 2011; Lackéus, 2015). These findings are critical to guide entrepreneurship education, selective training, and

policies- particularly in those settings characterized by the aftermath of a crisis or resource constraints.

In this context, the proposed study has sought to fill in these gaps by examining the development and practice of soft skills that are practiced by SME entrepreneurs. It embraces a qualitative, interpretivist posture because it builds rich, contingent descriptions that helps to explore the emotional, relational, and strategic properties of entrepreneurship. The method converts the emphasis on the measurement of static competencies in Favor of a perspective accounting the approach through which these capabilities are achieved, developed, and play into the entrepreneurial resilience and growth.

1.3 Aim and Objectives

Aim

This paper seeks to discuss the role of soft skills in establishing and promoting entrepreneurial resilience and business development in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs).

Objectives

In order to attain this goal, the paper shall attempt the following objectives:

- To determine the soft skills within the context of it being viewed by entrepreneurs in SMEs to be most relevant in addressing the uncertainties of navigating a complex business environment.
- To study the development of these skills, especially by means of the mechanism of cross-learning and reactions to a crisis situation.
- To find out how soft skills are perceived to impact business continuity, adaptability, and its long-term growth.

1.4 Research Questions

Primary Research Question

- In what ways do soft skills enhance entrepreneurial resilience and foster business growth in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs)?

Sub-questions

1. What soft skills are most frequently identified by entrepreneurs as essential for navigating uncertainty?
2. How are these skills developed, particularly through experiential learning and responses to crisis situations?
3. In what ways do soft skills influence business continuity, adaptability, and long-term growth?

The research questions will seek to delve in the manner in which the soft skills have been framed, developed and implemented by entrepreneurs in SMEs in the real business settings. To answer these questions, a qualitative research design is followed, the provision of semi-structured interviews, where the respondents are asked to comment on their emotional, relational, cognitive reactions to the challenges of the business. This strategy reflects through which the most interesting soft skills like emotional intelligence, flexibility, and strategic thinking develop and appear in the process of entrepreneurship.

The sub-questions are related to particular interview questions (e.g., leadership in stressful situations, learning through failure, dealing with uncertainty) to provide rich and context-sensitive knowledge that will fill the gap found in the literature review.

Based on the aim and objectives of the research, together with the sub-questions, there is a logical and consistent study design as demonstrated in the alignment of Aim, Objectives, and Research Questions below.

Aim: To study the importance of soft skills with reference to entrepreneurial persistence and prosperity

↓

Objective 1: To determine the perceived importance of what soft skills are to entrepreneurs in SMEs

→ *Sub-question: Which soft skills are more common to find the entrepreneurs identify them to venture through uncertainty?*

↓

Objective 2: To learn about the development of such skills, especially in the form of experiential learning and crises

→ *Sub-question: How do we acquire such skills or rather how do they develop?*

↓

Objective 3: To discuss the perceived effectiveness of soft skills on business continuity and adaptation and long-term growth

→ *Sub-question: provide opportunities to think about how soft skills can affect business outcomes and decision-making processes in business and entrepreneurship.*

Source: Author's own elaboration.

1.5 Scope and Significance of the Study

This paper draws upon the literature in relation to entrepreneurs running small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) which have had major changes in the market or some crisis internal or financial hitches. It pays special attention to the resilience and growth of an entrepreneur, as well as how soft skills (namely, emotional intelligence, adaptability, communication, and strategic thinking) are involved in surviving in such situations.

By putting on an interpretive and qualitative scope, the study will aim to capture the process through which these competencies build, exercise, and perfect themselves in the circumstances of uncertainty and adversity. It seeks to capture narrative data about SME entrepreneurs and use these to produce context-based understandings that quantitative research methods usually neglect.

The study offers the following key advantages:

Increase awareness to the entrepreneurship teachers and trainers that they need to incorporate soft skills training in their learning structures (Objective 2).

Enlighten policymakers about the need to incorporate emotional and relational competencies into SME support policy designs which recognise their importance to long-run resilience (Objective 3).

Motivate entrepreneurs to get in touch with their soft skills and enhance it to guarantee business sustainability and continuation (Objectives 1 & 3).

With all the identified soft skills tied to entrepreneurial mindset, resilience, flexibility, and long-term success of a business, this study will provide the volume of linking human-based skills to the business performance, business readiness, action, and results within a difficult situation.

CHAPTER 2 – LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Defining Soft Skills in the Entrepreneurial Context

This paper aims at examining the small and medium-sized enterprise (SME) owners who have suffered a lot of instability in the market such as external shocks, internal shocks and financial crises. It deploys a qualitative interpretivist methodology that analyses the strategies with which entrepreneurs get, utilize, and adjust soft skills in unfavourable business environments. Soft skills should not be regarded in such a situation as secondary or a kind of nice-to have, but rather survival-based skills, at the core of SMEs decision making and their long-term sustainability.

Within the last twenty years, the concerns with the applicability of soft skills to the entrepreneurial practice have been growing. In comparison to hard or technical skills that are usually learnt, soft skills are interpersonal, intrapersonal and cognitive skills, which affect communication, adaptability and problem-solving (Robles, 2012). Even though they are hard to quantify, these non-technical skills now have been recognized as strategic capabilities especially in fast paced and resource-constrained world.

Entrepreneurs need to have the ability to self-regulate, negotiate, adapt and be empathetic because there is a tendency that entrepreneurs work within emotionally and situationally intense settings (Baron & Markman, 2003; Mitchelmore & Rowley, 2010). This is contrary to more predictable organisational environments. According to the World Economic Forum (2020), three key future-of-work skills are analytical and critical thinking, creativity, and emotional intelligence and resilience, the qualities that are also directly associated with the entrepreneurial survival in a quickly evolving market (Lans et al., 2014; Lackéus, 2015).

There are some typologies in literature. According to Mitchelmore and Rowley (2010), four types are distinguished, namely, personal and relationship competencies, business and management competencies, entrepreneurial competencies, and human relations. Robles (2012) introduces an even wider perspective of the set of interpersonal, intrapersonal, and cognitive skills. But as Kyllonen (2013) contends, these models tend to overlap, interpretability is not universal and very less accuracy is faced in terms of

empirical findings. The lack of a common framework might put training programmes at risk of over representing some of the skills and underrating others that might be critical in practice of SMEs.

Notably, the majority of researchers consider that unlike hard skills, soft ones are mastered not with the help of some course but through the experiences. Cope (2011) notes that they develop due to falsification, reflective knowledge, and the entrepreneurial enthusiasm that is characterized by intense emotions, something that is not easy to recreate in an institutional context. This experiential aspect questions the validity of competency lists developed against the background of corporates that can downplay the adaptiveness and context-specific use of skills on the part of entrepreneurs.

Areas of agreement, disagreement and rare conceptual mismatch across current definitions are summed up in Table 2. Although there is a commonality of view among the literature on the importance of soft skills in entrepreneurship, there is a lack of unanimity when it comes to defining the skills, as well as identifying the paths of development. Such fragmentation at the theoretical level affects the methodological preferences, preferring context-responsive, narrative approaches as opposed to decontextualised, abstracted model.

Table 2. Selected models and classifications of soft skills in entrepreneurship.

Author(s)	Classification or Model	Key Dimensions or Categories
Robles (2012)	General Definition of Soft Skills	Interpersonal, intrapersonal, and cognitive capabilities impacting communication, flexibility, and problem-solving.
Mitchelmore & Rowley (2010)	Entrepreneurial Soft Skills Model	Personal and relationship competencies; business and management competencies; entrepreneurial competencies; human relations.
World Economic Forum (2020)	Future of Jobs Skills Framework	Analytical thinking, innovation, creativity, emotional intelligence, resilience.
Kyllonen (2013)	Critical View on Classification	Critiques overlapping models; highlights challenges in developing a universal framework.
Cope (2011)	Experiential Learning Perspective	Argues soft skills are developed through failure, reflective practice, and emotionally intense entrepreneurial experiences.

Source: Constructed by the author based on Robles (2012); Mitchelmore & Rowley (2010); World Economic Forum (2020); Kyllonen (2013); Cope (2011).

To conclude, one may comprehend this phenomenon as a sort of soft skills that are reversible and mutable and can be trained under influence of the tendencies in the market and the surrounding environment. The absence of such universal definition highlights the necessity to conduct research that will place these competencies under the context of the specific realities of entrepreneur phenomena. The proposed research meets that demand by exploring the case of SMEs under the conditions of high uncertainty and a lack of resources, especially the question of how emotional intelligence and other soft skills can be developed and used in practice.

2.2 Emotional Intelligence in Entrepreneurial Contexts

Emotional intelligence (EI) has been mentioned most often in non-technical competencies in the entrepreneurship literature. In general terms, it may be defined as the ability to perceive, interpret and regulate not only their emotions, but also those of other people.

Empirical studies have constantly associated EI with resilience and long-term performance of entrepreneurs. According to Bullough and Renko (2013), highly EI entrepreneurs stand a better chance to overcome a challenging situation because they are more resilient especially under tower or risky conditions. Respectively, Hayward et al. (2010) highlight the importance of EI in assisting the entrepreneurs to rethink undesirable events and to think clear in times of crises. According to Brundin et al. (2008), important processes that allow one to remain motivated and keep themselves engaged even following setbacks are affective self-regulation.

Current post-COVID research confirms these facts. According to Seibert, Kraimer, and Heslin (2021), more adaptive coping strategies were used by entrepreneurs with a higher level of EI, and these entrepreneurs also found new opportunities in case of supply chain disturbances. correspondingly, Robbins et al. (2023) identified that EI buffered the stress--depression relationship pre-pandemic and throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, indicating that it may be protective in the context of acute crises situations.

In addition to intrapersonal control, EI promotes interpersonal mechanisms like team leadership, negotiation with stakeholders and resolving conflicts. Baron and Markman (2003) argue that the key to success in business, trust, empathy, and communication are attributes that are often bolstered by EI and hence defining its social capital. Goleman, Boyatzis, and McKee (2013) in their work concerning the small business setting associate EI and transformational leadership.

EI is an ability not a personality trait and it is a dynamic yield that can be professionally cultivated by way of reflective practice, mentoring and experience of emotionally provocative circumstances (Cherniss, 2010; Cope, 2011). Still, its universality is disputed. Although researchers Goleman et al. (2013) and Brundin et al. (2008) emphasize its relevance to leadership and motivation, EI critics believe that it is cultural-specific and situation-based (Ashkanasy et al., 2016). The management of emotions preferred in the western entrepreneurial culture can be misinterpreted in the collectivistic or high power-distance society (Hofstede, 2011). This is a methodological question relating to the transferability of the standardised EI measurements to different SME populations, which also applies especially to the qualitative and context-centric nature of the research in this study.

In addition, most of the ongoing EI research tends to deal in procedural and psychometric EI research that gives little consideration as to how EI is implemented and integrated within the entrepreneurial practice. The aspect of culture and gender can greatly influence how EI is perceived and expressed, but the issue is often overlooked, and this factor restricts the generalisability of study results (Brush, de Bruin, & Welter, 2009; Henry et al., 2016).

In conclusion, there are essential entrepreneurial behaviours supported by EI, namely, resilience, effective leadership and adaptive decisions. Although commonly accepted as a factor of success, considerable conceptualisation of it is disparate, and measuring of it is quite liable to cultural bias. In this paper, the authors deal with such shortcomings by de-emphasising the narrow psychometric measures of EI and examines it in its contextual and experience-derived narratives and present it as a relational and adaptive resource that is vital to the survival and growth of entrepreneurs within a fluid environment.

2.3 Adaptability and Resilience in Entrepreneurial Practice

The key concepts in entrepreneur literature are adaptability and resilience that is a vital ability to cope with volatile and fast changing conditions. Adaptability is the capacity to change behaviours, strategies and thinking in relation to changing situations (Martin et al., 2013), allowing entrepreneurs to restructure the business models, react to changes in customer requirements, change internal business processes. Resilience is a feature of the ability to recover and be psychologically stable following negative events (Ayala & Manzano, 2014).

Entrepreneurs and small and medium sized businessmen have to deal with economic uncertainty, churn in regulations and resource crunch on a regular basis. Adaptability in such situations helps to facilitate strategic reoriented, innovation, and survival of businesses. This natural experiment with the COVID-19 crisis demonstrated that the most flexible entrepreneurs quickly shifted the value propositions, embraced digital technology, and turned to remote or hybrid states to continue their think to remain solvent (Bartik et al., 2020; Sharma et al., 2022). Such adaptations tended to be based on bricolage, i.e., the creative use of existing resources and avoiding making any major new investments, and were often able to harness social networks to attract suppliers, circulate market information, and retain morale (Kuckertz et al., 2020; Seetharaman, 2020). The SMEs were initiated and, in most cases, transformed not to merely survive but to be able to take a proactive approach and capture new opportunities (Brown & Rocha, 2020).

Amusingly, adaptability and resilience support each other, even though they are conceptually two different variables. Tenacious entrepreneurs are highly focused, long-term thinkers, and the ones who are efficient under constant pressure (Bullough & Renko, 2013; Corner, Singh, & Pavlovich, 2017). The resilience allows the SME founders whose self and economic wellbeing can be predisposed on the venture to survive the emotional impact of failure. Similar to adaptability, resilience is not natural, but it is acquired through experience, evaluation, and social support (Cope, 2011; Denyer & Neely, 2021), in most cases interconnected with other soft skills, including emotionality and openness to criticism.

One reason why the concept of resilience is controversial is due to the question of whether a resilient system is firstly an attribute of the individual or secondly an ecosystem product. Trait-based approaches (Ayala & Manzano, 2014) dangerously individualise entrepreneurial challenges, whereas an ecosystemic approach (Williams & Shepherd, 2016) considers resilience to arise due to accessibility in networks, mentorship, and institutional trial support. This difference has practical consequences: the excessive focus on individual strength may blind the view of structural disparities, especially with regard to under-resourced or less advantaged entrepreneurs, and areas of policy blind spots are associated with the excessive attention to individual resiliency. To conclude, flexibility and resiliency are learning, changing processes formed by adversity but also by the quality of the surrounding ecosystem. They play the crucial role regarding their survival, innovation, and growth especially in SMEs that do not have the cushion that larger firms would. This paper discusses these competencies as well as emotional intelligence and strategic thinking to appreciate the relationship which makes long-term entrepreneurship possible in conditions of high uncertainty, scarce resources.

2.4 Leadership and Strategic Thinking in SMEs

Leadership in SME is a contrast to big organisations where leadership is less formal and processes and authority are less formal. Smaller firms are characterized by leadership that is usually incorporated in intimate interpersonal relations, flexibility in operations, and having a great sense of vision (Man et al., 2002; Harrison & Leitch, 2005).

These differences are reaffirmed by the recent study in the era of post-COVID. According to Torres, Marshall, and Sydnor (2022), SME leaders implementing flexible and collaborative leadership styles in times of the pandemic found it easier to mobilise employees and stay on strategic path in the environment of crisis. Likewise, planning through a crisis usually entailed improvisation and on-site partnership with stakeholders, which upgraded resilience and market flexibility even in resource-poor settings (Clauss, Breier, & Kraus, 2021).

The process of strategic thinking has a strong connection to entrepreneurial proactivity and innovation and subsequent continuous learning (Lans et al., 2014). At a volatile market, it enables entrepreneurs to recast threats as opportunities and find ingenious ways of redesigning business models (Baumol, Litan, & Schramm, 2007). Comparing to the bigger corporations where strategic planning would be backed by specialised departments, SME decision making frequently stands on the ground of experience and improvisation which leads to a question about whether formal strategic approaches can be applied to the contexts with limited resources.

SMEs leadership is also relational and it often depends on the emotional intelligence (EI) to induce the creation of the trust, mitigation of the conflict, and the ability in order to sustain the cohesion of the team (Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee, 2013). Understanding, self-knowledge, and control of emotion specifically are added in the less formal organisational setups. Determining gender in the leadership style Gender and cultural norms also affect leadership styles: studies indicate that women tend to be collaborative and more flexible, which can be beneficial to operate in community-focused, underserved settings (Brush et al., 2009; Henry, Foss, & Ahl, 2016).

The strategic thinking tends to take shape rarely during the initial phase in SME. Long term planning may be limited by the pressures of the day to day survival and the possibility of little formal training. It is this under-theorisation that leads to a more general methodological gap: documenting the improvisational, context-sensitive character of the decision-making in small businesses in a systematic way. The description of leadership and strategic thinking to be discursively related to its status as dynamic and a practice that arises out of lived experience, as opposed to a fixed set of abilities, will address the demand of more relational and horizontal descriptions of entrepreneurial behaviour.

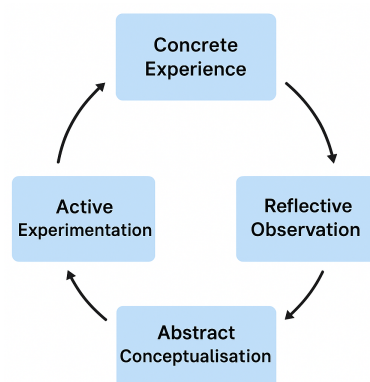
Finally, leadership and strategic thinking in SMEs are voluntarily adaptive, contingent and are influenced by the constant learning. Their development occurs in the cycles of reflections and actions, departing with the personal values, team dynamics, and environmental demands. This view point finds direct application to the current study which aims to appreciate how these soft skills are manifested in the environment of

uncertainty and resource scarcity where indeed entrepreneurship is an experiential process.

2.5 Experiential Learning and Skill Development

Soft skills in entrepreneurship are hardly ever gained in formal higher education, rather, they are mainly gained as a result of real-life experience. This is an ongoing task that needs active participation, critical thinking, and continuous compliance to the needs of the real-world situations of complexity. An Experiential learning cycle formulated by Kolb (1984) using concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation and active experimentations provides a solid model of conceptualisation of how such skills develop.

Figure 1. Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle Applied to Entrepreneurial Soft Skill Development



Source: Adapted from Kolb (1984).

Innovation in learning is usually confronted with unsteady situations like lack of resources, dynamics of regulations, or unstable market. All these pressures introduce entrepreneurship to critical thinking, creating inventive strategies, and experimenting with them in the real world. These run-ins with adversity or crises, as Cope (2011) points out, can be a stepping stone to developing strategic thinking, emotional regulation and problem-solving skills, which are highly refutable by trait-based perspective of such capabilities being inherent (Down & Warren, 2008).

As a matter of fact, the learning process is hardly linear. The intensity of emotions and the turbulent nature, not to mention those situations that have high stakes decision

implications, can hardly be simulated in classrooms settings (Pittaway & Cope, 2007). In turn, simulations, live projects, and reflective practice activities have become one of the most discussed topics in entrepreneurship education (Lackeus, 2015).

The importance of experiential learning is just supported further in the post-COVID research. Entrepreneurs learned new capabilities including digital transformation skills, fast plying in the market, working with crisis communication, mostly in severe pressure and did not happen in the classroom (Kuckertz et al., 2020; Davidsson et al., 2021). The provided examples daily show how soft skills can be developed far faster in a high-stress environment in both a pre-planned and emergent experiential environment.

This is also reinforced by mentoring, peer learning and real time decision making. Entrepreneurs are trained to develop improvisation skills, bargain, trust, and make sharp decisions, which in most cases are not fully instilled in the traditional programmes (Pittaway et al., 2009). Even the worst consequences of such a process, e.g., closure of the business or burnout, might result in flourishing personal development and strength (Cope, 2011).

Nevertheless, most of the literature is Eurocentric and revolves around high growth, technology-oriented ventures, and fails to capture informal, rural and marginal entrepreneurial settings. Ahl and Nelson (2015) demand more context-sensitive solutions, emphasizing the worth of tacit knowledge transfer via role-modelling, apprenticeship and community-problem-solving. On the same note, this line of argument is promoted by Anderson and Younis (2019), who state that in most SMEs, informal learning mechanisms work better than formal training.

Overall, entrepreneurial learning is an identity-constituting process that is based on experiential learning. It fosters the growth of creativity, problem solving, resilience and flexibility. However, major research narratives do not adequately report non-formal and culturally based forms of learning, especially where SMEs are low-resourced. Filling this gap, the current work places the concept of experiential learning as the central idea of reference that could explain the way in which entrepreneurs learn and acquire soft skills out of practice, which is directly applicable in the next section that looks at the issue of creativity and problem-solving.

2.6 Creativity and Problem Solving

The importance of creativity and problem-solving in behaviour of an entrepreneur, especially in the situation of scarcity of resources and uncertainty is vital. Although one can talk about creativity as the capacity to develop new and workable ideas, in the context of entrepreneurship, it is considered beyond generating ideas but also the capacity to reformulate constraints into opportunities, the ability to craft unusual solutions, and strategic redefinition in fluidity (Fillis & Rentschler, 2010). The process of problem-solving, in its turn, entails the use of critical and creative thinking in order to solve a complex problem in the conditions of time limitations and incomplete information (Zhao, 2005).

Business people often work under the conditions where quick actions are necessary. Creativity will help them develop innovative ideas and problem solving will convert innovative ideas into reality. These skills are critical in particular where start-ups are concerned, as well as in situations in which there are no formal structures or available resources during the time of crisis (Ward, 2004). Their interdependence is proven using empirical data: Baron and Ensley (2006) reported that successful entrepreneurs perform at a high level in recognition of patterns, analogical transfer, and reflective thinking-capabilities that facilitate not only the recognition of the problems but also the development of new ways of dealing with these challenges. They usually form such capabilities in informal and stressful environments and not in educational camps.

Creativity attracts different views among disciplines. The publications of the traditional management literature tend to view it through the lens of innovation output and product development (Amabile, 1996), but entrepreneurial studies in particular are beginning to explore creativity within the overlapping resource strained environments (Baker & Nelson, 2005). Problem-solving in these environments is frequently through the aspect of bricolage building new combinations out of re-arrangements of existing resources, rather than radically inventive. This is congruent with the current study on improvisational lived practices within uncertain entrepreneurial settings and practices.

Creativity also conforms to the environmental factors. Institutional constraints or scarcity may be sufficient to provoke adaptive recombination methods as well as

motivation of new stakeholder solutions, ethical decision making, and social business models (Baker & Nelson, 2005). To a large extent, SMEs turn to collaborative processes informing about the use of informal structures, staff knowledge, and customer information and showing the reliance of the problem-solving process on other soft areas, such as communicating, active listening, and ability of adaptation (Lans et al., 2014). Such abilities may be fostered with the help of reflective practice and project-based learning (Rae, 2006).

Although it has been an important topic of study in the field of entrepreneurship, creativity was under investigated. According to Henry et al. (2016), there was deficient information regarding creative learning interventions, the management of creativity, and contextual provisions of initiatives in creativity across companies and amid cultures. The gaps proposed may enhance knowledge of how brain and emotional flexibility create sustainable value by entrepreneurs.

In this paper, creativity and problem-solving are theorised as loose, situational soft skills on the foundation of which entrepreneurial learning and performance depend. Their interaction with resilience and strategic thinking shall also be investigated as a way of determining how they help in SME sustainability amid unsure surroundings.

2.7 Soft Skills in Entrepreneurial Education and Training

Increased complexity of the entrepreneurial ecosystems has prompted the academic institutions and policy initiatives to consider soft skills as an increasing part of entrepreneurship training. This is in contrast to traditional business education which concentrates on finance, operation, and marketing whereas the new approach concentrates on dynamic abilities including emotional intelligence, communication and being able to cope (Neck & Greene, 2011).

Starting to feature prominently in this change is the experiential and constructivist learning approaches where learning-by-doing, reflection-in-action and problem-solving are prioritised. Examples of common handles are role-playing, simulation of business, journaling (reflection), group work, and pitch competitions (Fayolle & Gailly, 2008).

The activities present not only technical knowledge, the development of self-awareness, leadership, and emotional regulation, by exposing learners to situations that simulate the uncertainty of being an entrepreneur.

The pandemic of COVID-19 consolidated the implementation of these pedagogy in internet-based and blended systems. Online hackathons, peer-learning communities, and remote incubators opened the access to those with geographical barriers (Ratten, 2021; Kuckertz et al., 2020). Nonetheless, this transition also unmasked disparity in technologies, digital literacy, and how effectively interpersonal soft skills should be developed under completely virtual circumstances. The so-called hybrid models, a hybrid of physical immersion and online cooperating, became one of the possible solutions that struck the right balance between flexibility and, at the same time, the depth of experience (Davidsson et al., 2021).

Mentoring and coaching are the vital accompaniments of the formal training, as the learners have the opportunity to watch role models show communication, ethical decision-making, and reflective strategies (Nabi et al., 2017). Failure exposure in supportive settings can develop both emotional resilience and strategic flexibility as essential characteristics of long term success (Pittaway & Cope, 2007).

Nonetheless, issues continue to exist in measurement and determining inclusivity of soft skills education in spite of such progress. According to Rae et al., (2014), natural grading rubric does not fit well when assessing adaptive and context-specific skills. In addition, female business owners, minorities, and people in under-resourced situations do not always have access to incubators, accelerators, or mentor networks (Henry et al., 2016). Inequalities which existed before were intensified in the pandemic, where remote opportunities were closed to some of the participants due to the lack of connectivity (UNCTAD, 2022).

The teaching, perception and the application of soft skills is also influenced by cultural and gender practices. According to Henry, Foss, and Ahl (2016), pedagogical models that include these differences would allow the training methods to be independent of geographical and demographical barriers.

The limitations are relevant to the study at hand in the sense that they confirm the relevance of recording business environments in which soft skills are learned, practiced, and perfected with time, such as SMEs. Contextualizing the learning, this study will capture the aspects which are overlooked by the formal education programme due to shortcomings related to inclusiveness, measurement, and applicability.

2.8 Research Gaps and Justification for the Study

Although there has been an increase in the awareness regarding the significance of soft skills in entrepreneurship, the industry still experiences serious theoretical and practical gaps.

First, the quantitative, trait-based models of soft skills research have prevailed, which conceptualise soft skills as hard-and-fast characteristics that can be measured using a psychometric instrument (Unger et al., 2011; Kyllonen, 2013). Though such tactics can help establish statistical connections, they do not tell much about the mechanisms of developing, deploying, and adjusting soft skills in the uncertain, fluid setting that is characteristic of entrepreneurship (Maritz et al., 2020).

Second, there is the ongoing contextual prejudice towards high-growth and the technological venture on the resources rich ecosystem (George et al., 2012; Pittaway & Cope, 2007). Such an emphasis is a blind spot in terms of SMEs, informal businesses, and entrepreneurs in the setting of underdeveloped or unstable institutional environments, where soft skills can be even more essential to stay in business and grow incrementally (Williams & Shepherd, 2016; Al-Dajani & Marlow, 2010).

Third, many of the literatures focus on soft skills in isolation without taking into consideration the interactive and co-evolutionary process of these skills in practice. The integration of emotional intelligence and resilience during the period of crisis, or the role of creativity in decision-making in extreme circumstances is discussed with limited focus, just to give a few examples (Cope, 2011; Corner, Singh & Pavlovich, 2017). It is this fragmentation that constrains the emergence of integrative models embodying this complexity of entrepreneurial behaviour.

Fourth, inclusivity is not developed. The effect of gender, culture, and socio-economic condition on the manifestation, growth and appreciation of soft skills is seldom looked into (Brush et al., 2009; Henry et al., 2016; Nelson & Ahl, 2015). The absence of an intersectional approach to research would imply that it could replicate historical structural disparities and yield non-generalisable knowledge (Ali et al., 2021; Brush et al., 2020).

And lastly, it is lacking qualitative studies based on narratives that encompass lived experiences of entrepreneurs. However, there are not many empirical descriptions of how soft skills can develop as a result of adversity, failing, and subsequent adaption (Cope, 2011; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). This gap is quite prominent in volatile, resource-scarce environments, where traditional indicators in these environments might fail to pick dominant adaptive competencies.

Table 3. Summary of Research Gaps in the Literature

Identified Gap	Explanation
Overreliance on quantitative approaches	Most studies measure soft skills using fixed psychometric scales, lacking exploration of how these skills are experienced and developed in real contexts (Unger et al., 2011; Kyllonen, 2013).
Contextual bias towards high-growth tech startups	The literature often focuses on well-resourced environments, ignoring entrepreneurs in SMEs or underdeveloped settings where soft skills might be even more critical (George et al., 2012; Al-Dajani & Marlow, 2010).
Fragmentation of soft skills studies	Soft skills are frequently examined in isolation, missing insights into how they interact or co-evolve in practice (Cope, 2011; Corner et al., 2017).
Lack of inclusivity	There is limited focus on how gender, culture, and socio-economic contexts affect soft skill development and expression, reducing generalisability (Brush et al., 2009; Henry et al., 2016).
Scarcity of qualitative, narrative-based research	There is a need for more in-depth, story-driven studies that capture the lived experience of entrepreneurs and the developmental nature of soft skills (Cope, 2011; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

Source: Adapted from Cope (2011); Williams & Shepherd (2016); Unger et al. (2011); Brush et al. (2009); Corner, Singh & Pavlovich (2017); Nelson & Ahl (2015). Additional references are cited within the table.

Rationale of the study

These gaps need to be addressed through changing the research direction. This paper uses interpretivist methodology in qualitative approach to form context-laden descriptions on the process of acquiring, employing, and evolving soft skills as perceived by SME entrepreneurs over the course of time. Semi-structured interviews will be used to gather data which will then be analysed thematically (Braun & Clarke, 2021) to unearth the patterns and meanings that are not apparent with cross-sectional and fixed-scale research.

The framework is especially appropriate to depict situational, relational, and process-related aspects of soft skills in the environment of volatility and a lack of resources. Lived experience is foregrounded, which allows the study to be in line with the recent suggestions of process-oriented and context-specific approaches to the study of the entrepreneurial competencies (Maritz et al., 2020; Ali et al., 2021).

Also, the ultimate contribution findings are expected to lead to theory formulation, inclusive policy design and empowerment of long-term sustainable experiential learning processes and interventions of the ecosystem to enhance entrepreneurial adaptability, sustainability, and resilience.

CHAPTER 3 - METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

The following research question is to be answered in the research: How can entrepreneurs establish soft skills and apply them to become resilient and grow their business? The qualitative design has been selected where subjective experiences, emotional processes, and interpersonal interactions are explored, which are impossible to measure in any meaningful way with any quantitative measurement.

The design fits the goals of the study discussed in Chapter 1:

- Look at the perception and value attached to soft skills by entrepreneurs.
- Know the way to acquire, adapt and transform such skills with time.
- Get to know the role of obstacles and turning points on their path of development.

The qualitative approach is specifically viable in exploring lived experiences in their social and cultural reality (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). In other past studies that have researched entrepreneurial learning and identity (e.g., Cope, 2011; Smith & Osborn, 2008), a phenomenological approach was effective in portraying finely detailed personal stories.

The research is interpretive and explorative, whereas its ontological orientation is a socially constructed reality and an epistemological one of the creation of knowledge through participation (Bryman, 2016; Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016). This places the participants in roles of meaning co-producers and not data-sources.

The semi-structured form of interviews will be adopted in providing rich descriptions of the crises, adjustment, and transition, which enables flexibility to trace the story of the participants but at the same time cover key points, including empirical intelligence, adaptive behaviour, and experience learning (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). The obtained data shall be thematically analysed.

Other possible designs were quantitative or mixed methods but they were unsuitable. Quantitative surveys would only show tendencies and are lacking the depth needed to cover the contextual and emotional information. The use of mixed means was precluded by time and the fact that there was higher potential to elicit tacit and context-specific skills when solely considering a qualitative approach (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Such design guarantees the methodological consistency of the research question, philosophical stance, and methods used, which makes it possible to come up with insider perspectives and the context-intensive knowledge.

3.2 Research Philosophy and Approach

The study takes the paradigm of constructivist epistemology seemingly on the premise of the existence of reality as socially constructed and meanings are co-created between the researcher and those studied (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018). This philosophical position reflects the exploratory character of the study goals that are aimed at revealing subjective meaning and personal interpretation along with contextually constructed representation of soft skills.

Soft skills can be tacit, emotionally colourful and situationally articulate thus an interpretivist lens is quite appropriate. According to Chapter 2, it is important to understand that leading practitioners of entrepreneurship (e.g., Cope, 2011; Rae, 2006) remark on the power of interpretative approaches to investigating the process of individual learning and adaptive behaviours. This background explained the decision of selecting an inductive method according to which theory is developed based on the experience of entrepreneurs instead of predetermined hypothesis (Bryman, 2016).

The study is ontologically relativist, given that the entrepreneurial experience of soft skills is also influenced by a certain social environment, resources present, and the emotional reaction to them. This school of thought justifies the application of the semi-structured interview that consists of a thematic model and an ability of the participants to express the experiences according to their style. In this design, the participants become also active in the formation of knowledge, not sources of information (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015).

The consistency of philosophical thinking is kept through the correspondence of the constructivist ontology, the interpretivist epistemology, inductive reasoning, and the qualitative methodology. Positivist methods were discredited on the grounds that they pay more attention to objectivity and generalisability that cannot be reconciled with the depth and context sensitivity of the study. Pragmatism was also put aside, with its methodological pluralism being outside of the range of this dissertation.

This internal reliability can reinforce the validity of the study and give a clear blueprint to study a dynamic and situational soft skills of an entrepreneur. The consistency of the main methodological elements is tabulated in Table 4.

Table 4. Methodological Coherence Map

The alignment of methodological choices is presented in Figure 2 below to illustrate coherence across ontology, epistemology, methodology, and research design.

Component	Description
Ontology	Relativist – reality is socially constructed and subjective.
Epistemology	Interpretivist – knowledge is co-created through interaction.
Philosophical Paradigm	Constructivist-Interpretivist.
Research Approach	Inductive – theory emerges from data.
Research Design	Qualitative, exploratory, and phenomenological.
Data Collection Method	Semi-structured interviews with SME entrepreneurs.
Data Analysis Method	Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2021).

Sources: Author's own

3.3 Sampling Strategy and Participant Criteria

In this work, purposive sampling will be used, which is based on selecting the people who can give extensive and contextually appropriate information (Patton, 2015; Saunders et al., 2019). The method is focused on depth rather than statistical generalisability by presenting theory-poor but practice-rich cases with a wealth of experience in the development and deployment of soft skills in the entrepreneurship scenario.

The included participants include the founders or the current heads of SMEs who have experienced major business challenges, crippled markets, economic crises, or internal reorganization that necessitates active engaging and perfecting soft skills. Such actors should be free and equipped to critic their choice-making, social relations as well as learning.

Inclusion criteria:

- Founder / co-founder of an SME that has been up and running at least two years.
- Having gone through an immense challenge or crisis in the entrepreneurial adventure.
- He/ she is willing and able to share personal experiences in details.

The research includes SMEs in Dublin and Latin America and can be used to compare two cultures in a cross-cultural way and fill in the literature gaps characterized in Chapter 2, where little literature abounds on how soft skills can be developed in different cultures and markets.

The anticipated 5-7 sample size meets the qualitative research recommendations of narrative and phenomenological richness with the addition that it fulfils the criteria of time and scope affordability (Guest, Bunce & Johnson, 2006; Vasileiou et al., 2018). The sample will sample various stages of business development, i.e., early expansion, consolidation/redirection and mature leadership to account a possible variation in the development of the soft skills and how the same are applied over time.

They will aim to achieve diversity across age, sector, and entrepreneurial background including hospitality, creative, retail industry; social enterprising, among others. It also represents the non-typical SME models which are the network marketing enterprises in the cosmetic and wellness sector which requires persuading, managing relations, and being adaptable to flourish a business and sustain the business (Coughlan & Macredie, 2002; Grayson & Baldwin, 2007).

The recruitment will be conducted through personal recommendation, professional networks (LinkedIn) and business networks. Each of the participants will be provided

with an Information Sheet and Informed Consent Form, the purpose of which is to explain the aim of the study, procedures, and warranties of the ethical nature. Anonymity and secrecy will be ensured with the use of nicknames in reporting.

The participants should also have the ability to report some decisive situations events, e.g., instances of adaptation, leadership opportunities, or decisions under pressure, which will serve as the basis of discussing the evolution of acquisition, change, and utilisation of soft skills.

3.4 Data Collection Method

Semi-structured interviews will be used to gather information as they are rather appropriate to investigate personal experiences, emotional processes, and contextual background which may shape the soft skills in entrepreneurship (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). In this method, consistency can be achieved by using a guiding set of open-ended questions and at the same time flexibility can be presented in that participants have the opportunity of elaborating in their own ways.

Themes that will be covered in the interview guide will be decision making under pressure, emotional regulation, communication, resilience, leadership. The focus of questions is directly connected to the research aim and objectives, thus providing coherence between the context of data collection and conceptual framework

The semi-structured interview has been a common method of entrepreneurial resilience and learning research (e.g., Cope, 2011; Rae, 2006), where its use is driven by interest in a theory-informed response that could not be obtained in a structured survey approach.

The research will be carried out by either face-to-face or online (via Zoom/ Meet/ Microsoft Teams) method, depending on the preference of the participant and the feasibility of the research, without the loss of inclusivity. They will take, on average, 45 - 60 minutes, and will aspire to maximize the depth without inconveniencing the participants.

Each participant will be provided with an Information Sheet and Informed Consent Form prior to the interview procedure, in which the purpose of the study, right to withdraw at any time, data security, and will be encouraged to participate voluntarily will be indicated. The compliance of the GDPR and NCI ethical guidelines will be considered strictly.

Interviews are going to be audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim with consent of the participants. It is planned that transcripts will be anonymised, locked away on encrypted devices and utilised only with academic purposes in mind.

The conversational form which is not too rigid will assist the researcher to gather emotionally delicate, contextualised information which will then be analyzed through themes in order to determine a pattern in how the entrepreneurs perceive, acquire, and use the soft skills as they accumulate over the years.

3.5 Data Analysis Technique

Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2021) is consequently an appropriate option to be utilised in an explorative and interpretive study like this, and by attributing the singled out themes collectively with the research aim, objectives, and sub-questions, it provides methodological coherence and reinforces the connection between the empirical results and the conceptual framework that supports this thesis (Terry et al., 2017; Nowell et al., 2017).

TA can be used to explore the experience of soft skills in the practices of entrepreneurship, and in the ways it is performed and made sense of in varied entrepreneurial journeys. It will enable the researcher to go beyond superficial description and into more emotional, behavioural, and developmental levels of the stories of the participants. This is close to the aims of the study, which aims at comprehending the process of soft abilities development in situ using the experience of entrepreneurship.

The analysis will be done within the six phases model by Braun and Clarke. All these stages will be clearly connected to the research questions and objectives so that the research is within its methodology. To illustrate, when coding through the identified

main themes that were revealed as a result of the literature review (Chapter 2), one should be open to any emerging themes in the texts of the participants:

- Familiarization: To get deeper into the data through reading and rereading the transcripts and at the same time taking preliminary notes.
- Creation of First Codes Referring to the generation of systematic meaningful code aspects on the whole collection of data.
- Seeking Themes - Codes are grouped into patterns of a higher order, that is, themes, representing common meaning or repetitions of insight.
- Themes Review Processes: Fine tuning of themes based on coded data and the universe as each theme should be consistent and relevant.
- Defining and naming themes How to define and name themes so that you can be analytically clear.
- Writing the Report - Combining the findings and supplying them with verbatim quotes and relating the findings to research questions and to the literature literature.

Coding will be conducted using either spreadsheets (e.g., Excel) or qualitative analysis software (e.g., NVivo), depending on data volume and complexity.

This method is also in line with existing and related entrepreneurial learning research (e.g., Cope, 2011; Rae, 2006), which has demonstrated the utility of thematising narrative data in order to capture processes of skill building and adaptation.

To be more transparent and authentic, the results of each theme will be represented and supported with direct quotations of people interviewed. Particular emphasis will be placed on the instances of emotional reflection, adaption of behaviour, and experiential learning because they will be perceived as the main aspects of acquiring soft skills.

Also, peer-review will be established in the coding stage and audit trail established throughout the analysis. These measures act to support the validity and validity of the research results (Nowell et al., 2017).

Through systematic process of attributing the identified themes back to the research aim, objectives and sub-questions, the analysis is methodologically consistent and enhances the relationship between the empirical research findings and conceptual framework that supports the development of this thesis.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

Moral integrity is also essential in this study, primarily since it is of qualitative and interpretative character, i.e., it includes the gathering of personal reflections, as well as potentially sensitive experiences of entrepreneurs. To conduct the study, all the ethical rules provided by the National College of Ireland (NCI) will be followed strictly, and the principles listed in the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) (European Union, 2016) will be addressed.

Before the data is collected the project will receive the appropriate institutional review to obtain formal ethical approval. A fully informed information sheet will also be provided to the participants. The objectives, procedures, potential risks, and benefits of the study will also be clearly described in the information sheet and the consent form, which will allow the participants to decide in full awareness and of their own volition whether they want to participate in the study. All participants will be asked to give their informed consent before being interviewed.

As ethical principles of the research, the following ones will be involved:

- **Informed Consent:** The aim and procedures of the study, the risks and the benefits thereof will be explained in clear and understandable language to the participants who would be free to withdraw their participation until the time when the study is about to proceed on anonymised data. (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2015).
- **Confidentiality and Anonymity:** Identifying information will be averted. Both people and businesses will be referred to using pseudonyms. The transcripts and audio recordings will be safely stored on encrypted devices and permanently deleted once analysis is complete. Raw data will only be available to the researcher.

- Data protection and storage will be entirely compliant with GDPR and the retention period will be kept to a minimum time necessary.
- Reducing Harm: Although the vulnerable group is not engaged in the study, people might feel uneasy by discussing failure, emotional pressure, or professional disappointment. The researcher will also be aware of these kinds of issues and will give the freedom to participants to take some pause or skip questions or withdraw at any time.
- Transparency and Integrity: In the course of the research, the researcher will not give leading questions and take care not to manipulate the results. The principle of transparency will include member checking, which will enable members to review what they have contributed and ensure interpretations are accurate. (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

Moreover, as the research is cross-regional, the researcher, as a bilingual speaker, will prepare an interview material and the consent forms in both English and Spanish to guarantee linguistic correctness and culturally appropriate messages of the research to the participants in Dublin and Latin America. The method will facilitate the maintenance of integrity of meaning among the languages used, as well as comfort and understanding of the participants. The researcher will also be reflexively conscious of their position as a way of reducing the aspect of interpretation bias when there are a lot of different cultural understandings. Consent and all data management will be in compliances with GDPR, and data will be stored only as long as needed (minimum retention) and afterwards deleted permanently. Encrypted servers located in the EU and complying with GDPR will be used to store all the data collected irrespective of the location.

Use of these principles is expected to not only safeguard the subjects of the study but also make the research process and findings to be honest, plausible, and morally acceptable.

3.7 Trustworthiness and Rigor

The criteria of judging qualitative research is by its rigor or its validity, reliability, and transparency of its results. In the opinion of Lincoln and Guba (1985), the basis in terms of which the colour of trustworthiness is judged is composed of four main points: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

3.7.1 Credibility

Credibility is described as the level of match between findings and the experiences and the perspective of the participants. To enhance the credibility, semi-structured interviews, member checking (review of transcripts and participants reviewing the transcripts and coding the transcripts) and deeper interaction with the data (rereading, coding and interpretive reflections on the data) will be adopted. Reflexivity shall also be embraced, where the epistemological stance of the researcher would be taken into consideration and it being reviewed critically to reduce biasness. To maintain transparent interpretations, findings will be presented along with quotations of the participants expressed verbatim (Nowell et al., 2017).

3.7.2 Transferability

Transferability deals with the question of applicability of the results to alternate environments. This study will give a thick description of the participants, SMEs, and their experiences even though statistical generalisation is not the goal of a qualitative research. The contextual diversity that relates to other countries and phases of business of SMEs will give the data its strength since reading through the data, readers can determine its applicability to their contexts (Denzin and Lincoln, 2018).

3.7.3 Dependability

Dependability is the stability and reproducibility of research process with the contents of time. Audit trail will be made and the methodological decisions during the data collection and analysis will be recorded. The logic and coherence of interpretations will also be strengthened through peer debriefing with colleagues and consistent feedback given by the supervisor (Nowell et al., 2017).

3.7.4 Confirmability

Confirmability means that the results should be an expression of the participants and not the researcher. The positionality, emotional responses, and interpretative decisions made by the researcher are to be documented with the help of a reflective journal. To ensure transparency, direct quotations will be applied in the findings to ensure a difference between the voices of the participants and that of the researcher in terms of their interpretation (Patton, 2015).

3.8 Restrictions of the Methodology

Although the suggested study will entail in-depth and situated contemplations regarding the involvement of entrepreneurs in exercising and advancing their soft skills, several methodological limitations have to be taken into consideration.

3.8.1 The Sample and generalisability

The study will involve sampling of only 5-7 people who will be selected purposively. This provides rich, in-depth analysis as per the principles of qualitative research but limits us in terms of statistical generalisation. The objective of the research is to make an analytical generalisation, and the results can be used in similar entrepreneurial contexts (Guest, Bunce, and Johnson, 2006).

3.8.2 Subjectivity and Bias of the Researcher

As a qualitative and interpretive project, the research process will undoubtedly demonstrate the two background, assumptions and positionality, of the researcher. Even though objectivity is neither desired nor even anticipated in constructivist study, bias is potentially overcome through the use of reflexivity, member checking, and audit trail. The credibility will be strengthened by flawless decision-making and interpretation procedures (Denzin and Lincoln, 2018).

3.8.3 Self-Reporting Limitations

Participants provide the self-reported narrative of the research which may be influenced by the selective memory, social desirability or post-hoc rationalisation (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2015). In the attempt to reduce these risks, probing follow up questions

will be utilized and thematic triangulation through analysis will be applied in fortifying interpretations.

3.8.4 Time constraints and limitations of resources

The study has a limitation of having no longitudinal approach because of time and resources constraints given that the study is a postgraduate research project. The prospect of a longitudinal design would have allowed learning more about the progress of soft skills, but the current research represents a practical solution to the given time frame that will rely on retrospective reporting regarding the past and contextual reporting.

CHAPTER 4 – FINDING

4.1 Introduction

The given chapter states the major outcomes of the study which have been obtained through semi-structured interviews which were conducted with a purposeful sample of entrepreneurs who have founded or worked in the sphere of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). The objective will be to detail how these individuals have managed to develop and employ soft skills to become resilient and adapt to the ambiguities and pressures of the entrepreneurial practice.

The study entailed six critical interviews that involved various areas and business environments with reference to varying stages in business development. The participants were welcomed to contribute to their experiences regarding entrepreneurial challenges, emotional and strategic coping, pressure-based decisions, personal and interpersonal learning.

This was done by applying thematic analysis as explained by Braun and Clarke (2006; 2021) to observe patterns and common themes coming out of the narratives by participants. The topics addressed in this chapter are strictly connected with the research purpose stated at the beginning of the work in Chapter 1, and the theory background mentioned in Chapter 2. This helps in ensuring that the analysis is not just descriptive but rather it critically interacts with the existing literature showing where the findings provide similarities, contradiction, and extension of the work of others. Data presentation is thematic, and not running in time, and it allowed tracing those patterns that are at the heart of the study objectives and differentiating them with more peripheral ones.

The chapter details as follows:

Participant Overview – describes the backgrounds of the participants in relation to the sector, experience in years and development level of business.

Thematic Results – focuses on exploring the most important themes discovered in the data, that is, emotional intelligence, adaptability, leadership, experiential learning, and resilience.

Summary of Findings – makes conclusions against the research questions and the literature covered on Chapter 2.

Ethical issues have been provided, and anonymity of participants has been denominated by the usage of pseudonyms to ensure the protection of participant confidentiality.

4.2 Participant Overview

The sample of the participants is diverse in the background and sector of entrepreneurship, with the stage of their business development, providing varied opinions on the significance of the soft skills in maintaining resilience and increasing. Even though the sample was chosen on the availability of the participants, it encompasses variety of SME settings, which enables the research to encompass knowledge that is applicable within varied realities of operations.

The key characteristics of each participant, in particular, the sector, years of business and the state of development was summarised in table 4.2. The variety can be used in comparing the application of soft skills and adaptation to use in various entrepreneurial contexts as discussed in the thematic findings.

Participant	Sector / Industry	Years in Business	Stage of Development	Notes
P1	Fashion retail & personal image consultancy	3 years	Consolidation	Stable client base; focus on refining services and maintaining quality.
P2	Education Services & International Student Mobility	6 years (since 2019)	Maturity	Diversified services; strong partnerships; sustainable business model.
P3	International trade & logistics (exports/imports)	4 years current venture (previous experience in China)	Growth	Adapting prior export expertise to Irish market; pursuing expansion.
P4	Beauty & wellbeing (network marketing)	5 years	Growth	Relationship-building and team development; expanding network.
P5	Beauty & personal care	4.5 years	Consolidation	Stable client portfolio; exploring niche markets.
P6	Tourism & Hospitality	2 years current venture (5 years prior experience)	Growth	Adapting services to seasonal demand and post-pandemic shifts.

4.3 Discussion: Thematic Findings in Context

This paper explored how entrepreneurs acquire and use soft skills (soft skills like emotional intelligence, adaptability, leadership, resiliency), by way of lived experience, especially when faced with situations of uncertainty, resource limitation, and cultural fluctuation. Based on the stories of six interviewees (P1 6P6), the results show that such skills are not inherent or determined; it develops via emotionally intense experiences, working under pressure, and interaction between personal development and the business role.

The themes that were suggested based on the analysis such as resilience, experiential learning, adaptability, soft skills as areas of entrepreneurial competencies, and the leadership styles and the fragile nature of the support is directly relatable to the research objectives. All the themes are placed within the context of the current literature that shows how the findings confirm, extend, or contradict the earlier studies

4.3.1 Resilience as an Ongoing Emotional Process

The concept of resilience was proposed as one of the fundamental capabilities, and it was not only conceptualized as an inner set but also as an adaptive process that bases on emotional and coping adjustment. Among the cases, resilience persisted due to strategies including recuperation breaks (P1), self-dialogue (P2), consistent routines (P5), energy within relationship with customers (P4, P6) and the long term perspective in the face of instability.

As an example, P1 steered her business through a personal health crisis, P2 dealt with emotional exhaustion and the need to keep the business going, and P6 redesigned her tourism business after the COVID lockdown to inform the services to the new travel behaviour. P4 did not give up when it was common that network marketing would totally reject it and P5 did not give up and give in to the market tides and supplier mishaps.

If I fall, everything falls. (Participant 2, interview, 2025)

Sometimes I need to disappear for a day, just to continue the next. (Participant 1, interview, 2025)

You need to keep going, even when the answer is no ten times in a row. (Participant 4, interview, 2025)

Even in low season, you must project confidence so clients trust you. (Participant 6, interview, 2025)

These informations support the ideas of Cope (2011), who suggested the view of the kind of endeavors like learning as being an affective process, as well as Bullough and Renko (2013) with their claim that resilience is the key to survival in a highly unstable setting. They also add weight to the discovery of Brundin et al. (2008) that emotion regulation leads to greater clarity in making decisions in times of high pressure.

Additional contribution to literature: Whereas the existing literature (Ayala & Manzano, 2014; Williams & Shepherd, 2016) acknowledges that resilience is important when dealing with market shocks, this paper introduces the fact that resilience must be linked to the maintenance of the business identity and the trust of clients in the case of sudden market shifts in SMEs. That sets resilience as a recovery mechanism as well as an aggressive strategic resource.

4.3.2 Experiential Learning and Adaptability under Pressure

In all the cases, the learning was mainly experiential and stimulated by trial and error, interaction of stake holders and reflective learning practice and not formal training (Kolb, 1984; Pittaway & Cope, 2007). Respondents told about the adjustments to the new marketing conditions, culture and business issues:

- P3 took the expertise that China has in relation to exports in the Irish market and adapted to the new logistical and cultural norms.
- P1 learned branding and logistics on his own by trial and error.
- P2 converted her migration experience to a service model that is client centred.
- P4 customized products to the needs of local wellness in the world.

- P5 juggled between innovation and holding on to the brand identity.
- P6 re-engineered tourism service delivery in the post-pandemic era to meet with the transforming consumer expectations.

Both dimensions of adaptability in these contexts were operational (modification of business models, differentiation of streams of income) and emotional (emotional re-situations, sustenance of trust, keeping optimism) in line with the Martin et al. (2013) conceptualisation of adaptability as cognitive and behavioural.

You adapt or disappear. (Participant 1, interview, 2025)

He had the idea, but no one to do it. I brought the knowledge. (Participant 3, interview, 2025)

If the market changes, you either change with it or get left behind. (Participant 5, interview, 2025)

After COVID, I had to rethink everything—from destinations to marketing tone. (Participant 6, interview, 2025)

These results confirm the belief by Lackéus (2015) that deep learning actually happens in emotionally evocative, inconclusive situations and the post-adversity rebuilding viewed by Cope (2011) as strategic reconstruction.

Implications beyond literature: This paper indicates that the issue of adaptability in SMEs is propped up not only by the strategic flexibility but also by relational capital or preserving trust among critical clients and partners. This gives an element of social aspect to adaptability which is not well researched thus blending operational innovation to trust in networks to be equally important in resilience and growth.

4.3.3 Soft Skills as Core Entrepreneurial Competencies

Soft skills also became the key to the sustainability of businesses, and in many cases, they were more highly valued than a formal plan or prognosis of finances. Throughout the cases, the interpersonal skills, emotional intelligence, and communication were emphasized as the crucial factors that determine client retention, trust establishment, and positioning on the market:

- P2 focused on profound emotional investment in relations with clients.
- P1 mentioned flexibility and communication, as important aspects on everyday work.
- P3 emphasized the issue of cross-cultural coordination.
- P4 had emphasised trust and authenticity in her network marketing concept.
- Long-term client retention was disparaged with active listening and personal engagement, which is labeled as P5.
- In P6, empathy and negotiation were emphasized on when getting partners in tourism.

It's not about selling a course. It's about walking with them through everything. (Participant 2, interview, 2025)

This is a business of relationships. If they trust you, they listen. (Participant 4, interview, 2025)

Your hands can do the work, but it's your words and attitude that make people come back. (Participant 5, interview, 2025)

Tourism is selling emotions—people remember how you made them feel. (Participant 6, interview, 2025)

Such reports concur with the opinion of Chell (2013) according to which soft skills should be socially constructed and not universal and concur with the results of Rauch and Frese (2007) who conclude that strategic thinking is important to business survival. They also support Bullough and Renko (2013) who say emotional intelligence contributes to resilience in uncertain settings.

Non-literature contribution: The paper adds to the existing knowledge by demonstrating that not only in SMEs, but also in general, soft skills are not only the enablers of moderating the impact of a crisis but also the immediate contributors to strategic and operational decisions. They directly affect daily business decisions, create market positioning, and give increased client loyalty, wherein they become fundamental to the entrepreneurial assets as opposed to a side skill. This observation leads one to believe that SME training and policy must place the soft skills enhancement as one of the primary foundations of entrepreneurial capacity building.

4.3.4 Leadership Styles and Cultural Intelligence

Leadership styles differed among the participants and depended on business climate, cultural background and relationship dynamics of the firm:

- P1 also showed a self led manager, who was in charge of operations.
- P2 was a leader who was very relational, was very emotionally attuned and empathic towards clients.
- The leadership of P3 was intertwined with that of an Irish partner thus incorporating a variety of views.
- P4 had a philosophy of distributed leadership where she was allowing her network to exercise their own judgments.
- P5 was a mentorship oriented client-centred approach.
- P6 became culturally intelligent and applied service leadership to the demographics of different tourists.

Sometimes a single message from a client saying 'thank you' saves my day.
(Participant 2, interview, 2025)

Even if your network is big, you can still feel alone when sales are down.
(Participant 4, interview, 2025)

Referrals from colleagues are gold in low season. (Participant 6, interview, 2025)

Such findings are consistent with the concept of cultural intelligence expressed by Ang et al. (2007) as well as the request of culturally informed models of leadership put

forward by Henry et al. (2016). They too concur with Goleman, Boyatzis, and McKee (2013) in focusing on emotional intelligence as part of establishing trust.

Beyond literature: As previous studies tend to present leadership in SMEs as a smaller scale version of corporate management structure, this paper has disclosed through the use of horizontal, highly individualised leadership styles that existed within the smaller organisations; this form of leadership is more appropriate within resource-limiting and cultural diversity situations. This form of leadership is not top-down but rather fluid and emergent with many formed through negotiation as opposed to authority or imposed structurally, and thus adaptive and relational. This implies the need to focus on leadership training of entrepreneurs on interpersonal influence and cultural sensitivity as well as distributed decision-making rather than hierarchical models.

4.3.5 Isolation and the Fragile Nature of Support

Young people recorded isolation throughout the cases, and lack of consistent and sustained structured help. All the participants were students that lacked the use of formal mentorship and regular institutional support. They instead depended on informal sources of support- clients, peers, and community contacts to give them the required encouragement and to run their businesses afresh. As the previous sections have explained, such networks were able to help with the reassurance of emotion but were not especially practical or strategic.

These results support the conceptualisation of resilience, developed by Williams and Shepherd (2016) about the embedded character of resilience, and the critique of the entrepreneurial ecosystems promoted by Ahl and Nelson (2015), which tend to serve communities with few members.

Outside the literature: The literature on the subject dwelling on the buffering effect of networks, whereas this study articulates emotions sustaining informal networks in the SMEs are weak. With no established mentor, financial support, or organisational structures, business owners still put themselves at the risk of fluctuating in the market place- regardless of being very well-endowed in soft competencies like resilience, adaptability, and emotional intelligence. This indicates a potential need to initiate policy

responses to support relationships within the provision of structural resources to enhance entrepreneurial ecosystems.

Conclusion

The results are based on confirming that the constellation of soft skills, such as emotional intelligence, adaptability, resilience, leadership, and cultural intelligence is not secondary but a central, dynamic capability that allows SMEs to survive a time of uncertainty, operate continuity, and make informed strategic choices. These skills are not only not immutable attributes but rather, are always being constructed through lived experiences which are emotionally charged, favoring the Kolb (1984) theory on experiential learning and the understanding of entrepreneurial competence developed by Chell (2013) which views the latter as socially constructed and dependent on contexts.

Critically, the study contributes to the present literature by:

- Associating resilience with the maintenance and stability of business identity in case of market shocks.
- Positing the relational capital as the central lever of adaptability that is as significant as strategic flexibility.
- Emphasising the horizontal and personalised styles of leadership as being competitive assets within the SME environments, as opposed to more classical hierarchical styles.
- Proving the aspect of creativity using local networks and real time client feedback.

The cross-case analysis also indicates that though soft skills may help cover the structural gaps to some extent, it cannot substitute the system-varying conditions that are needed to sustain the entrepreneurial ecosystems. Unless accompanied by the stable set of support, financial backing, and facilitating institutional arrangements, highly talented entrepreneurs are yet to reshape volatility and lack of resources.

Such observations have direct policy and pedagogical implications: the entrepreneurial development programs are envisioned to integrate emotional literacy, intercultural

competence, and ability to adapt as a basic element of the curriculum program, and not a series of optional skills. Specific support to those entrepreneurs that are underrepresented, e.g. women, migrants, or work in the informal economy, would be more likely to increase the resilience and growth potential identified in this paper.

Although such insights prove to be helpful, the results depend on a small, purposefully chosen sample in a given geographic and cultural environment, which can restrict the probability of generalisation. Overall, therefore, there is an indication of symbiosis between the two elements, that is, soft skills and systemic support: the former equips entrepreneurs to effectively react to the challenges they are facing, whilst the latter provides the stability that enables these competencies to produce a lasting impact. This interaction has created an argument that demands more longitudinal investigations to test how soft skills alter in a long-term as well as combined with policy interventions in forming entrepreneurial resilience and growth.

4.4 Summary of Findings

The research problem was answered by the main research question as follows: How do the soft skills build entrepreneurial resilience and growth in SMEs? It was established by the thematic analysis of six contrasting entrepreneurial practices that the soft skills were dynamic, situational abilities, which develop out of face-to-face interaction, emotional engagement, and situational learning (Chell, 2013; Cope, 2011). The qualitative approach received both sector-specific perspectives and first-hand experiences of how these competencies can be developed and strategically implemented regarding the maturity of the business, as well as showed its shortcomings in the lack of systems support.

RQ1 - Essential soft skills for navigating uncertainty

In all the instances, emotional intelligence, flexibility, resilience, leadership and interpersonal communication have proved to be essential in maintaining operations as well as adjusting to uncertain situations (Rauch & Frese, 2007; Bullough & Renko, 2013). The work building on the literature available illustrates that in SMEs these skills are applied not only to mitigate the effects of another crisis; instead, they become a direct driver of everyday strategic and operational decisions. In a given scenario,

empathy and trust-building (P5) were used as purposeful retention tactics, although credibility and authenticity (P4, P6) were invaluable in markets where repeat customer purchases and referrals were its foundation.

RQ2 - How these skills are developed over time

The results supported the experiential learning theory by Kolb (1984), involving development of soft skills as a result of iterative learning processes (trial, reflection and adaptation) in emotionally-charged situations. Nevertheless, the figures show that adaptability, in SMEs, is enabled both by relational capital, that preserves trust with the key clients and partners, as well as by strategic flexibility. Examples of P1 self-taught branding, P3 cross-cultural export expertise transferred, and P6 redesign of tourism after the pandemic demonstrates how emotional resilience is facilitated by routines, relation energy, and self-regulation practice (Brundin et al., 2008; Lackéus, 2015).

RQ3 - Influence on business outcomes and decision-making

Operational and strategic results were molded by soft skills. EI intensified customer loyalty, flexibility made turning the market in the right direction easier, and leadership (self-directed, shared, and distributed) rallied troops and cross-cultural negotiation (Ang et al., 2007; Henry et al., 2016). These results refute the models of hierarchical leadership as evidence is provided that SME leaders tend to prefer horizontal and personalised leadership. It was already noted that informal networks were protection to isolation and decision fatigue (Williams & Shepherd, 2016), but their perishability without the institutional support is evidence of an ultimate limit to focusing on personal abilities.

Synthesis

Collectively, the evidence indicates that soft skills and systemic support have a symbiosis relation. Although the former enables business leaders to overcome challenges, the latter offers the structural capabilities that such abilities need to achieve sustainability with a lasting impact. This study makes a contribution in the following way:

- The relationship between resilience and the survival of business identity in case of market shocks.
- Locking in relational capital as a central springboard of adaptability.
- Emphasising horizontal leadership as SME competitive advantage.
- Illustrating how local networks and immediate customer feedback give rise to the creativity.

The practical implication of these findings entails that entrepreneurial education and support programmes need to incorporate emotional literacy, intercultural competence, and adaptive capacity as a defining aspect of it and provide specific interventions to underrepresented entrepreneurs. It is a two-pronged strategy that might increase resiliency and growth potential, whereas policy plans mixing skills training and systematic assistance would solve the tripwires of vulnerabilities.

Lastly, it implies that future longitudinal or mixed-methods studies have a potential fertile ground to document changes related to soft skills over time and their quantifiable contributions to the performance indicators of SMEs, providing a better perspective on how soft skills apply to the resilience of entrepreneurship and its growth.

CHAPTER 5 - DISCUSSION

5.1 Introduction

This chapter critically analyses the results of the study (Chapter 4) in the context of the available scholarship on the sphere of entrepreneurship, resilience and soft skills and the theoretical as well as practical implications. Whereas the chapter immediately preceding gave the results thematically, here we are interested as much in putting these results in a perspective of the whole body of research--where they either contradict, build upon or simply complement our existing knowledge.

The constructivist-interpretivist perspective (Denzin and Lincoln, 2018) guides this research in terms of conceptualising soft skills and analysing the latter people as dynamic, socially embedded skills, which develop in the course of lived experience and not as the fixed individual traits (Cope, 2011; Lackéus, 2015). These findings demonstrate how emotional intelligence, adaptability, leadership, and resiliency are some of the dependent capabilities that the entrepreneurs are mobilising to manoeuvre uncertainty, scarcity of resources and cultural transition.

These skills are both protective in that they provide a buffer against adversity (as shown in Chapter 4) as well as being generative, in the sense that they enhance innovation, find opportunities and form relationships. As these empirical insights are synthesised with relevant theory, the discussion generates a more human-dux, contextually based conception of entrepreneurship--one that places more prominence on the relational and emotional infrastructure that ensures long-term sustainability and increased growth levels.

Notably, the analysis points to blind spots in the literature conceptually namely the understated nature of relational capital as a way in continuing sustainability of the concept of adaptability; and the measures through which horizontal leadership culture can be successful at outperforming hierarchical leadership models in small and medium-size organizations.

5.2 Revisiting the Research Questions

How soft skills lead to the resilience and growth of SMEs entrepreneurs was the central research question that has been answered with the help of a qualitative thematic analysis. Those abilities can be verified as not peripheral or optional so-called nice-to-haves, but rather central enablers of survival, adaptation and strategic growth in resource-scarce contexts.

One, the study substantiates earlier arguments that emotional intelligence, flexibility, resilience, interpersonal communication, are the major determinants when going through uncertainty (Goleman et al., 2013; Bullough & Renko, 2013). But the results take this a step further by demonstrating that the skills used in SMEs extend outside the crisis in mitigation, to influence strategic decisions daily such as client trust-building (P5), credibility in relationship-oriented markets (P4, P6) and emotional regulation to sustain performance through pressure (P1, P2).

Second, as according to the opinion of Kolb (1984), who developed the experiential learning theory, and Cope (2011), who wrote on the topic of entrepreneurial learning, the data proves that these skills are mostly acquired through a pattern of trial, contemplation, modification in emotionally stimulating situations. However, this perspective is further echoed by the fact that the findings in SMEs outlined that, whereas strategic flexibility is central towards flexibility, relational capital, i.e. trust among clients, partners, and peers is also equally important towards adaptability, which is highly under-represented in the existing literature.

Third, the findings come out to question the conventional models of leadership by showing how horizontal leadership, as well as personalised leadership, prove effective in a SME environment. Contrary to hierarchies presumed in most of the existing leadership literature (Henry et al., 2016), the participants identified the relationally oriented collaborative style that resulted in durable resilience, cohesion, and cross-cultural negotiation.

All in all, the paper can conclude that soft skills are part of mutually supportive sets: adaptability can provide a booster to resilience; resilience can reinforce the credibility

that leadership calls upon; and leadership will foster the trust that will allow emotional intelligence to produce measurable business performance. To a large extent, this integrated model is not found in the SME scholarship that discusses such competencies by themselves.

5.3 Integration with the Literature

5.3.1 Interdependent and Dynamic Skills

Although most of the previous studies consider emotional intelligence, adaptability, and resilience as distinct constructs (Martin et al., 2013; Ayala & Manzano, 2014), the study demonstrates that they are highly interconnected in reality. Such flexibility gives resilience the strength it needs and vice versa, emotional regulation provides flexibility which is a necessary cycle in order to be able to handle pressure. This escalation can specifically be seen in SMEs as they have close proximity to their clients and scant operational cushions, therefore integration of skills is not a choice but rather a requirement.

5.3.2 Experiential Learning as the Heart of the Development Pathway.

The results are consistent with those found in Kolb (1984), Pittaway and Cope (2007) which show that learning about entrepreneurs is mostly experiential and frequently based on discomfort, failure and reflection on adapting. But this paper covers an additional dimension: culture, individual values, identity drives a big role in how people can view challenges as an opportunity to evolve or as a threat that affects the direction of skill acquisition.

5.3.3 Relationally Constructed Resilience

Bolstering the ecosystemic concept formulated by Williams & Shepherd (2016), in this case, resilience can be demonstrated to be a socially co-constructed tendency occupied by informal networks, client loyalty, and peer collaborations. However, in contrast to a lot of the extant literature, this paper notes a ceiling effect that can be reached with respect to relational resilience, especially when lacking systemic institutional support,

entrepreneurs will be exposed to burnout regardless of their well-developed interpersonal skills.

5.3.4 Creativity With constraint

As per the notion of bricolage postulated by Baker and Nelson (2005), such SMEs regularly faced resource scarcity that fostered creativity where an iterative solution was informed by feedback which was provided by customers as well as the community (Lans et al., 2014). And more importantly the results indicate that limitations prompting innovation are not only of a stimulating but also of a defining nature, and the reason is that in case of limited resources, with constraints, expectations of what might be realized do become rigid, there is thus a dual edge on working under pressure.

5.3.5 Difficulty of Trait-Based Models

In the end, the research directly opposes the universality of the constructs of soft skills that remain static and trait-based (Unger et al., 2011; Kyllonen, 2013). The data demonstrate that these competencies are dynamic, changed by time, and informed by the interaction of lived experience and context of relationship, which hints at the need to perform more longitudinal or process-oriented studies of the competency area.

5.4 Theoretical Contributions

This research further develops theory in five important ways regarding entrepreneurship:

5.4.1 Re-packaging Soft Skills as Emergent Competencies

The evidence makes soft skills not only dynamic, but also contextually-mediated capabilities, with which static, trait-based views do not concur (Unger et al., 2011; Kyllonen, 2013). They develop in a system of challenge, reflection, and adaptation that depends on cultural background, availability of resources, and personal values of the entrepreneur. This reframing goes beyond who the entrepreneur is, to how the entrepreneur develops over time.

5.4.2 Barriers to surface patterns of interconnected skill clusters.

Results disapprove the fragmented way of using skills in most of the SME studies. Emotional intelligence, adaptability, resilience and leadership are demonstrated to work in mutually reinforcing clusters and as one aspect of these grows the others are enhanced. This provides a less detached system of comprehending entrepreneurial capability particularly in turbulent setting.

5.4.3 Relational Resilience

Recapitulating on the works of Williams and Shepherd (2016), resilience is not a personal coping resource but a socially constructed resource. It is also maintained via client reciprocity, peer referrals and community connection which have been ignored in literature on entrepreneurship. This subtlety has important policy implications where microenterprise is concerned, especially in disadvantaged and underserved environments.

5.4.4 The Making of the Entrepreneur

The development of the entrepreneurial identity and its transformation is shaped by the soft skills, and the statement resonates with those of Down & Warren (2008). Turning points Strategic priorities and relational behaviours are also recalibrated whenever there is a change in self-concept such as a company-wide turn around or a major business change of direction.

5.4.5 Contextualisation of Entrepreneurial Theory based on Inclusion

This study is supported by migration owned, female owned and non-tech SMEs that have expanded the field and range of soft skills and resilience theories to high-growth, tech-oriented sectors, which have so far occupied most of the research.

5.5 Practical and Policy Implications

5.5.1 For Practice

Introduce Soft Skills in Entrepreneurial Education: Hard skills should be taught through incorporation of experiential and reflective learning in situations, which replicate the pressure of the real world. Emotional intelligence, flexibility, adaptability, and resiliency can be developed along with technical skills through role-play, scenario planning, or storytelling-can be used by means of learning.

Mentorship as a Soft Skills Booster: Structured mentoring, peer-coaching programmes can also speed up delivery of relational and adaptive competencies, especially where the entrepreneurs are new to business activities.

Build Relational Capital: Build trust networks of people who can be more than a source of sales, but strategic safety nets in the areas of making decisions, providing of emotional support and supporting the business through hard times.

5.5.2 For Policy

Narrow Success Metrics: Programmes should relocate growth-based KPIs to involve other KPIs like resilience capacity and relational capital to demonstrate the sustainability of the processes.

Specific Interventions to Meet the Needs of Underrepresented Groups: The issue of resilience gaps revealed in this paper can be narrowed by policies that respond to gender, migration, and sector-specific factors.

Context Sensitive, Long Term Interventions: Training is a one-size-fits all problem; the policy cannot be designed to generalize the cultural background of the entrepreneur, the stage of business and how the industry dynamics work.

These implication suggests an evident and singular priority, that is, to ensure the design of entrepreneurship ecosystems where skills and structural support are synthesized

knowing that the most talented entrepreneurs are bearers of threats when deprived of enabling environments.

5.6 Future Research Directions

Although the work contributes to a much more subtle picture of entrepreneurial resilience and growth as supported by soft skills, a number of opportunities in further research course still lie open.

5.6.1 Longitudinal Monitoring of the Developments in Soft Skills

Since, in this case, soft skills were portrayed as dynamic and contingent abilities, additional studies should entail the use of longitudinal designs to understand the way in which they change throughout varying stages of the business, crisis, and market environment. These designs can also show the aspects of whether some skills plateau or they turn into different competencies as the time runs.

5.6.2 Intersectional and Inclusive Studies

This research synthesised the views of migrant-led and female-led SMEs and a more intersectional study may further unwind how rising to prominence may be connected to factors like gender, race, social-economic status and migration background.

5.6.3 Quantitative Integration

Integrating the qualitative feedback on soft skills with any quantitative performance measures to gauge the piecewise connection between soft skills and business performance, including revenues stability, client retention, or innovation rates may deliver a more comprehensive picture of how soft skills lead to improved business performance.

5.6.4 Looking at Informal and Resource-Constrained Settings

Most of the participants did not carry out their activities with any institutional backing, but rather depended on informal networks. Further research to study these informal resilience mechanisms in a more systematic way must further be conducted especially in developing or transition economies.

5.6.5 Methodological Innovation

The participatory and visual research practices like photo-elicitation, storytelling workshops, or digital diaries would be preferable in order to capture the non-verbal, embodied dynamics of enacting soft skills that would be lost in traditional interviews.

5.7 Final Reflections

The study redefines what it means to be an entrepreneur as a whole human experience, and not merely technical skills and competitive decisions, the success of which is comprised by the domains of feelings, relationships and flexibility using which the entrepreneur can handle the risk and maintain success.

Soft skills are emotional intelligence, adaptability, resilience, leadership, and relational capital, and the fact that they did not come out as fringe as they were initially perceived but rather as part of the infrastructure of entrepreneurship. They were revealed to be fluid, mutually reinforcing, and insisted on living experiences of the participants.

This study is an effort to overcome this situation by incorporating the insights of the above-mentioned findings into current theory as an attempt to overcome the current tendency to turn soft skills into separate and unchanging characteristics. Rather, it suggests that they can be conceptualized as interrelated groupings that are always formed and reshaped through the cycles of challenge, reflection, and adaptation and strongly affected by social and cultural contexts.

The evidence also tends to point out the existential paradox where soft skills, although to some degree able to bridge structural gaps, are not a big deal to counter the enabling conditions (e.g. mentorship, financing, enabling policy frameworks) that can sustain entrepreneurship in the long run. Such systemic support is lacking hence the best entrepreneurs are left vulnerable to the weaknesses of their environments.

To educators, policymakers and support organisations the implication is clear: entrepreneurial capacity-building should be viewed, not as a temporary skill-building activity, but, rather, as a long-term, relational process. This will not only help develop the resilience of individuals but develop a more inclusive, sustainable entrepreneurial ecosystem.

In a sense therefore, this paper highlights how in the heart of all entrepreneurship is not only the opportunity in discovering an opportunity only, but the emotional and relation ability to go after it-day in day or day out of challenge onto another definition of challenge.

CHAPTER 6 – CONCLUSION

6.1 Introduction

This paper has explored the meaning of soft skills and their importance in the resilience and growth of the small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). It employed a qualitative interpretivist approach to investigate how entrepreneurs develop, learn and use non-technical skills in environments of uncertainty, threatened circumstances, and resource constraints. The sample was heterogeneous and included women entrepreneurs and migrants as well as solo entrepreneurs that ensured a variety of perspectives and life experience.

This chapter summarises the most important thematic findings, matches them with the literature, describes theoretical and practical contributions, indicates unexpected results, mentions limitations, and suggests a future research direction. It includes policy implications, education, and entrepreneurial practice implications as well.

Backing away on giving the idiosyncratic instances, therefore, the analysis reveals how the emotional intelligence, adaptability, resiliency, creativity, communication and leadership abilities are adaptive, relational and learnable ones, which make the entrepreneurs not only able to survive through tough times but also be resourceful to create opportunities; build trust and maintain long-term business viability.

6.2 Key Findings and Contributions

The researcher concludes that emotional intelligence, resilience, adaptability, creativity, communication and leadership are at the centre of entrepreneurial practice in SMEs. They are skills that are not learned sequentially or necessarily through purely formal methods, but form through experience, reflection, crisis, and iterative learning—all many of which are foundational to the experience-based learning models (Cope, 2011; Kolb, 1984), however, and again, with the distinct difference of exemplifying their adaptive quality.

Resilience is reframed in the research as a socially mediated ability based on the ability to regulate emotions, motivation, adaptation and identify work. Similar to the findings of Brundin et al. (2008) and Bullough and Renko (2013), entrepreneurs who are able to

turn adversity into opportunities, who are able to manage a high degree of emotional stability, and lead their businesses or organizations empathetically have a better chance of succeeding within environments of high volatility.

The findings so far indicated that structural and contextual aspects (culture, migration status, the type of entrepreneurial ecosystem) influenced the perception, value, as well as the application of soft skill, which harmonized with the criticism of the context-blind entrepreneurship theory put forth by Ahl & Nelson (2015).

The aspect of relationship also came out with a lot of distinction: unorganized networks of interaction, peer-to-peer influence, and social education all added to the interpersonal skills to make the concept of entrepreneurship socially rooted (Pittaway & Cope, 2007; Fletcher, 2007). Shared learning and mentorship as well as emotional reciprocity were especially significant in conditions of low availability.

6.2.1 Surprising and Notable Findings

Although it was not surprising to see soft skills as the key ingredient to entrepreneurial success, it is important to note that two results were especially pronounced.

First, the result was the appearance of a new mechanism of resilience relational trust. Trust was found to serve more than simply a positive by-product of good relationships; it served as a type of insurance investment in terms of social capital particularly at times of crisis. Using established trust, entrepreneurs were able to acquire resources, maintain loyalty and increase post-crisis recovery speed. This observation can add to existing literature on the importance of social capital by shifting the importance of trust as a facilitator of potential to the situation where it is an active barrier to volatility.

Second, emotional intelligence was felt as a dynamic and changing ability. They explained enormous changes in one hour, in one minute in their ability to regulate their emotions across time, and often precipitated by emotionally loaded failures, market shocks or other turning points in their lives. Such experiences redefined emotional intelligence as a flexible and teachable skill, involving once again the efficacy of process-oriented view in entrepreneurship studies.

The two findings have useful nuance to existing theory by pointing out the underdeveloped extra routes in adopting, growing, and remaining to be psychologically healthy in an extremely difficult setting by entrepreneurs. They also provide practical implications of training and support programmes where they consider trust-building and emotional self-regulation as ongoing priorities of development being central as opposed to personality traits that can be possessed at the outset.

6.3 Theoretical and Practical Implications

Theoretically, this research supports a constructivism perspective of emerging, relational, and situation-focused views on soft skills. These capabilities are more fluid abilities than inbuilt traits, responsive and developing with lived experience, critical reflection and existent social interaction (Down & Warren, 2008; Nowell et al., 2017). The view refutes the universalist and trait-based models and, instead, situates entrepreneurship within particular realities of culture, social, and emotional contexts.

Using this evidence of interdependence between the soft skills, the research findings can be used to further build on the existing models by demonstrating the interdependence of adaptability, resilience, and emotional intelligence as mutually supporting clusters. These clusters not simply serve as bulwarks against adversity but they also serve as pump-primers of as well opportunity creation; a subtleness that is minimized in mainstream small- to medium-sized enterprise literature. Voice diversity, especially the one of the underrepresented and resource-limited situations, adds further value to the argument in Favor of a more inclusive and equity-oriented entrepreneurial theory (Ahl & Nelson, 2015).

In practical terms, the results will have implications to a number of stakeholders:

To the instructor: To foster the way that the entrepreneurship students learn and experience, entrepreneurship programmes must incorporate experiential and reflective learning environments with pressures similar to those in the real world, promoting iterative dexterity via trial, feedback and adjustments. Mentorship and P2P exchange should form part of it.

To policy makers: The support mechanisms must acknowledge the emotional and relational abilities as the strategic resources especially among entrepreneurs who encounter the systemic limitations. Adaptive interventions may include long-term mentoring programs, network-enhancing programs and culturally competent interventions.

In the case of incubators/accelerators: In addition to training on technical skills, there should be improvements in the aspects of emotional capabilities, collaborative leadership, and identity-based coaching with strategy and financial assistance.

Community-based organisations: Capitalising on the relational aspect of soft skills can help in helping build both individual and group capacity towards entrepreneurship by establishing spaces where problems can be solved together through trust.

Overall, the implications of the study made would support a human-centred, context-responsive frame of entrepreneurship support that would take into account the lived realities of founders and the development of adaptive and relational skills as a long-term and strategically important process.

6.4 Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Although this research provides sophisticated gifts about the role of soft-skills in entrepreneurial resiliency and expansion, there are some methodological and contextual limitations that has to be addressed.

To begin with, the small purposive sample that is diverse in gender, migration status, and sector that the entrepreneurs are involved in, casts doubt on the statistical generalisability of the inferences. This is concerned with analytical generalisation as opposed to making universally applicable conclusions by means of transferring the insights made to a similar situation.

Second, using self-reported stories can be associated with the danger of retrospective reconstruction and social desirability bias (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). Though the

method of member checking and reflexive journaling was used to increase the credibility of the research, the fact is that qualitative research is by its nature construed interpretive and as such findings are created collaboratively, and influenced by the researcher positionality.

Third, the cross-sectional cross design of the study is capturing the status of the subject of inquiry at one time. This restricts the likelihood to follow the development of soft skills throughout the years or to observe the dynamics of soft skills in relation to changing financial-economic conditions, personal changes or the stages of business evolution.

These constraints leave a number of areas that can be explored in future:

Longitudinal designs might track entrepreneurs in various stages of the venture, especially when the venture reaches a critical event like business pivots, scaling or post-failure recovery.

Wider contextual coverage needs to cover informal economies, rural businesses, migrant-led businesses and community-based projects in extensions of the demand to widen and diversify the field of entrepreneurship research (George et al., 2012; Al-Dajani & Marlow, 2010).

The embodied, emotional, and non verbal elements of entrepreneurial learning and resilience might be recorded through methodological diversification by means of diary studies, ethnography, participatory visual approaches, which would not come out in the interviews alone.

Sectoral or cross-cultural comparisons might find out as to whether some of these soft skills are universal in nature or culture-based and how the institutional conditions might influence its growth and deployment.

Lastly, the reflexive awareness implies that the interpretivist position employed by the researcher put more focus on the relational/affective aspects. These reinforce consistency within the study, but complementary research studies which use other

epistemological perspectives may challenge the validity and generalisations of such results.

6.5 Final Thought

This study places soft skills as the main strategy how entrepreneurial survival, reorganization, and prosperity might look like long-term. Honed on uncertainty, polished by reflection and ensured by networks of trust, these are the skills which underlie emotional and strategic resilience.

The study presents a more diverse and less technocratic picture of entrepreneurship, based on the experiences of entrepreneurs operating under resource constraints, cultural shifts, and structural disadvantages, which has a more humane perspective of perceiving entrepreneurship as the dynamic interaction of the individual agency, the availability of social capital and favorable structures.

In practice, this implies the integration of experiential and reflective learning into curriculum learning by educators; building long-term, context-sensitive sets of support by policy-makers; and making trust, self-awareness, and adaptability key strategic assets of practitioners.

Finally, entrepreneurship does not only mean making businesses, it is about making people. The identification of this has enabled policy, research and practice to foster the development of entrepreneurial ecosystems, in which human capability is, in the long term, the most sustainable source of innovation, resilience and social improvements.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A – Participant Information Sheet (English)

Participant Information Sheet

Title of the Study: *The Role of Soft Skills in Entrepreneurial Resilience and Growth*

WHO I AM AND WHAT THIS STUDY IS ABOUT

My name is Macarena Rivera Aguirre, and I am conducting this research as part of my Master's degree at National College of Ireland. The purpose of this study is to explore how soft skills – such as communication, adaptability, creativity, and emotional intelligence – contribute to the resilience and growth of entrepreneurs. This research is qualitative in nature and aims to gain a deeper understanding of entrepreneurs' experiences, rather than to test or prove any predetermined outcomes.

WHAT WILL TAKING PART INVOLVE?

If you agree to take part, you will be invited to participate in a one-to-one interview lasting approximately 60 minutes. The discussion will focus on your experiences as an entrepreneur, how you have developed and applied soft skills, and how these skills have influenced your ability to overcome challenges and grow your business. With your permission, the interview will be audio-recorded to ensure accuracy. Interviews will take place online via [Zoom/Teams] or in a mutually agreed safe location.

WHY HAVE YOU BEEN INVITED TO TAKE PART?

You have been invited because you are an entrepreneur with relevant experience and insights that can help explore the role of soft skills in business resilience and growth. Your participation will help build a richer understanding of this topic from real-life experiences.

DO YOU HAVE TO TAKE PART?

Participation is entirely voluntary. You may refuse to answer any question, and you may withdraw from the study at any time without providing a reason. If you withdraw, any data you have provided will be deleted and will not be included in the analysis.

WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE RISKS AND BENEFITS OF TAKING PART?

This research does not involve any anticipated physical or psychological risks. You may find it reflective and rewarding to share your entrepreneurial journey, and your insights could contribute to greater academic and practical understanding of soft skills in entrepreneurship. However, there is no direct personal benefit from participation.

WILL TAKING PART BE CONFIDENTIAL?

All information you provide will remain confidential and your identity will be anonymised in the research report and any related outputs. Your name and any identifying details will be replaced with pseudonyms. Confidentiality will only be broken if there is a strong belief of serious risk of harm to yourself or others, or if disclosure of a serious criminal offence is required by law.

HOW WILL INFORMATION YOU PROVIDE BE RECORDED, STORED AND PROTECTED?

The interview will be audio-recorded with your consent. Signed consent forms and original audio files will be securely stored in encrypted folders on a password-protected device accessible only to the researcher. These will be retained until after my degree has been conferred. Transcripts with all identifying details removed will be kept for a further two years before being permanently deleted. Under freedom of information legislation, you are entitled to access the information you have provided at any time.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO THE RESULTS OF THE STUDY?

The findings will be used solely for my Master's dissertation and will not be published elsewhere. The dissertation will be submitted to National College of Ireland and may be available through its digital repository.

WHO SHOULD YOU CONTACT FOR FURTHER INFORMATION?

Researcher: Macarena Andrea Rivera Aguirre
Master's student, National College of Ireland
Email: x24100030@student.ncirl.ie
Supervisor: Dr TJ McCabe
HRM and Research Methods, National College of Ireland
Email: thomas.mccabe@ncirl.ie

THANK YOU

Thank you for considering taking part in this study. Your participation is highly valued and will contribute to a better understanding of how entrepreneurs navigate challenges and achieve growth through soft skills.

Appendix B – Participant Information Sheet (Spanish)

Hoja de Información para Participantes

Título del estudio: *El papel de las habilidades blandas en la resiliencia y el crecimiento emprendedor*

QUIÉN SOY Y DE QUÉ TRATA ESTE ESTUDIO

Mi nombre es Macarena Rivera Aguirre y estoy realizando esta investigación como parte de mi Maestría en el National College of Ireland. El propósito de este estudio es explorar cómo las habilidades blandas – como la comunicación, adaptabilidad, creatividad e inteligencia emocional – contribuyen a la resiliencia y el crecimiento de los emprendedores. Esta investigación es de carácter cualitativo y busca comprender en profundidad las experiencias de los emprendedores, más que probar o confirmar resultados predefinidos.

¿EN QUÉ CONSISTIRÁ PARTICIPAR?

Si acepta participar, será invitado/a a una entrevista individual de aproximadamente 60 minutos. La conversación se centrará en sus experiencias como emprendedor/a, cómo ha desarrollado y aplicado habilidades blandas, y cómo estas han influido en su capacidad para superar desafíos y hacer crecer su negocio. Con su permiso, la entrevista será grabada en audio para garantizar precisión. Las entrevistas se llevarán a cabo en línea vía Zoom/Teams o en un lugar seguro acordado mutuamente.

¿POR QUÉ HA SIDO INVITADO/A A PARTICIPAR?

Se le ha invitado porque es un/a emprendedor/a con experiencia y conocimientos relevantes que pueden ayudar a explorar el papel de las habilidades blandas en la resiliencia y el crecimiento empresarial. Su participación contribuirá a construir una comprensión más amplia de este tema a partir de experiencias reales.

¿TIENE QUE PARTICIPAR?

Su participación es completamente voluntaria. Puede negarse a responder cualquier pregunta y retirarse del estudio en cualquier momento sin necesidad de dar explicaciones. Si se retira, cualquier dato que haya proporcionado será eliminado y no se incluirá en el análisis.

¿CUÁLES SON LOS POSIBLES RIESGOS Y BENEFICIOS DE PARTICIPAR?

Esta investigación no implica riesgos físicos ni psicológicos previstos. Puede resultar enriquecedor y satisfactorio reflexionar y compartir su trayectoria emprendedora, y sus aportes podrían contribuir a una mayor comprensión académica y práctica del papel de las habilidades blandas en el emprendimiento. Sin embargo, no existe un beneficio personal directo por participar.

¿SERÁ CONFIDENCIAL SU PARTICIPACIÓN?

Toda la información que proporcione será tratada de forma confidencial y su identidad se anonimizará en el informe de investigación y en cualquier resultado relacionado. Su nombre y

cualquier detalle que pueda identificarle serán reemplazados por seudónimos. La confidencialidad solo se romperá si existe una fuerte sospecha de riesgo grave de daño para usted u otras personas, o si la ley requiere informar sobre un delito grave.

¿CÓMO SE REGISTRARÁ, ALMACENARÁ Y PROTEGERÁ LA INFORMACIÓN QUE PROPORCIONE?

La entrevista será grabada en audio con su consentimiento. Los formularios de consentimiento firmados y los archivos de audio originales se almacenarán de forma segura en carpetas cifradas en un dispositivo protegido con contraseña, accesible solo para la investigadora. Estos se conservarán hasta que se otorgue mi título. Las transcripciones sin información identificatoria se mantendrán durante dos años adicionales antes de ser eliminadas permanentemente. Según la legislación de libertad de información, usted tiene derecho a acceder a la información que haya proporcionado en cualquier momento.

¿QUÉ SUCEDERÁ CON LOS RESULTADOS DEL ESTUDIO?

Los resultados se utilizarán únicamente para mi tesis de Maestría y no se publicarán en otro lugar. La tesis se presentará en el National College Of Ireland y podrá estar disponible a través de su repositorio digital.

¿A QUIÉN CONTACTAR PARA MÁS INFORMACIÓN?

Investigadora:

Macarena Andrea Rivera Aguirre
Estudiante de Maestría, National College of Ireland
Email: x24100030@student.ncirl.ie

Supervisor:

Dr. TJ McCabe
HRM and Research Methods, National College of Ireland
Email: thomas.mccabe@ncirl.ie

Appendix C – Consent Form (English)

Participant Consent Form

Title of project: *The Role of Soft Skills in Entrepreneurial Resilience and Growth*

Consent to take part in research

- I, _____ voluntarily agree to participate in this research study.
- I understand I can withdraw at any time or refuse to answer any question without consequences.
- I may withdraw permission to use my interview data within two weeks after the interview; the material will then be deleted.
- I have had the study purpose and nature explained to me in writing and had the opportunity to ask questions.
- Participation involves a one-to-one interview (~60 minutes) discussing my entrepreneurial experiences, soft skills, resilience, and business growth.
- I understand there is no direct personal benefit from participating.
- I agree to my interview being audio-recorded.
- All information I provide will be treated confidentially.
- My identity will remain anonymous in any report by changing my name and disguising any identifying details.
- Disguised extracts from my interview may be quoted in the Master's dissertation submitted to National College of Ireland which may be stored in the university repository.
- If I report that I or someone else is at risk of harm, the researcher may have to inform relevant authorities.
- Signed consent forms and original audio recordings will be stored securely on a password-protected device accessible only to the researcher until after my degree is conferred.
- An anonymised transcript will be retained for two years after the exam board date before permanent deletion.
- I may access the information I have provided at any time while it is stored.
- I may contact the researcher or supervisor for clarification or further information.

Researcher:

Macarena Andrea Rivera Aguirre, Master's student, National College of Ireland, Email: x24100030@student.ncirl.ie

Supervisor:

Dr TJ McCabe, HRM and Research Methods, National College of Ireland, Email: thomas.mccabe@ncirl.ie

Signature of research participant

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Signature of researcher

I believe the participant is giving informed consent to participate in this study.

Appendix D – Consent Form (Spanish)

Formulario de Consentimiento del Participante

Título del proyecto: *El papel de las habilidades blandas en la resiliencia y el crecimiento emprendedor*

Consentimiento para participar en la investigación

- Yo, _____, acepto voluntariamente participar en este estudio de investigación.
- Entiendo que puedo retirarme en cualquier momento o negarme a responder cualquier pregunta sin consecuencias.
- Puedo retirar mi permiso para usar los datos de mi entrevista dentro de las dos semanas posteriores a la misma; en tal caso, el material será eliminado.
- He recibido por escrito la explicación del propósito y la naturaleza del estudio, y he tenido la oportunidad de hacer preguntas.
- La participación implica una entrevista individual (~60 minutos) sobre mis experiencias emprendedoras, habilidades blandas, resiliencia y crecimiento empresarial.
- Entiendo que no obtendré un beneficio personal directo por participar.
- Acepto que mi entrevista sea grabada en audio.
- Toda la información que proporcione será tratada de forma confidencial.
- Mi identidad permanecerá anónima en cualquier informe, cambiando mi nombre y ocultando cualquier detalle que pueda identificarme.
- Extractos enmascarados de mi entrevista podrán citarse en la tesis de maestría presentada a National College of Ireland la cual podría almacenarse en el repositorio de la universidad.
- Si informo que yo u otra persona está en riesgo de sufrir daño, el/la investigador/a podría tener que notificarlo a las autoridades pertinentes.
- Los formularios de consentimiento firmados y las grabaciones de audio originales se almacenarán de forma segura en un dispositivo protegido con contraseña, accesible solo para el/la investigador/a, hasta que se otorgue mi título.
- Una transcripción anonimizada se conservará durante dos años después de la fecha del tribunal examinador, antes de ser eliminada permanentemente.
- Puedo acceder a la información que he proporcionado en cualquier momento mientras esté almacenada.
- Puedo contactar al/la investigador/a o al/la supervisor/a para obtener aclaraciones o más información.

Investigadora:

Macarena Andrea Rivera Aguirre, Estudiante de Maestría, National College of Ireland, Email: x24100030@student.ncirl.ie

Supervisor:

Dr. TJ McCabe, HRM and Research Methods, National College of Ireland, Email: thomas.mccabe@ncirl.ie

Firma del participante de la investigación

Firma: _____ Fecha: _____

Firma del investigador/a

Considero que el/la participante está dando su consentimiento informado para participar en este

Firma: _____ Fecha: _____

Appendix E – Semi-Structured Interview Guide (English)

Interview Guide

1. Personal and Business Context

- Could you briefly tell me how your business started?
- What is your current role in the company and what are your main responsibilities?
- What sector does your business operate in, and how many years has it been running?

2. Challenging Experiences

- What has been one of the most difficult or uncertain moments you have faced as an entrepreneur?
- How did you react to that situation, both emotionally and strategically?
- What kinds of decisions did you have to make under pressure or uncertainty?

3. Development of Soft Skills

- Which personal or interpersonal skills do you believe were essential in overcoming those challenges?
- How did you learn or develop those skills? Was it something that came through experience?
- Do you recall any situation that changed the way you lead or communicate?

4. Application of Soft Skills

- Could you share a concrete example where using a soft skill (such as empathy, adaptability, leadership, communication...) made a significant difference?
- How do you currently manage stress, conflicts, or changes within your business?
- What strategies do you use to stay resilient and motivated under external pressure?

5. Learning, Networks, and Support

- Have you had any mentor, network of contacts, or external support that has influenced your way of leading?
- What role did your environment (family, colleagues, clients) play in your development as an entrepreneur?

6. Reflection and Personal Evolution

- How would you describe your evolution as an entrepreneur from when you started until today?
- What skills would you like to continue strengthening or learning?
- If you had to advise someone who is just starting their business, what would you tell them?

Appendix F – Semi-Structured Interview Guide (Spanish)

Guía de entrevista

1. Contexto personal y del emprendimiento

- ¿Podrías contarme brevemente cómo nació tu emprendimiento?
- ¿Cuál es tu rol actual dentro de la empresa y cuáles son tus principales responsabilidades?
- ¿En qué rubro opera tu empresa y cuántos años lleva en funcionamiento?

2. Experiencias desafiantes

- ¿Cuál ha sido uno de los momentos más difíciles o inciertos que enfrentaste como emprendedora?
- ¿Cómo reaccionaste ante esa situación, tanto emocional como estratégicamente?
- ¿Qué tipo de decisiones tuviste que tomar bajo presión o con incertidumbre?

3. Desarrollo de habilidades blandas (soft skills)

- ¿Qué habilidades personales o interpersonales creés que fueron fundamentales para superar esos desafíos?
- ¿Cómo aprendiste o desarrollaste esas habilidades? ¿Fue algo que surgió con la experiencia?
- ¿Recordás alguna situación que haya cambiado tu forma de liderar o comunicarte?

4. Aplicación de habilidades blandas

- ¿Podés contarme un ejemplo concreto en el que el uso de alguna habilidad blanda (como empatía, adaptabilidad, liderazgo, comunicación...) haya marcado una diferencia importante?
- ¿Cómo gestionás actualmente el estrés, los conflictos o los cambios dentro de tu empresa?
- ¿Qué estrategias utilizás para mantenerte resiliente y motivada ante la presión del entorno?

5. Aprendizaje, redes y apoyo

- ¿Contaste con algún mentor, red de contactos o apoyo externo que haya influido en tu forma de liderar?
- ¿Qué rol tuvo tu entorno (familia, colegas, clientes) en tu desarrollo como emprendedora?

6. Reflexión y evolución personal

- ¿Cómo describirías tu evolución como emprendedora desde que comenzaste hasta hoy?
- ¿Qué habilidades te gustaría seguir fortaleciendo o aprendiendo?
- Si tuvieras que aconsejar a alguien que recién empieza su emprendimiento, ¿qué le dirías?