
Understanding black women opportunity entrepreneurs' networking behavior: navigating intersectionality in South Africa's entrepreneurial ecosystem

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Abstract

Purpose – Globally, black women entrepreneurs represent the fastest-growing group of entrepreneurs, driving significant economic and social impact. This research timely responds to calls aiming for varied research contexts and for investigating women entrepreneurs in non-Western contexts. This study examines networking within South Africa's entrepreneurial ecosystems (EEs) to contextualize theory across diverse cultural and socio-economic settings, thereby deepening understanding of the compounded barriers faced by black women entrepreneurs at the intersection of race and gender.

Design/methodology/approach – A qualitative research design was adopted to explore individual experiences while identifying patterns and connections that can enhance our understanding of black women's networking behavior to navigate the EEs in South Africa.

Findings – The study's findings reveal three unique themes which contribute to women's proactive networking behavior, involving cross-gender and cross-race relations. Furthermore, we learn how black women entrepreneurs exploit strategic networking opportunities to grow their tech ventures and navigate intersectionality through resilience of being part of a minority group.

Research limitations/implications – EE actors should deliberately introduce allyship programs to enhance black women's position and belonging in various settings through, e.g. mentorship and training programs. Policymakers in other countries could gain key insights from the South African Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment (BBBEE) policy, which positively influence women entrepreneurs' position in EEs.

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Originality/value – Our study links the Intersectionality Theory with Social Network Theory. Previous studies considered gender and networking behavior, without referring to the intersection between gender and race and how this intersection might influence networking behavior.

Keywords Entrepreneurial ecosystem, Networking, Black women, Tech opportunity entrepreneurs, Intersectionality, South Africa

Paper type Research article

1. Introduction

In male-dominated STEM sectors, gender bias and discriminatory practices against women tech entrepreneurs are well documented (Kubberød *et al.*, 2021; Marlow and McAdam, 2015; Treanor, 2022; Reyes and Neergaard, 2023). Women tech entrepreneurs are, therefore, assumed to face challenges in their networking due to gender bias and their underrepresentation in these networks. However, tech entrepreneurs are required to proactively network, particularly in Entrepreneurial Ecosystems (EEs), to access critical resources, such as technology, R&D, market knowledge and financial capital, since the EEs are key enablers for developing high-growth tech ventures (Spigel and Harrison, 2018; Stam and Van de Ven, 2021). Unfortunately, most literature on EEs has taken a gender-neutral approach, assuming these systems and players support all entrepreneurs equally (Brush *et al.*, 2019; Neumeier *et al.*, 2019; Stoker *et al.*, 2024).

Furthermore, most research on women tech entrepreneurs and networking is done in Western countries (McAdam *et al.*, 2019; Stahl *et al.*, 2023; Stoker *et al.*, 2024). Moreover, the major interest lies in white women entrepreneurs and their challenges in gendered spaces, even though some samples also include immigrants and black women (e.g. Ozkazanc-Pan and Clark Muntean, 2018; Neumeier *et al.*, 2019). Hence, little is known about black women entrepreneurs and their experience in navigating EEs and what challenges they face, due to the intersection between gender and ethnicity. Scholars, therefore, argue that inequality positions in bridging social capital across racial and ethnic groups in entrepreneurship are still unexplored empirically (Ozkazanc-Pan and Clark Muntean, 2018; Neumeier *et al.*, 2019; Woldesenbet Beta *et al.*, 2024).

In South Africa, black women entrepreneurs are among the fastest-growing groups of entrepreneurs (Ojediran *et al.*, 2022). Yet, scant research is conducted in South Africa and other emerging countries on women entrepreneurs in STEM and EEs (Treanor, 2022). Only a few studies (e.g. Ojediran *et al.*, 2022) have specifically examined black women opportunity entrepreneurs in STEM in South Africa. The population of opportunity-driven black women entrepreneurs is small, but growing and our research aims to contribute to this underexplored research area. It is therefore important to ask how black women entrepreneurs experience EEs and how they navigate them through their networking. South Africa is a unique research context, imprinted by the history of Apartheid, cultural diversity and the challenges of intersectionality with respect to race, gender and socio-economic inequality, embedded also in STEM and EEs (Sadiki, 2022). Yet, the country also strives to foster social cohesion and nation-building, aiming to bridge historical divides, e.g. through the Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment policy to create a more equitable, inclusive and transformed economic landscape in South Africa (van De Rheede, 2022). It is therefore timely to investigate women's networking in EEs in other parts of the world, such as South Africa, to contextualize theory in varied cultural and socio-economic contexts (Treanor, 2022; Woldesenbet Beta *et al.*, 2024). Accordingly, we formulate the following research question:

RQ. What is the networking behavior of black women tech entrepreneurs, as they navigate gender and racial biases in the South African Entrepreneurial Ecosystem while developing their high-growth ventures?

Social network theory is widely used to understand networks and networking behaviors (Granovetter, 1983), with some studies focusing on the differences between men's and

women's networking behaviors, preferences and tendencies (Ibarra, 1997; Brands *et al.*, 2022; Stahl *et al.*, 2023; Stoker *et al.*, 2024). In our study, we link intersectionality theory to social network theory to investigate challenges related to both gender and race in women's networking. The Intersectionality Theory of Crenshaw (1991) originally referred to black African American women, raising the question of whether this Western-centric theory could explain the black women's experiences in South Africa. Due to South Africa's unique history, this study will contribute to a deeper understanding of the amplified barriers faced by black women entrepreneurs at the intersection of race and gender.

The research is qualitative, investigating through research interviews the first generation of black women (15) with equal access to STEM education and corporate careers, pioneering as tech opportunity entrepreneurs in spaces where white males are influential. The research contributes by enhancing our understanding of black women's networking and how they shift power inequalities if interaction partners find women as legitimate players and are supportive of their mission. Furthermore, the research indicates how inequalities for black women entrepreneurs can be reduced through "positive" mechanisms, which can further enhance their position and inclusion in EEs, which is scarcely observed in the literature on women in Western contexts. The implication of our findings will support policy development and guide EE actors to deliberately empower black women entrepreneurs in STEM and EEs.

The article outline is as follows. First, we present theory and relevant literature, including women entrepreneurs' networking in STEM and EEs, intersectionality theory and social network theory. Second, we explain the research context, methodology and the empirical findings. Finally, we highlight the contributions of the findings and introduce future research avenues.

2. Literature review

2.1 EEs for women entrepreneurs – navigating gender bias in masculine contexts

Brush *et al.* (2019) define EEs as dynamic, interdependent systems comprising various actors and factors that collectively support entrepreneurial activities. Key stakeholders in EEs include entrepreneurs, investors, government agencies, universities and support organizations, each playing a vital role in providing resources and opportunities. However, the EE literature often overlooks gender-specific challenges, portraying EEs as gender-neutral, which fails to address the unique challenges faced by women (McAdam *et al.*, 2019; Brush *et al.*, 2019).

In EEs and STEM industries, women are typically underrepresented, with more men holding key positions as technology entrepreneurs, incubator managers, industry experts and investors. Masculine cultures, therefore, dominate and are reinforced (Stoker *et al.*, 2024). Masculine mindsets and behavior are typically linked to aggression, toughness, physical stamina, competitiveness and extreme commitment to work (Reyes and Neergaard, 2023). Furthermore, the high-growth tech entrepreneur, assumed to take risks, scale fast and act independently, is normally personified in a male figure. The "think entrepreneur – think male" paradigm still prevails in EEs, and women entrepreneurs face gendered biases and are perceived as "underperforming" and less ambitious related to growth (Marlow and McAdam, 2013; Reyes and Neergaard, 2023; Stoker *et al.*, 2024). Conversely, women entrepreneurs are often forced to adopt masculine male behaviors, including communication styles and networking strategies, to gain legitimacy (Stahl *et al.*, 2023; Stoker *et al.*, 2024). Nonetheless, women tend to be perceived as less legitimate and capable of pursuing tech entrepreneurship, and EE actors are reluctant to endorse and invest in the venture (Brush *et al.*, 2019; Treanor, 2022). Hence, women entrepreneurs face restricted access to critical resources because EE actors perpetuate gendered norms in incubators and investor milieus (Brush *et al.*, 2019; Neumeyer *et al.*, 2019; Reyes and Neergaard, 2023).

Most research on women tech entrepreneurs navigating EEs is done in Western countries (Stahl *et al.*, 2023; Stoker *et al.*, 2024). Hence, little is known about black women entrepreneurs and their experiences in navigating EEs due to the intersection between gender and ethnicity/race. We therefore draw upon intersectionality theory to develop our analytical framework for studying black women entrepreneurs and their networking in EEs.

2.2 Intersectionality, power and legitimacy of women in STEM, EEs and allyship

Crenshaw (1991) defined intersectionality as the intersection between minority identities, including race and gender. Furthermore, intersectionality theory includes the range of historically emergent social hierarchies and systems of power (Collins, 2019; Martinez-Dy and MacNeil, 2025). The theory recognizes the impact of overlapping social structures shaping women's lived experiences positioned at the axes of two or more oppression systems (Martinez Dy, 2020). Due to South Africa's history of an Apartheid system, the intersectionality between race and gender is amplified and therefore offers an interesting context to understand the first generation of black women and tech entrepreneurs. Crenshaw (1991) originally referred to black African American women, which leaves the question of whether this Western-centric theory can explain black women's experiences in South Africa. Martinez Dy and MacNeil (2025, p. 139) point to "a (mis)conception of a universal black woman's experience that lacks the complexity and nuance of context and multi-dimensional identity". Drawing on Nkomo (2021), we argue that the research contributes to a deeper understanding of the amplified barriers faced by black women entrepreneurs at the intersection of race and gender.

Scholars also view intersectionality theory as a crucial lens for examining multiple identities and the intersection of power (Bhattacharyya *et al.*, 2024). Multiple identities are the set of identities available for individuals to identify with or to be categorized according to, including gender, race, culture, social status, education and professional role (Kang and Bodenhausen, 2015). As such, multiple identities and categorization create an interactive and complex dynamic of race and gender, also representing an opportunity, due to, e.g. shared identities (e.g. STEM education). Moreover, individuals with multiple identities can benefit from switching among different social identities according to their current context, needs and goals (Kang and Bodenhausen, 2015).

As argued, the EE literature lacks explicit studies on the challenges women entrepreneurs encounter due to both gender and race. Some studies, however, have investigated intersectionality, including gender, race, and other minorities in STEM and corporate settings. Most of these studies are conducted in the United States for historical reasons, e.g. the civil rights movement, racial justice and the emphasis on diversity, equity and inclusion in organizations (Erskine and Bilimoria, 2019). Even though the United States differs from South Africa, research conducted in STEM sectors using theoretical perspectives such as allyship and intersectionality can shed light on gender and racial barriers. Allyship refers to individuals of dominant groups who can support and empower marginalized and underrepresented groups (Bhattacharyya *et al.*, 2024). An ally is typically an individual who, despite benefiting from systems of power that marginalize others, supports marginalized groups. Since allyship can leverage powerful individuals' position of power and privilege, it can challenge and transform power structures and inequality regimes. To enact as an effective ally is, however, challenging, as power asymmetries exist within allied relationships, and the ally must be conscious of their own privilege and systems of power to understand how to change them.

Studies on allyship in the United States have shown that black women suffer from dual (race and gender) stigmatized identities in STEM organizations and are more likely to attribute experiences of discrimination to their race rather than to their gender. Black women, therefore, face compounding challenges compared to white women in STEM, where both white and black women are underrepresented (Erskine and Bilimoria, 2019; Bhattacharyya *et al.*, 2024).

In the corporate sector in the United States, white allyship is assumed to be effective in integrating and promoting black women from across the African diaspora (Erskine and Bilimoria, 2019). Yet, effective allyship is difficult to achieve, due to intricacies related to white privilege and the complex dynamics of race and gender in organizations (Kang and Bodenhausen, 2015) and in allied relationships (Bhattacharyya *et al.*, 2024).

2.3 Framing our study: previous women entrepreneurship studies in STEM and EEs

In South Africa, during Apartheid, black women were excluded from STEM education and jobs, and STEM sectors and industries have remained male-dominated post-Apartheid (Sikhosana *et al.*, 2023). Only a few studies have been conducted in South Africa investigating challenges and opportunities for black women entrepreneurs in masculine STEM industries and EEs. Ndlovu *et al.* (2023) examined the internal factors for women entrepreneurs in the agricultural industry, showing that networking skills were critical. The study also highlighted gender discrimination as a challenge, but did not explicitly explore racial challenges. With Institutional theory as a theoretical lens, Yusif *et al.* (2024) explored the challenges women technology entrepreneurs face in the ICT sector and how institutions and societies contributed to overcoming barriers.

The few studies investigating obstacles black women entrepreneurs face in EEs, related to finance, market entry and regulatory hurdles. Derera *et al.* (2014) explored the gender-specific barriers to raising start-up capital. The findings revealed that women entrepreneurs received less funding due to gender bias in finance, e.g. various forms of exclusion in entrepreneurial lending practices, making venturing into STEM sectors difficult. Another study explored financial inclusion and intersectionality (gender, income and race) from an informal sector perspective (Simatele and Kabange, 2022). The study draws on the intersectionality theory and shows that women's multiple identities enhanced their opportunity to access resources to pursue their businesses. Furthermore, Gavaza *et al.* (2025) emphasized how access to microfinance influences and supports women entrepreneurs in townships (informal settlements at the outskirts of cities), using empowerment theory as a social framework that helps individuals gain control of their lives by challenging systems of oppression. One more study investigated black women entrepreneurs in the wine industry using a theory explaining legitimacy, identity and cultural capital. The study unpacked how black women challenge barriers to their entrepreneurial identities in their quest to become legitimate in an industry where they have been excluded (Ojediran *et al.*, 2022).

Expanding on prior research, we argue that scholars have not yet described black women's networking in EEs, emphasizing intersectional challenges of gender and race. Moreover, we argue that the complex power dynamics embedded in relationships based on the relative social positions of EE actors and race and gender positions in South Africa can shed light on black women entrepreneurs' networking. Black women are assumed to face compounding challenges and dual discrimination in EEs, but can potentially also leverage intersectionality as a resource and (networking) strategy.

2.4 Women's networking strategies and behaviors in EEs and power dynamics

To understand black women's networking strategies, we build on social network theory and the seminal work of Granovetter (1973, 1983). Granovetter (1973, 1983) distinguished between bonding and bridging social capital and strong and weak ties, which are concepts that slightly overlap. Bonding ties and strong ties typically refer to family and close friends with whom you have high levels of homogeneity and share strong similarities related to class, ethnicity and interest. Bridging and weak ties, on the other hand, are more heterogeneous and often cross "boundaries" such as class, age, ethnicity and interest, involving social groups with dissimilar norms and values. For women in tech spaces, shifting to bridging and weak ties most commonly involves the entry into "unsafe spaces" where they may not feel belonging (Kubberød *et al.*, 2021).

In masculine STEM industries and EEs, the underrepresentation of women is found to affect women's networks and networking behavior (Reyes and Neergaard, 2023; Stoker *et al.*, 2024). For instance, tech incubators, providing resources to entrepreneurs, tend to encourage networking strategies favoring masculine transactional networking behaviors, reinforcing rather than diminishing gender inequalities (Ozkazanc-Pan and Clark Muntean, 2018). Moreover, the same study reported that, even though incubators stimulated connections with weak ties, the women entrepreneurs tended to favor relational networking, using bonding strategies to form strong ties with people they already knew well. The authors further conclude that women relied on strong ties out of necessity and were constrained to build weak ties. Hence, tech incubators tend to reinforce the dominant status quo for male tech entrepreneurs, encouraging transactional networking, hidden through the rhetoric of gender neutrality (Ozkazanc-Pan and Clark Muntean, 2018; Reyes and Neergaard, 2023).

Networking scholars investigating gender and social networks concur that "... gender inequality is reproduced and reinforced in the social interactions that constitute social networks" (Brands *et al.*, 2022, p. 588). Moreover, women are generally regarded as of lower status than men, hindering the development of social networks. Ibarra (1997) and Brands *et al.* (2022) also suggest that women favor relational over weak and transactional ties, induced by basic gender differences or socialized gender variations. Yet, Brands *et al.* (2022) argue that networking scholars investigating women's networks tend to blend choice and constraint arguments, as women's networking behaviors are embedded in structural power dynamics in masculine tech communities, which might impact their "choices" of acquiring resources. Related to this, we align with Brands *et al.* (2022) in arguing that both preference and constraint arguments are incomplete, and neither can explain gender variations in social networks. It is therefore complex to fully understand white and black women's networking behavior (Brands *et al.*, 2022).

Scholars have also used homophily theory to examine the effect of gender homophily, meaning that individuals tend to build relationships with people of the same gender. So, individuals prefer to establish ties with others like themselves, referred to as *choice homophily* (Brands *et al.*, 2022; Ibarra, 1997). Conversely, such preferences can be constrained by the lack of similar interaction partners (Brands *et al.*, 2022), which is common among most women entrepreneurs in STEM and EEs. For black women entrepreneurs in South Africa, constraints pertain to both gender and race. As argued, social network and homophily theory need careful interpretation to explain networking while also considering gender and/or race. This situation is caused by societal and organizational structural power dynamics and inequality faced by both white and black women (Brands *et al.*, 2022).

While being cognizant of networking constraints for women entrepreneurs, we also acknowledge *individual agency*, defined as the maneuvering of social connections in search of network-related advantages (Brands *et al.*, 2022). Women's ability to enact individual agency through leveraging networks can, however, be limited by active hindrance from interaction partners. Partners in EEs can perceive women as less competent and legitimate, influencing relational dynamics. Yet, women can, through agency, change these self-reinforcing dynamics, but extant research gives limited insight into the mechanisms of gender (in) equality (Brands *et al.*, 2022).

Furthermore, Stoker *et al.* (2024) reported difficulties in leveraging female-led collective agency, through, e.g. women-only networks, to change and transform inequality regimes in EEs. Collective agency, in the form of gender homophily related to women's tendency to group with other like-minded women, is, however, documented. This collective agency creates safe spaces for women, provides emotional support, builds self-confidence and fosters social capital in EEs (Stoker *et al.*, 2024).

Although social network theory has gained global reach, it was developed in Western contexts and implicitly invokes white stereotypes. Hence, its relevance for black women in non-Western contexts can be questioned (Brands *et al.*, 2022). Sundararajan (2020) also raised questions about the rationalities of strong-ties versus weak-ties, suggesting these may vary

across cultures. Originally, the concept of weak ties is ties with an individual who is unrelated and unfamiliar, such as acquaintances and strangers, involving some element of risk. Conversely, individuals can also share a common cultural identity and form an attachment to that group, where individuals are so-called *relatively strangers*, and where interpersonal bonds are not required (Sundararajan, 2020). Hence, aligning with both Brands *et al.* (2022) and Sundararajan (2020), we suggest that social networks are culturally anchored and culturally sensitive, and may influence black women's networking behavior. Furthermore, when South African black women entrepreneurs cross race and gender, they may leverage their intersectional identities (Kang and Bodenhausen, 2015) to enhance legitimacy in diverse contexts.

3. Research methodology

3.1 Research context

South Africa is unique, imprinted by the history of Apartheid, characterized by multicultural diversity and intersectionality with respect to race, gender and socio-economic class inequalities embedded in EEs (Sadiki, 2022). Specifically, black women experience discrimination in STEM (Sikhosana *et al.*, 2023). Furthermore, black African women are 30% less likely than men to obtain funding and less than 20% of women entrepreneurs in South Africa obtain funding from formal financial institutions (World Bank, 2021; Asah and Hove-Sibanda, 2025). To address these inequalities, black-owned businesses, under the framework of the Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment (BBBEE) policy, have been instrumental in providing competence, networks and capital (van De Rheede, 2022). The BBBEE policy aims to create a more equitable, inclusive and transformed economic landscape in South Africa by increasing black ownership and control of businesses, skills-development, assisting black-owned SMEs, improving access to finance and creating supply-chain opportunities through Enterprise and Supplier Development (ESD) (Ponte *et al.*, 2007). However, the effectiveness of this policy, particularly the translation to STEM-based EEs, remains unclear. While the BBBEE policy has created an elite class of black entrepreneurs, its impact on fostering a broader, inclusive EEs, is mixed. Challenges such as access to funding, market entry barriers and the sustainability of support mechanisms continue to affect practical outcomes (Vilakazi, 2021).

In South Africa, most women entrepreneurs are motivated by necessity and operate informal businesses. In the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM) report, Bowmaker-Falconer and Meyer (2021) reported that 85.1% of women entrepreneurs started a business due to necessity. The UNDP (2024) indicates that few women entrepreneurs are involved in Tech (ICT) sectors and operate typically low-income retail and small-scale agriculture businesses. Moreover, women accounted for 23% of the workforce in STEM sectors and 13% of STEM graduates in South Africa (South Africa Business Integrator, 2024).

3.2 Research methodology and entrepreneur profiles

The research is qualitative, adopting an interpretivist paradigm, aiming to understand the contextual complexities of black women entrepreneurs in South Africa (Woldesenbet Beta *et al.*, 2024). We used semi-structured interviews to collect data. Each interview lasted between 1 and 1.5 h and was recorded and transcribed. The research-based questions and interview guide focused on: Entrepreneurial ecosystems, Networking behaviors and strategies; Social identities, Intersectionality and Financial support, providing a structure ensuring that key topics are covered while allowing participants to emphasize what they consider most relevant and significant (Bell *et al.*, 2018).

We adopted purposive sampling to select a unique sample of 15 opportunity-driven black women entrepreneurs. Opportunity-driven entrepreneurship refers to the voluntary nature of participation in the start-up process and is motivated by the entrepreneur's expectation of

potential reward of being better off by starting a business, such as autonomy, independence, money, the need for control and social status. It also comprises job creation or innovative products and services aimed at targeting new market niches or needs (Hechavarría *et al.*, 2024, p. 1617).

We used the following inclusion criteria: (1) the black women entrepreneurs must have founded or co-founded their own venture and hold the title of CEO or CTO, ensuring firsthand experience and insights into the entrepreneurial journey, (2) the women must have received early-stage capital and (3) the women entrepreneurs should operate in EEs and STEM sectors in South Africa. This provides a focused approach for women entrepreneurs operating in masculine sectors where women are traditionally underrepresented and where gender-related challenges persist.

To record if any new codes and higher-order themes emerged, saturation was assessed progressively during our analysis, which was updated after each interview. Saturation emerged after interview 10, with most core themes identified, and with interviews 11–12, we could not generate new categories, but could use the data to elaborate on existing themes. By interview 13, no new perspectives or themes emerged, and interviews 14–15 were used to confirm our categories and themes. This process concurs with prior research that emphasized that saturation, in relatively homogeneous samples, often occurs within the first 12 interviews (Saunders *et al.*, 2018). The sample of 15 was thus appropriate, given the unique population.

Table 1 provides an overview of the demographic characteristics of the black women entrepreneurs, while Table 2 highlights their business profiles.

3.3 Data analysis process

An abductive approach (inductive and deductive) was used to code and develop themes through thematic analysis (Bell *et al.*, 2018). The generation of themes from the data is the inductive component, and the deductive element involves the use of pre-ordinate themes, drawn from theoretical frameworks and research (Proudfoot, 2023). The final themes were developed and enhanced by using the above approach, going back and forth between the data and theory.

A relevant and interesting corpus of data was gathered, as shown in Figure 1, which summarizes the three steps used to analyze the data and illustrates the resulting data structure (Gioia *et al.*, 2013). The three steps include: *Step 1: Generating preliminary categories and first-order codes*. In this first step, participants' quotations were used to generate first-order codes, and the data were revisited several times to revise each category. *Step 2: Assimilate first-order codes and develop theoretical categories*. During step 2, patterns in the data were identified and documented through the consolidation of data recorded in each interview, allowing for the development of theoretical categories (Eisenhardt *et al.*, 2016). *Step 3: Delimiting theory by aggregating theoretical dimensions (themes)*. During step 3, we sought underlying dimensions to understand how they fit together into a cohesive picture, and three themes emerged.

4. Findings

The findings in Figure 1 are structured around the three third-order themes. Each theme is explained by referring to second-order themes embedded in the narratives below.

4.1 Proactively bridging racial and gender divides

All women entrepreneurs had university education, mainly in STEM and accounting. Being the first generation of black women accepted in universities for these prestigious studies meant they represented a minority in class (subject to discrimination), but had the opportunity to socialize with white South Africans. Many women also established

Table 1. Profiles of 15 black women entrepreneurs and background

Entrepreneurs	Age group	Education	Working experience	Marital status	Children	Family
Ent A	Thirties	Engineering degree, space engineering	Engineering business	Divorced	Yes	Working, single mother
Ent B	Twenties	Engineering mechanical degree	Tech company founder, Medtech	Single	No	Single mother, teacher
Ent C	Thirties	Chartered Accountant, MBA	Corporate Finance	Married	Yes	Parents working professionals
Ent E	Thirties	PhD life science	Management consulting	Married	Yes	Parents working professionals Spouse is a business partner
Ent F	Twenties	Chartered Accountant	Corporate finance	Single	No	Parents entrepreneurs
Ent G	Twenties	Biochemistry, Computer science degree	Management consulting Digital consultant	Single	No	Working, single mother
Ent H	Twenties	MA – media studies	Entrepreneurial program NGO, Creative Industry	Single	No	Parents in academia
Ent I	Forties	Business Administration	Advertising, Investment marketing	Single	No	Unknown
Ent K	Twenties	Engineering degree	None	Single	No	Parents medical doctors
Ent L	Twenties	Law degree	Corporate law	Married	No	Parents entrepreneurs From Kenya
Ent M	Twenties	Medical degree	Clinical practice	Single	No	Parents working professionals
Ent O	Forties	Biotech, engineering	Corporate/Industry	Married	Yes	Unknown
Ent P	Thirties	Chemistry degree	None	Single	No	Parents business owners Grew up in a township First person in her family to travel abroad
Ent Q	Thirties	Tech ICT studies, Business Administration (GIBS)	Event specialist, Hospitality industry	Unknown	No	Unknown
Ent R	Forties	Law degree	Lawyer, Finance/Corporate Established an advisory business	Unknown	No	Middle class

Table 2. Profiles of 15 black women entrepreneurs: team, programs and networks, business/product and funding

Entrepreneurs	Recruitment of team members	Team composition and mission	Entrepreneurial programs Ecosystem actors Social network	Business/product	Source of funding
Ent A	From work in tech company	Male co-founder Female Mission BEE Mission	Industry training accelerator Commercial incubators: mentors and social network Social network in the space industry	Engineering business, space engineering	Seed capital funding Government financial investment support Development Bank support Bootstrapping Government grant
Ent B	University Professor and students	Female CEO, male co-founder from academia Shared values Diversity mission	Government funded incubator Commercial incubator University network to attract students Global forum speaker Government support	Agri tech product	Bootstrapping Corporate BEE fund
Ent C	Corporate finance, colleagues or the same board	Black female team BEE mission	Social network from investment banking/corporate finance Personal relationships with white males Strong networks with banks and government bodies Government development agencies' support	Corporate finance, Black female-owned fund, active	Bootstrapping Corporate BEE fund
Ent E	Family and University	Husband is co-founder (white), and an engineer Social mission	International Summit International pitching conference US-based accelerator program Tech ecosystem in Western Cape EE Government agency support	Home service platform	Bootstrapping Angel investor Governmental funding African-focused VC fund
Ent F	Unknown	Black female CEO (team unknown)	Financial institution development program Social network from corporate finance/investment banking Local SME Fund Social network and allies from corporate Investment bank investment fund	Corporate finance, diversified VC fund	Public-private sector fund

(continued)

Table 2. Continued

Entrepreneurs	Recruitment of team members	Team composition and mission	Entrepreneurial programs Ecosystem actors Social network	Business/ product	Source of funding
Ent G	Through friends	Black female CEO/CTO, others are black males Female mission	University Incubator Global accelerator VC for Africa, access to investors STEM network for women Pan-African businesses network Women role models/mentors Financial services investment funds	Fintech, financial literacy, AI	Bootstrapping Seed capital fund Corporate enterprise development fund, BEE
Ent H	From university	Black female CEO, software developer and a teacher Impact driven	Social network from previous career International Entrepreneurship program Hubs and incubator network Global finance funding Incubator for edtech International financial institution funding	Education Tech learning App Virtual reality and gaming	Government grant Seed capital Corporate enterprise development fund
Ent I	Work and private life	Female-led team, black and white	Start-up boot camp Local financial institution fund Accelerator – mentorship Government agency funding	Inclusive fintech, microfinance	Seed capital fund
Ent K	Recruited team at university	Black woman CEO, white male co-founder and eight team members	International accelerators Mentors, advisors & investors Local development initiative	Data analysis Software company	Angel investor Seed capital fund
Ent L	Inspiration from community workshops	Black woman CEO Freelancers for work tasks Mission for justice	Corporate incubator White female investor Global Accelerator program	Legal advice App	Enterprise development foundation Seed capital fund
Ent M	Recruited co-founder at university	Black woman CEO white male co-founder and seven team members	International accelerator Mentors	Medical support services app	Angel investors Seed capital fund

(continued)

Table 2. Continued

Entrepreneurs	Recruitment of team members	Team composition and mission	Entrepreneurial programs Ecosystem actors Social network	Business/ product	Source of funding
Ent O	Corporate, industry career, Biotech studies	Co-founder with husband (black male) and two full-time technicians, two part-time research assistants, two males and females Female mission	British entrepreneurial program Government-funded incubators Biotech incubator Winning awards Conferences/ Exhibitions Universities, national and abroad Industry collaboration	Sustainable bio-based products	VC capital Grants Bootstrapping Competitions
Ent P	Peer students in chemistry Inspired by chemistry studies From science to products in chemical sector.	Black-owned company two women and two men Mission – empower women in business and manufacturing	Industry/ manufacturer collaboration Business seminars International accelerator Business awards Fellowship for young African leaders' business program Network with other young leaders in sub-Saharan Africa Business Exhibition Government Empowerment Fund	Cosmetic science/ manufacturing	Bootstrapping Government grants Competitions Other Funding
Ent Q	Skilled technicians and unskilled individuals from local community	CEO and founder 13 employees, three in leader team (all males). Mission, empower local communities, bridge the digital divide	Learning with industry telecommunication Innovator Trust Mentorship Incubation program Government agency support Royal academy of engineering Innovation awards	Cutting-edge ICT solution	Bootstrapping Grants Public funding
Ent R	Business, energy industry and University	Woman CEO with three team partners, white and black males Pan-African mission and vision	Pan-African Network of entrepreneurs Development program for women in energy and network	Energy-tech tool	Funding development institution In early process to raise capital

deliberate and strategic partnerships beyond racial and gender groups in universities among peer students, professors and supervisors. One woman reached out to white peer students in class, learning from them.

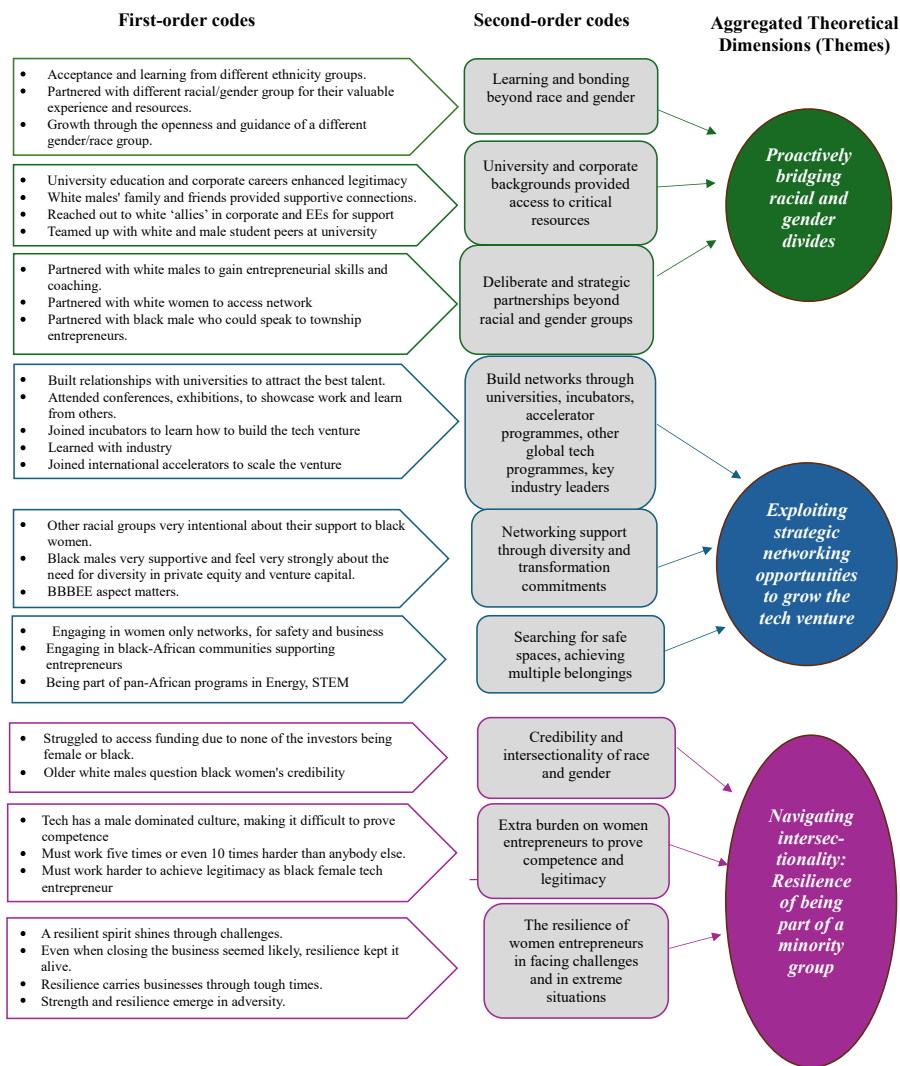


Figure 1. The data structure. Source: Authors' own work

When I got into my class, there was one side where there were sitting black students, and there was another side where it was just [white] Afrikaans [language of some of the whites in South Africa] students. And I just said, let me just join this group of Afrikaans students. So, I joined their team . . . I got firsthand experience of building projects from nothing and making things into working products. The nicest thing was that they accepted me as part of that group . . . And because I said I want to learn from you. They opened themselves up to me. *Ent B*

Another woman teamed up with a [white] peer student and found kinship due to similar interests in tech.

I picked engineering because it would teach me how to solve problems. And that's why I met [my co-founder], who pretty much had the same view of the world, like things could be better. *Ent P*

A different woman entrepreneur (*Ent K*) “recruited” her university lecturer and master supervisor [male] to help develop the tech venture. The supervisor “. . . taught us a lot, of how we solve [technical] problems”. The supervisor first assisted part-time, later he joined the team and the company full-time. Hence, for black women entrepreneurs, university degrees represented fertile ground for proactive networking, crossing race and gender divides, teaming up with like-minded academics and peer students. We argue that these women leveraged intersectionality in their networking, using their *multiple identities* and *shared identities* related to STEM education and the shared passion for technical problem-solving, to cross gender and race barriers.

Nearly all women entrepreneurs (except 2) had working experience in the STEM industry and corporates. During their working careers, the women proactively formed professional relationships with white males, building *social capital*. In early phases of tech venturing, the black women entrepreneurs could capitalize on these *strong ties* to access resources. Hence, the women used their *shared corporate/professional identity*, leveraging intersectionality to develop the tech venture. Below, one woman describes how she built relationships with white males.

If you don’t have that network, if you don’t have the ability to be in the right space to be presented an opportunity . . . So, we’ve had to rely on personal relationships built through professional relationships, obviously, very different from who we are, with white males. Because, naturally, that is where the capital and business have historically been. *Ent C*

Partnering with white males and sometimes black males with prominent positions in corporate and EEs helped access early-stage capital. One participant (*Ent M*) received assistance from a friend, a white male in venture capital, who later became a co-founder, to assist with fundraising and developing a pitch deck. This white male had access to an angel investor who funded the business, and the black woman explains:

As a white male, you’re likely to have family, friends who are angels, those who are going to give you a bar to start. So that’s not something that I had access to. I’ve had an idea, and it was a good idea. But I have no family who’s going to give me a million without any strings attached or severe hardship. When I saw him, it was him, his car and a million Rand to be honest. *Ent M*

Furthermore, the black women entrepreneurs deliberately recruited team members who complemented their skills and social networks. One entrepreneur said she was strategic about teaming up with both white and black men, being conscious of both the challenges and opportunities with *intersectional identities*.

He is an older seasoned gentleman . . . he is like a white old man. I’m a black woman. The other partner is a young black man from the bar, and our big focus is township businesses. In as much as I’m a black person, I do recognize the privilege that I have. I live in Sandton, how am I going to speak to a township entrepreneur? So, he can have that conversation. So, we combined it. *Ent R*

Several women also reached out to strategically positioned individuals (across gender and race) in EEs, leveraging *weak ties*, who could “open doors,” to access a wider array of resources needed for tech venturing. One woman entrepreneur shared:

So, there was a woman [white], we met her at a conference. And she was one of the founders of [an incubator], and very entrenched in building a startup ecosystem in Cape Town, so that relationship was great. She was an evangelist and would recommend us to other investors, . . .so we got into the ecosystem. And then we pitched at the biggest startup conference in South Africa and met X [colored male]. And that’s where we met a lot of tech people, they’ll become customers. *Ent E*

As described, the black women entrepreneurs demonstrated courage by leveraging their individual agency, crossing gender and racial boundaries, and placing themselves in a risky and vulnerable position. Even though democracy is established, providing all ethnic groups the same rights, South Africa’s legacy of Apartheid and systemic exclusion continues to shape access to

capital, networks and education. These women are, therefore, pioneers, enacting their individual agency despite the risk of dual discrimination in most spaces they navigate. Nevertheless, the women could also leverage their multiple identities and intersectionality to transcend gender and race through shared identities, such as STEM and corporate/professional identities.

4.2 Exploiting strategic networking opportunities to grow the tech venture

The black women entrepreneurs excelled at proactive networking, reflecting and acting strategically to grow their ventures. Proactive networking was managed deliberately, in universities and incubators, accelerators, industry and corporates, with allies, investors, black African and pan-African networks and women-only networks.

The establishment of strong ties in universities was key to establishing the venture and building legitimacy as a tech entrepreneur. At the university, they connected with student peers, professors and others with whom they built an entrepreneurial team of like-minded individuals (*shared identities*) across race and gender. After university, several women maintained strong ties with universities to exploit relevant resources, attracting talent and accelerating R&D. A few tech entrepreneurs also attended scientific conferences, tapping into research milieus even abroad and overseas, relevant for technology development.

We do analyses at different universities. Some of them, we can't even find in South Africa. But through our connections (universities) in South Africa, they connect us with somebody else overseas ... *Ent O*

All women portrayed a learning orientation, continuously upskilling their competence. As black women entrepreneurs, they needed to work harder to demonstrate legitimacy and earn trust. Accordingly, they proactively searched for incubators, accelerators, competitions and other programs to build competence and network.

The University had an incubator to help entrepreneurs at an early stage in concept, the ideation phase, to validate the idea very quickly. So, they had a lot of experts or mentors who would push you to understand and validate your idea quickly. *Ent G*

So, they established *weak and bridging ties* to enable learning and competence. Their minority position, we argue, enhanced the need to prove their competence and legitimacy as tech entrepreneurs.

As the women developed high-growth, and internationally oriented tech ventures, a few also aspired to learn from international programs, such as accelerator programs, in the United States, Europe and Africa. International programs provided competence and networks not available in South Africa. These women's learning aspirations transcended borders, and they were ready to compete globally.

We were building a tech startup and needed to scale. But South Africa doesn't have a culture of building global, scalable tech businesses. So, we started searching online, and we found an American tech startup accelerator and venture firm in Silicon Valley, and then an American tech incubator. *Ent K*

Thus, these women could learn from global tech founders and get access to a large pool of investors. The program also helped brand the new venture, creating word-of-mouth, enhancing legitimacy. Joining entrepreneurial programs also involved competitions and access to grants, which helped bootstrap, prior to venture capital.

The women's learning appetite continued among industry actors, as most products and services were targeted at diverse industry sectors. It was crucial to learn about industries, adapt products, set up production and access customers. The most effective way to learn was through relationships with industrial players. Again, the women bravely entered new spaces, established new (weak) ties and bridged into STEM spaces, where they were subject to discrimination. Yet, their eagerness to succeed with their venture triumphed over risks.

I needed to build relationships with key industry leaders. I just went in there, diving in and asked multiple questions. Know the wrongs and the right things in industry. Some relationships turned out to be good. Some are not so good—because wherever you go, there are always gatekeepers. *Ent Q*

Several women entrepreneurs also proactively reached out to what they named “allies,” referring to individuals and organizations representing friends, helpers and supporters in EEs and corporate in South Africa. These “allies” could be white males, black males or white women, and were all strategically well-positioned with relevant social networks and expertise and were intentional about supporting black women entrepreneurs.

[white male] he’s been very intentional about supporting us because we’re a new fund manager, because we’re black, because we’re female. *Ent F*

[black male] he feels very strongly about the need for diversity in private equity and venture capital. So, they’ve also been extremely supportive. They also introduce us to a lot of investors. So, they’ve been very instrumental. *Ent F*

The women entrepreneurs were cognizant of the advantages black women had in South Africa, due to the BBEE policy and managed to use their minority position to enact individual agency and exploit opportunities. Being a black female-owned team was critical when targeting, e.g. large corporations.

The key thing of operating in South Africa is that we remain black female-owned, with a majority shareholder being myself, especially with the types of customers we’re going for, large corporates. The BEE aspect matters. *Ent K*

All women entrepreneurs also engaged in women-only networks and favored female mentors and allies, showing *gender homophily* tendencies. Women-only networks provided safe spaces where women could share similar experiences of minority positions, to achieve well-being and psychological safety. It was essential for women to socialize and identify with like-minded women, to build self-confidence and develop their identity as a tech entrepreneur (*gender homophily and shared identities*). Being a minority in STEM and EEs pushed the women to socialize in women-only networks, finding support through diversity and transformation commitments (*collective agency*).

Being a founder of a technology startup as an African black female is very rare, so I always gravitate towards the other females in the room. [Member of 50 Inspiring Women in STEM network] Amazing women in the space, who have the same problems. Because it’s such a small community. *Ent G*

The women also emphasized the business value these networks provided, e.g. STEM and Energy sector networks. Even though a few women had deliberate female BEE missions, e.g. building all-female teams with clear transformative goals, it was unclear if they could change oppressive systems through *collective agency* involving only women.

The women entrepreneurs also proactively searched for membership in other types of networks, tapping into valuable resources. Interestingly, the black women were embedded in multiple contexts: universities, corporations, industry, STEM, EEs, black-African and pan-African communities (*intersectional identities and multiple identities*). The black women could, for instance, join black-African tech entrepreneurship communities where they feel a sense of belonging. These multiple belongings created multiple safe spaces for black women, while also providing critical resources and networks.

We are both fellows of an alliance called X [. . .] Entrepreneurship, which is a peer-to-peer Alliance for elite Africans and companies. That community enables me to meet entrepreneurs who have raised seed capital. Some of them have excited their businesses on a larger scale. That community has enabled me to connect with people who have walked a similar journey, and I can get in-depth advice on how to best position my business. *Ent B*

Despite standing out in proactive networking and demonstrating confidence and success in growing and financing their venture, the women also experienced gender and racial discrimination. These critical recurring incidents caused emotional suffering and required resilience to overcome.

4.3 Navigating intersectionality, resilience of being part of a minority group

The women shared their struggles and suffering experienced in various situations throughout their journey, stemming from their minority status.

People bet on the jockey before they bet on the horse. So, I feel the reasons why women suffer, and specifically African women, is because I don't think we know how to sell the story of the jockey, in a way for people on the other side to understand. It's something I'm learning as I grow in the space. *Ent L*

Most participants perceived their challenges to exist not only because of being female, but also due to their race, expressing negative emotions of being *different* from other people in the space and lacking similar people to interact and identify with.

I struggled because none of the investors were female, and none of them were investors of color. And even in pitching, you're never pitching to females, and you're never pitching to people of color . . . you're going to be in a room that doesn't look like you. So, finding mentorship in that space became quite challenging. *Ent M*

All women entrepreneurs reported that women must work much harder to demonstrate their competence, reflecting their pioneering position as black women, socially exposed and vulnerable. This creates an extra burden on women entrepreneurs to prove competence and legitimacy, due to their *intersectional identities* as both women and black.

It's a very difficult industry to be in. And it just makes it even worse if you're a woman, because you can imagine how many meetings I get into and I'm the only woman in there, and my voice isn't heard. You had to work five times as hard as anybody else. Sometimes people will just look at you and think because you're in the room, you're supposed to be taking the notes, as somebody's token. *Ent A*

The participants also demonstrated courage in situations where their credibility and competence were questioned, claiming their place in STEM and EEs, despite their minority position.

A lot of times, when you get around the table, and its males that are older, they question your credibility. What have you done to get here? How much do you really know? For me, I just had to learn, the moment I get to the table, I very quickly have to say triple major [University], [top consulting companies], and you establish your position. And then they say, you're amazing. *Ent G*

The women were emotional about difficulties and why they kept going, finding inner strength and meaning, despite the struggles. Many demonstrated resilience built over time from coping with challenging situations.

I learned that I'm resilient. I learned that it takes a lot to break me. I can crack a bit, or I can bruise, but you can't destroy me. I learned that about myself. I think about my entrepreneurial journey; it's been a beautiful personal journey of healing and growth for myself. *Ent R*

5. Discussion

5.1 Intersectional minority identities

The black women entrepreneurs represented both racial and gender minority identities, aligned with [Martinez Dy and MacNeil's \(2025\)](#) work on multi-dimensional identities. The Intersectionality Theory is therefore instrumental in understanding the lived experiences of the black women entrepreneurs in our sample, as intersectionality recognizes the impact of overlapping social structures ([Crenshaw, 1991](#); [Martinez Dy, 2020](#)). Our findings suggest that

the women operated within distinct power structures (Lassalle and Shaw, 2021), thereby creating societal hierarchies (Collins, 2019; Tewolde, 2024).

All our participants mentioned that white males remain dominant and therefore hold the power in the South African EE, despite the Employment Equity and BBBEE legislation. Several participants noted that they were the only woman and, at times, the only black person in business meetings. Taken together, the intersection of race and gender created particularly difficult challenges for the black women entrepreneurs. The Intersectionality Theory lens illuminated the biases and stereotyping experienced by the participants and their responses to these challenges. In most instances, the participants worked harder to prove they belonged and had to be resilient in overcoming these challenges, which aligns with Ojediran *et al.* (2022), who argue that prior studies have ignored how black women struggle to frame their entrepreneurial identities in achieving legitimacy. Our study, therefore, links Intersectionality Theory with Social Network Theory, as existing studies have only considered gender and networking behavior (McAdam *et al.*, 2019), without addressing the intersection between gender and race and how this intersection may influence networking behavior.

5.2 Black women enacted proactive networking despite unequal power structures

The women exhibited strategic and proactive networking, building critical networks at the university and in corporations that became strong and effective bonding ties for establishing their tech venture. Furthermore, the women strategically reached out to incubators, accelerator programs, mentors, allies and investors (*weak ties*) to access necessary resources. Hence, the women acted strategically and transactionally in their networking, adopting “masculine” tendencies, contrasting research on women’s networking in Western countries (e.g. Brush *et al.*, 2019; Brands *et al.*, 2022; Stahl *et al.*, 2023).

Furthermore, the black women were highly cognizant of the need to act strategically due to the social and economic structures of power embodied in EEs. They enacted individual agency to leverage the powerful individuals’ position of power, expertise and privilege, continuously exploiting opportunities while also utilizing their intersectional identities in this regard. Combining Intersectionality theory and social network theory has therefore proven valuable in understanding black women’s networking, enriching the constraint-preference dichotomy.

5.3 Relational dynamics, power and mechanisms of inequality regimes in EEs

Networking activities for black women in South African EEs involve navigating systems of inequality and power imbalances, aligning with research on women in Western contexts (Stoker *et al.*, 2024). Yet, we also found that black women enacted individual agency and defied oppressive structures, yet needed recognition and support from influential EE actors (Brands *et al.*, 2022), who were mainly white and male. Our findings revealed that black women, through proactive networking, gradually achieved legitimacy in EEs as tech entrepreneurs, transcending their subsidiary position in EEs, in contrast with research on women in Western contexts (Stoker *et al.*, 2024).

Moreover, the black women reached out to “allies” who were supportive and helped create “safe spaces” in EEs. It was strategic for white males to support black women, thereby changing the relational dynamic, empowering black women, which illustrates the complex dynamics of race and gender in South Africa. Women’s proactive networking, which transcends race and gender, fostered a “positive” relational dynamic, strengthening the position of black women in EEs. The inherent power inequalities and unbalanced relationships, hence shifted due to allyship (Bhattacharyya *et al.*, 2024; Erskine and Bilimoria, 2019). Our findings, therefore, shed light on the relational dynamics for women in EEs, indicating that women can shift power inequalities if their interaction partners perceive them as legitimate players and are supportive of their mission. We therefore observed “positive” mechanisms that reduce power inequalities for women entrepreneurs, enhancing their position and inclusion in EEs, which contrasts with prior studies (Stoker *et al.*, 2024).

Even though South Africa struggles with high levels of inequality, social exclusion and racial tensions, the country has also strived to foster social cohesion and nation-building, aiming to bridge the historical divides and promote a national identity, emphasizing values like solidarity, mutual respect, collective responsibility and *allyship* (Sadiki, 2022). Related to this, the BBBEE policy has proven effective in various sectors and industries in promoting transformation, making the South African economy more inclusive for black women (van De Rheede, 2022). We argue that allyship in the EE, together with transformation policies, worked jointly and contributed to redistribute opportunities for the less privileged, influencing how EE actors take on a supportive role toward black women entrepreneurs. We found that the BBBEE policy, to some extent, reduced inequality mechanisms and regimes, thereby strengthening the position of black women in EEs (Stoker *et al.*, 2024).

We propose a theoretical framework that explains the networking of black women entrepreneurs in the South African EE, as illustrated in Figure 2. Box 1 describes the black women entrepreneurs, their proactive networking behavior, challenges and resilience. Box 2, describes central elements of the South African EE, box 3 explains the central mechanisms of gender/race (in) equality regimes, which can reduce power inequalities and marginalization and which enabled black women to achieve resources and goals achieved through networking, in box 4.

6. Theoretical and practical implications

6.1 Theoretical implications

Related to women's proactive networking crossing gender and race, we may conclude that black women's minority position (*constraint*) pushed them to bridge racial and gender divides. Evidently, black women entrepreneurs did not have the privilege of choosing women-only (*homophily*) in their networking and would need to cross gender and race in tech venturing. Demography (race and gender) and structural power dynamics, therefore, influenced black women's networking behavior. Conversely, our findings are less conclusive regarding

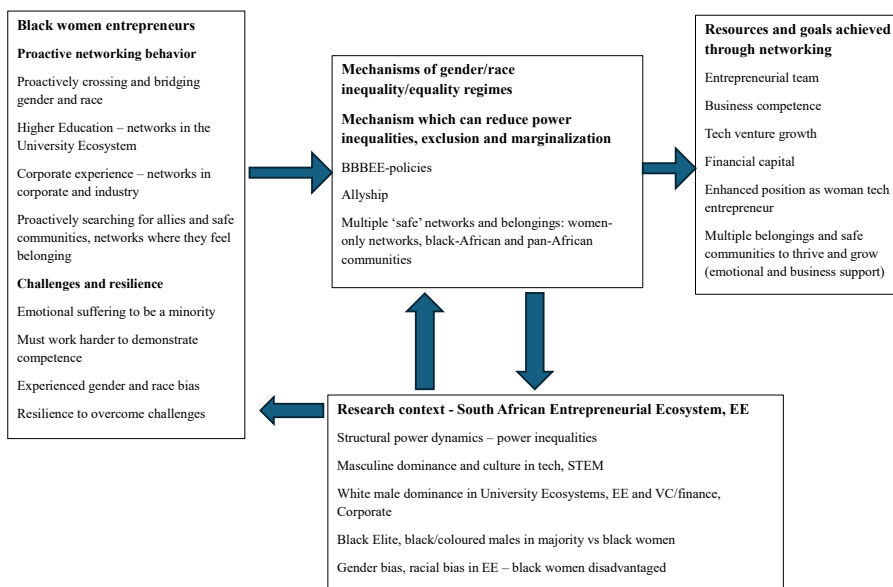


Figure 2. A theoretical framework explaining black women entrepreneurs' networking in the South African EE. Source: Authors' own work

preference, i.e. to what degree transactional and proactive networking conflicted with their (gender) tendencies.

Furthermore, the black women had access to extended “communities” and experienced multiple belongings, which enhanced their position and chances to network and acquire resources. The black women had to leverage individual agency and engage in proactive networking, involving social and emotional risks, to achieve legitimacy and belonging in spaces they navigated. However, we argue that in some of these communities, members shared intersectional identities (Kang and Bodenhausen, 2015; Sundararajan, 2020), for example, as Black Africans and in Pan-African networks, creating safe spaces. The findings of multiple belongings may challenge the conventional distinction between strong-ties and weak-ties rationalities, suggesting that social networks are culturally sensitive (Sundararajan, 2020). We argue this can explain why black women “safely” could engage in proactive networking, reaching out to relatively strangers, representing a blend of strong and weak ties. Hence, the rationalities and trade-offs associated with social network theory, and the binary of strong versus weak ties, materialize differently across contexts. Social networking is indeed embedded in specific socio-cultural contexts, influencing women’s networking behavior and relational dynamics in EEs (Brands *et al.*, 2022; Sundararajan, 2020). Furthermore, multiple, intersectional identities are found to represent both challenges and opportunities for black women entrepreneurs in South Africa (Kang and Bodenhausen, 2015), due to the complex dynamic of race and gender.

Extended communities and “allies” therefore provided valuable resources and strengthened women’s position in EEs. This contrasts with Western-based research, where women’s networks mainly provided emotional support and led to marginalization (Ozkazanc-Pan and Clark Muntean, 2018; Stoker *et al.*, 2024). Networking scholars should therefore consider culture questioning logic and rationalities underpinning strong/weak-ties, recognizing variants of weak-and strong-ties countries. Varied research contexts can therefore induce critique and expand theory.

6.2 Practical implications

For policymakers in other countries seeking to cultivate and strengthen women entrepreneurship, key insights can be learned from South Africa regarding the positive influence of the BBBEE policy. As shown, universities can be valuable contributors to women tech entrepreneurship and can “recruit” more women to STEM programs and offer entrepreneurship education to inspire and educate women to pursue an entrepreneurial career. Furthermore, entrepreneurship and mentorship programs at universities should incorporate gender-aware entrepreneurship pedagogies and offer mentorship programs for women students.

Incubators and accelerators should consider introducing allyship programs to empower women’s positions through, e.g. mentorship and training programs. Additionally, incubators should be aware of the emotional costs that black women endure due to discrimination. Mentoring should therefore encompass emotional support. Moreover, investors should be trained to be gender-aware when dealing with women entrepreneurs. Also, investor milieus should strive to raise the number of women investors and fund managers to achieve a better gender balance in deal-flow evaluations.

7. Limitations and future research

It is timely to investigate black women opportunity entrepreneurs to build theories across varied contexts. Particularly, research on women’s networking should be examined across cultures and EEs to fully comprehend networking behavior, as context and culture matter (Stoker *et al.*, 2024). EE actors are crucial for implementing impact BBBEE policies, and future studies are needed to comprehend how policies translate to EEs and the investor space, particularly (van De Rheede, 2022).

We recommend future studies of social networks to critically explore the complexities behind women's networking behavior, including samples with women of different ethnicities and races (Brands *et al.*, 2022). It is important to understand how intersectionality and culture influence women's networking and relational dynamics, to consider challenges and opportunities in women's networking behavior. There is a need for more research on allyship in South Africa, focusing on the extent of allyship, whether it is informal and/or deliberate, organic or organized. More research is needed to understand how inequality, power regimes and mechanisms can be reduced to create more effective and positive mechanisms that strengthen women's position in EEs.

8. Conclusion

Our findings on black women entrepreneurs navigating the EEs in South Africa provide a narrative of significant competence, achievement and resilience. Moreover, these women are truly opportunity entrepreneurs, driven by passion, chance and impact-seeking. Globally, black women entrepreneurs represent the most rapidly growing group of entrepreneurs, driving growth, prosperity and social impact. The research, therefore, timely responds to calls aiming for varied research contexts and for investigating women entrepreneurs in non-Western contexts.

The research adds novel knowledge by investigating black women entrepreneurs in South Africa. Due to their background, they needed to act transactionally and proactively to acquire critical resources and establish ties with powerful individuals, transcending gender and race. Situated at the intersection of multiple marginalized minority positions (gender and race), the women endured liabilities beyond the usual risks of entrepreneurial venturing but still enacted individual agency to change and transform. They deliberately used their minority position as a position of power to strengthen their position in EEs and portrayed themselves as fully equipped to orchestrate the complex intersectional networking strategies required in South African EEs.

It is remarkable how these women find the inner strength and resilience to navigate and perform despite social and emotional exposure, leaving their comfort zones and proactively reaching out to "unsafe" spaces, balancing vulnerability and opportunity as black women in a predominantly masculine and white space.

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