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Business growth mentorship for female-owned enterprises in South Africa

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Purpose: This study examines the role of mentorship offered to female entrepreneurs during the growth phase of their businesses. Applying social cognitive theory (SCT), we examine the personal, behavioural and environmental factors that contribute to learning outcomes as a result of a mentoring relationship.

Design/methodology/approach: The study adopted a qualitative research design to understand the role mentoring has on female entrepreneurs in South Africa who have been mentored either individually or participated in a group mentoring programme. We adopted a purposive sampling technique, identifying and selecting female entrepreneurs who have been running their businesses for a minimum of 3 years and have been through a type of mentorship programme either as an individual or in a group format. Data were collected through semistructured interviews with 21 participants.

Findings/results: The study findings indicate that mentoring offered to female entrepreneurs enhances their cognitive skills. These provide the foundation for enabling leadership and business management skills development, building resilience and business stability, which leads to business growth. The constellation of these skills forms higher-order entrepreneurial scaling competencies, although these depend on the type or format of the mentorship.

Practical implications: The study provided practitioners with a framework of competencies that could serve as a guide for mentoring established women entrepreneurs as they scale their business ventures. Furthermore, the study offers insights into how various forms of mentorship contribute to the development of competencies for scaling.

Originality/value: This study contributes an empirical model to the extant literature that showcases the role of mentorship for female entrepreneurs in business growth. The study has implications for practice by demonstrating that the format of mentorship, individual or group, leads to different outcomes on business growth; therefore, practitioners who provide business development services and institutions who train entrepreneurs need to consider this in designing their programme.

Keywords: business growth phase; emerging market; entrepreneurial mentorship environment; entrepreneurial process; female entrepreneurship; mentorship.

Introduction

Women play a significant role in entrepreneurship; yet, they continue to experience challenges when starting and running businesses (Etim & Iwu, 2019). Female entrepreneurs as owners and managers of small, medium and micro enterprises (SMMEs) face challenges, such as lower entrepreneurial self-efficacy, scarcity of strong networks and a lack of resources, including mentorship (Bowmaker-Falconer et al., 2023; Elliott et al., 2020; Etim & Iwu, 2019). These persisting challenges contribute to the low rate of established businesses in South Africa and reduced female business success rates (Bowmaker-Falconer et al., 2023), which ultimately exacerbate unemployment challenges, especially for women seeking financial stability.

Entrepreneurial development opportunities, such as mentorships and peer support, play a significant role in entrepreneurial success by addressing gendered challenges (Cao & Shi, 2021; Neneh, 2024). Although mentorship matters, mentors with the relevant experience in developing the country's entrepreneurial ecosystem are scarce, which limits women's unconventional learning opportunities (Bowmaker-Falconer et al., 2023; Langevang et al., 2018). Female entrepreneurs emphasise the importance of mentorship functions, including motivation, networking, reflection, inspiration, management, knowledge and guidance (Laukhuf & Malone, 2015). However, there is limited research on how mentorship supports female entrepreneurs in their business venturing activities (Cantner et al., 2021; Murnieks et al., 2020).

The limited research on mentorship-related matters is approached from a generic perspective, without highlighting the significance of mentorship as the entrepreneurial phases unfold (Sullivan, 2000), especially in the growth of women-owned businesses. Research on business success factors typically focuses on nongender-specific elements, such as sales turnover, and increases in employment productivity and customer base (Corrêa et al., 2022; Meyer, 2018; Meyer & Klonaridis, 2020). Even though it is reported that around one-third of global entrepreneurs are female, there is a lack of research on female entrepreneurs in the growth development phase (Cantner et al., 2021; Murnieks et al., 2020). As it is recorded that there are fewer women-owned established businesses (Bowmaker-Falconer et al., 2023), it is important to garner an understanding of how mentorship enhances business growth for women to unearth suitable interventions and the relevant empirical frameworks for their success. Therefore, our research unpacks the role of mentorship in developing the entrepreneurial competencies that enable female entrepreneurs to scale.

Using social cognitive theory (SCT) (Bandura, 1999) that explains how individuals learn during the social exchanges in their social environment, the study explored this research question: 'What role does mentorship play for female entrepreneurs during the growth phase of the business?'. The SCT was used because, in the context of female entrepreneurs, this theory highlights how mentorship can provide opportunities for learning through the guidance and experiences of more seasoned entrepreneurs. We interviewed 19 female entrepreneurs who have received mentorship and two mentors to triangulate the findings. The research took place in South Africa, a context known for low entrepreneurial activities by women compared to men (Bowmaker-Falconer et al., 2023).

The study provides several contributions to the existing research. Firstly, the study provides a consolidated model that shows how mentorship contributes to developing competencies that are required for business growth. Secondly, the study shows that cognitive skills, business management skills, leadership skills development and entrepreneurial resilience are essential outcomes of mentorship during the growth phase. Thirdly, the study shows that these sets of skills are not mutually exclusive; instead, they are a constellation that forms entrepreneurial scaling competencies. With these findings, the study contributes to SCT by classifying the skills obtained from mentorship as first-order, second-order and third-order skills. These skills are ranked from simple to more complex competencies, depending on the tasks performed. Fourthly, our study demonstrates that the format of mentorship, individual or group, has different outcomes on business growth. These findings have implications for academia and practice.

The document begins with a review of the literature on mentorship for female entrepreneurs during business growth and identifies the underpinning theories, such as the SCT, as well as other mediating concepts. The literature review is followed by details and rationalisation of the methodology decisions. Subsequently, the research findings are presented, followed by discussions of how the findings enhance the existing literature. Lastly, concluding remarks are highlighted, including recommendations for future research.

Literature review

Entrepreneurial mentorship and the business growth phase

Mentorship is an experiential learning activity, where mentors support and challenge the mentees to reflect on current and future actions that enable attitudinal changes (Sullivan, 2000). Mentoring is vital for personal and professional growth, where a seasoned professional advises a less experienced mentee (Kunaka & Moos, 2019). In an entrepreneurial context, it also produces results for the individual mentee and the business (Kunaka & Moos, 2019). As an alternative to traditional training, the mentoring process follows distinct phases of initiation, cultivation, separation and redefinition (El Hallam & St-Jean, 2016).

The notion of mentorship has potential drawbacks in developing countries, where finding mentors with entrepreneurial experience can be challenging, especially for female entrepreneurs (Bowmaker-Falconer et al., 2023; Cao & Shi, 2021). These authors argue that entrepreneurship attitudes are influenced by training and mentoring programmes. In addition, mentoring can be seen as a social learning process that enhances entrepreneurial behaviour through engagement, observation and the imitation of mentors (Kanaku & Mood, 2019) and their skills application.

Extant literature argues that, for mentorship programmes to be successful, they should be tailored to the specific business phases (Sullivan, 2000). Refiloe et al. (2020) reiterate that mentorship support for entrepreneurs helps solve business problems as they emerge, instead of assisting the entrepreneur with a once-off generic business plan production, often occurring at the start of the business. Different stages of business growth require different entrepreneurial competencies and skills (Mamabolo & Myres, 2020). Therefore, while training and other forms of learning are helpful, mentorship provides a unique opportunity for entrepreneurs to learn from others who have had a similar journey as it allows for a more personalised learning experience (Kunaka & Moos, 2019). This invariably fosters mutual benefits, such as knowledge enhancement, skills enhancement, emotional support and ultimately, business growth.

According to Cantner et al. (2021), the business growth phase is characterised by a business that has existed for a minimum of 3.5 years. The main characteristics of the growth stage are the emergence of an entrepreneurship culture and new markets, products, systems, processes and innovation (Cantner et al., 2021; Sullivan, 2000). The entrepreneurs in this phase consistently utilise available institutions and programmes that have the potential to expand – and contribute to – the economy's growth in a sustainable

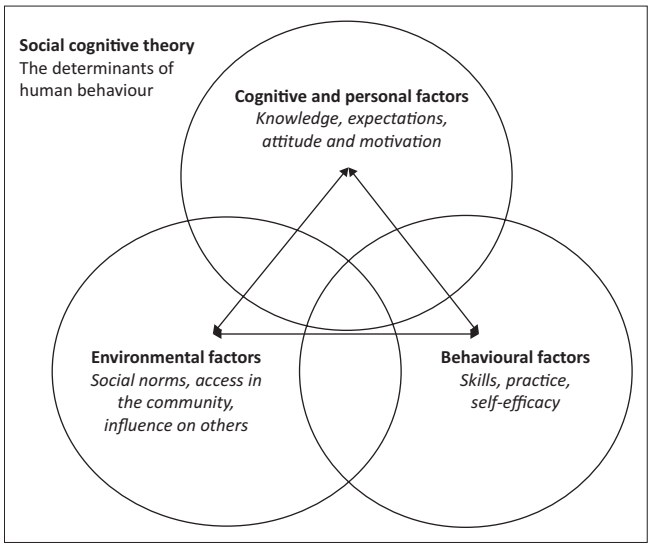
manner. Businesses entering the growth phase not only require additional resources, but they need additional competencies, such as future planning, to develop and sustain the growth (Refiloe et al., 2020). These resources include a number of skills, such as future planning and understanding the markets in which the business operates (Bachtiar & Al Amin, 2019). The different skill sets that are required may include setting the vision, planning, relationship building and engaging with the market; therefore, various interventions are needed for each business phase, and novice entrepreneurs may need external support, including mentorship (Sullivan, 2000).

Researching female entrepreneurs during the enterprise's growth phase matters because Corrêa et al. (2022) assert that the growth of the economies of emerging nations is greatly aided by the presence of female entrepreneurs in those regions; yet, female entrepreneurs still lag behind their male counterparts. Despite the role female entrepreneurs play, a lower percentage of them achieve optimal success, especially those running smaller businesses with fewer employees and limited growth ambitions (Etim & Iwu, 2019). This highlights the necessity for a deeper comprehension of the role of mentorship offered to female entrepreneurs.

Social cognitive theory

Social cognitive theory, as developed by Bandura (1999), provides a useful framework for understanding the role of mentorship during an enterprise's growth phase, especially among female entrepreneurs. Mentorship, whether delivered individually or in groups, is inherently a social learning process, making SCT an ideal lens for exploration. Social cognitive theory's premise is that while learning is a cognitive process, it is heavily influenced by social interactions and observing others – through modelling (Bandura, 1999). The ability to learn through observation enhances the impact of others' behaviours, identity expressions and displayed imagery on an individual's career choices (Abbasianchavari & Moritz, 2021). In addition, the environment within which the individual exists also influences learning. Therefore, in line with SCT, entrepreneurs – especially women – can more readily realise their potential when they possess confidence, the relevant skills and adequate social support.

Social cognitive theory identifies three key components that work together through reciprocal interaction to facilitate learning (Figure 1): (1) *Cognitive or personal factors*: They include the knowledge, experiences, attitudes and motivation that an individual brings into the learning environment, as well as their expectations. These personal factors shape how an individual processes new information and approaches learning. (2) *Behavioural factors:* These are the skills, practices and actions the individual expresses in their environment, including self-efficacy – the belief in one's ability to perform tasks successfully. The behaviours displayed contribute to the learning process by reinforcing or adapting actions based on outcomes. (3) *Environmental factors:* This encompasses the social norms, cultural



Source: Bandura, A. (2001). Social cognitive theory: An agentic perspective. *Annual review of psychology*, *52*(1), 1–26

FIGURE 1: Social cognitive theory.

influences and contextual factors that shape the individual's learning experience. These external factors create opportunities or barriers to learning and influence how individuals interact with their surroundings. These three components – personal, behavioural and environmental – are not isolated. They interact with and influence one another, creating a dynamic learning process, where change in one factor can impact the others. We expand on these further in the following section.

Cognitive/personal factors and entrepreneurial mentoring

According to Bandura (2001), personal factors comprise cognitive, affective and biological factors. This then influences the person's knowledge, attitudes, motivation and expectations. Cognitive processes have a determinative influence on behaviour (Bandura, 2001). In the context of this study, the question is, what is it that female entrepreneurs need in terms of knowledge, attitudes, motivation and expectations that could facilitate their entrepreneurial capacities and have a positive impact on business growth? Female entrepreneurs require a set of skills and qualities, including experience, persistence, perseverance and self-confidence, to proactively navigate any difficulties they face during business growth (Dos Santos et al., 2019).

While some entrepreneurs are persistent in identifying opportunities and committed to their goals, there is a widespread argument that some female business owners may lack the knowledge and education required, as well as the role models to expand their enterprises (Abbasianchavari & Moritz, 2021). Mentors and protégés trade various resources, such as knowledge, skills, better training and pleasant experiences that reinforce female entrepreneurs' performance and attitude (Awadzi, 2019; Muldoon et al., 2019). However, the necessity and outcome of such support services are rarely covered in the literature (Awadzi, 2019). Some studies have shown that women need additional training in

global expansion, marketing, procurement, computer-aided management and human resource management (Awadzi, 2019). These are competencies needed in the growth phase of the business. Therefore, we explore in this study what a mentorship relationship can contribute to the personal or cognitive factors of female entrepreneurs.

Behavioural factors and entrepreneurial mentoring

The business growth phase requires an entrepreneur to engage with different stakeholders and partners in the value chain of their businesses or the industry, such as financiers, suppliers and customers (Cantner et al., 2021). Therefore, there is a need for entrepreneurs to portray certain behaviour patterns consistently. These will be influenced by the cognitive factors, as well as the environmental factors. The ability to model through observation of successful others (mentor, peers) becomes important.

Adding a mentoring component to standard business training can help women-owned businesses grow and gain new skills, knowledge and self-confidence to act as needed (Awadzi, 2019; McKenzie & Puerto, 2021). This action could include a crucial aspect of entrepreneurship, accessing valuable resources, such as financial capital and knowledge, psychosocial support and accessing government resources through networking opportunities, provided through mentoring engagement (Muldoon et al., 2019). Therefore, in this study, we explored which behaviour patterns could be learned by female entrepreneurs because of participation in a mentorship programme.

Environmental factors and entrepreneurial mentoring

Different forms of environmental factors affect both personal factors and behaviours. These are imposed physical and sociostructural environmental factors that individuals have no control over (Bandura, 2001). For entrepreneurs, these include socioeconomic conditions that can hinder the growth of women-owned businesses. Other challenges include social discrimination rooted in gender stereotypes, cultural barriers and societal pressures (Al-Kwifi et al., 2020; Bowmaker-Falconer et al., 2023). The gender disparity is exacerbated by societal perceptions; this includes their marginalisation and discrimination and viewing women only as reproducers (Etim & Iwu, 2019). To ensure that enterprises continue to exist and thrive, there is always a need for efficient support systems for all phases of the entrepreneurial process, and even more so since mentorship can fill in knowledge and experience gaps to help entrepreneurs who are dealing with social and economic injustices (Kunaka & Moos, 2019). How then do female entrepreneurs navigate their challenges? What is the role of mentorship in assisting female entrepreneurs in navigating these environmental factors?

On the other hand, the reciprocal and interactive nature among the three components of the SCT suggests that the cognitive and behavioural factors can also affect the environmental factors (Bandura, 2001). This means that individual entrepreneurs can influence their social environment, which may influence business growth, depending on their abilities. Therefore, we explored how a mentoring relationship could enable female entrepreneurs to have a positive impact on their environment and lead to business growth.

Methodology

Research design

The study aimed to establish what role mentorship has to assist established female entrepreneurs in running their businesses during the growth phase. We focused on first-hand accounts of female entrepreneurs' life experiences of mentorship and how this affected their business growth. A qualitative, phenomenological research design was adopted as a strategy of inquiry to obtain a deeper understanding of the role mentorship plays in the journey of established female entrepreneurs (in depth and breadth; Saunders & Lewis, 2018). Assuming an interpretive philosophical paradigm, we were able to explore the interaction between personal or cognitive, behavioural and environmental factors and how these influence the meaning that is socially constructed in specific contexts of female entrepreneurs.

Our sample was derived purposefully from (1) South African female entrepreneur, who (2) have been running their businesses for a minimum of 3 years and whose businesses were of difference sizes in terms of staff compliment, (3) have been through a type of mentorship programme either as an individual or in a group format. For variability, the diverse business types included services, manufacturing, construction, hospitality, education and financial services. Through the first author's entrepreneurial networks, an initial 26 female entrepreneurs were identified, and invitations were sent out to request the entrepreneurs to volunteer their participation. Given that we were specifically looking for entrepreneurs who had participated in some form of a mentorship programme, we further incorporated an element of snowballing, to expand our reach of the sample to fit the criteria (Berndt, 2020; Saunders & Lewis, 2018). This led to a reach of 51 entrepreneurs. Of these 51, through our selection criteria and others opting out for several reasons, the number was reduced to 19 female entrepreneurs who voluntarily consented to participate in the study. In addition, we interviewed two industry experts who had worked formally and informally as mentors for several years in the entrepreneurial space. This provided the triangulation to compare the female entrepreneurs' response with the mentors' perspective. See Table 1 for details of profiles.

Data collection

A semistructured interview guide was designed, informed by the literature review and the theoretical framework (e.g. Bowmaker-Falconer et al., 2023; Sullivan, 2000).

TABLE 1: Participants' profile.

Participant ID	Academic qualification	Years in business	Business type	Staff complement	Mentorship structure
P1	Matric (basic education)	9	Beauty Product Manufacturing	Full-time: 3; Part-time: 8	Group
P2	Undergraduate	16	Automative Servicing	6	Group and individual
P3	Postgraduate	7	Marketing	3	Individual
P4	Undergraduate	6	Waste Management	80	Individual
P5	Postgraduate	15	Restaurant	35	Individual
P6	Postgraduate	10	Fashion Retail	1	Group
P7	Undergraduate	3	Events Management	Full-time: 1; Part-time: 5	Individual
P8	Matric (basic education)	18	Education Primary School	40	Group
P9	Matric (basic education)	13	Food Processing Industry	40	Individual
P10	Undergraduate	13	Engineering	Full-time: 4; Part-time: 10–30	Group
P11	Postgraduate	4–5	Recruitment Training and Placement, Consulting	200	Individual
P12	Postgraduate	6	Material Handling Equipment	18–20	Group
P13	Postgraduate	9	Financial Services	1 (owner)	Group
P14	Undergraduate	14	Services Consulting	Full-time: 12; Part-time: 300+	Fluid, ad-hoc, structured
P15	Postgraduate	28	Events Management	Full-time: 3; Part-time: 5–100	Individual
P16	Undergraduate	17	Financial Services	10	Individual
P17	Matric (basic education)	9	Poultry farming	Full-time: 3; Part-time (15)	Group
P18	Undergraduate	6	Construction	6	Individual
P19	Postgraduate	7	Consulting	Full-time: 2; Part-time: 6	Individual
IE1	Postgraduate	5	Mentorship	None	Varies, depending on the programme owner
IE2	Postgraduate	7	Mentorship	None	Unstructured meetings

ID, identity; P, Participant; IE, Industry expert.

The interview guide was piloted with entrepreneurs to test the quality of the semistructured questions for clarity and purpose fitness. Minor changes were made, including re-ordering, consolidating related questions and rephrasing questions to fit the discussions with the industry experts.

Ethical clearance was obtained before data collection from the local university. The interviews were conducted virtually, using the online platform communication tools, Zoom and Microsoft Teams. This method was deemed more convenient for most participants as it was flexible enough to accommodate their busy time schedules. This mode of interviewing allowed us to conduct interviews with female entrepreneurs across the different provinces within South Africa, with no logistical constraints. The interview duration was, on average, 40 min. All interviews were recorded and transcribed, using an autotranscriber (Otter AI). To ensure the quality of the transcripts, we proofread the transcript against the audiorecorded data and cleaned up any inaccuracies found.

Data analysis

The data analysis process started with loading the transcripts into a technological approach, using the computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software, ATLAS.ti, which supports the analysis process. Three stages of analysis were followed (Saldana, 2014).

The first stage was to conduct first-order analysis by generating descriptive codes by following a reiterative process of naming, renaming, merging and/or deleting codes. During the first-order coding stage, we tracked for saturation by recording the number of new codes per transcript, until no new codes appeared (Saunders & Lewis, 2018). Saturation was achieved at transcript number 16, meaning that we had sufficient data to continue with the analysis and draw themes. An initial list of 238 codes was recorded; however, through the process of reiterations and condensing codes, a final list of 29 meaningful first-order codes was generated. This provided a wide range of competencies and skills that were identified through the mentorship process.

In the second-order analysis phase, we analysed the primary codes to check for similarity in meaning and then categorised them into 12 second-order codes. These were clusters of knowledge, skills and attributes that were learned through participation in a mentorship learning programme.

In the final stage of the analysis, we synthesised and distilled second-order codes and aggregated them into five themes that would answer our research question, 'What role does mentorship play for female entrepreneurs during the growth phase'. These themes were as follows: (1) *enhancing cognitive skills as foundational skills;* (2) leadership skills development; (3) *building resilience despite limiting social conditions;* (4) *business management skills and support for business stability and* (5) *business scaling because of mentorship-enabled skills.* Table 2 shows the themes that emerged from the data. This is discussed in detail in the findings section.

A careful process was used to ensure the optimal quality controls were in place that are crucial to all scientific research and serve as the basis for reliable and significant findings. Verification and data quality are essential for ensuring trustworthiness in qualitative research (Golafshani, 2003). Firstly, this was achieved by ensuring that the relevant sample was approached as participants and that quality data were collected. Secondly, data quality verification was achieved through listening to the audio

TABLE 2: Thematic analysis.

Themes	Subtheme	Individual mentorship	Group mentorship	Frequency	Total
1. Enhancing cognitive skills as foundational skills	1.1. Self-management skills	X	X	9	36
	1.2. Expressing voice	O	X	5	
	1.3. Building analytical skills	X	X	22	
2. Leadership skills development	2.1. Attributes	O	X	9	37
	2.2. Values	O	X	11	
	2.3. Setting the direction of the business	O	X	8	
	2.4. Leading from the sides	O	X	9	
3. Building resilience despite limiting social conditions	3.1. Triumph despite limiting social conditions	X	X	21	63
	3.2. Dealing with gendered challenges	X	X	42	
4. Business management skills and support for business stability	4.1 Financial management	X	O	18	67
	4.2. Professionalism and branding	O	X	19	
	4.3. Strategic partnerships	X	O	25	
	4.4. Technical support	X	O	5	
5. Business scaling because of mentorship-enabled skills	5.1. Business advancement	X	X	45	54
	5.2. Social impact	X	X	9	

Note: X = more developed; O = less developed.

recordings to ensure accurate transcriptions. Thirdly, the data analysis process followed a rigorous and reiterative coding process to ensure that the generation of themes was inductively informed by the data (Saldana, 2014).

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the Gordon Institute of Business Science University of Pretoria.

Results

This section presents the detailed findings, which are also shown in Table 2 and Table 3. The themes formed from the narratives that emerged in the study are enhancing cognitive skills, developing leadership skills, building resilience, providing business management support and scaling. Some of these mentorship outcomes differed, based on the type of mentorship the entrepreneurs had received, whether as an individual or in a group.

Theme 1: Enhancing cognitive skills as foundational skills

The data demonstrate that entrepreneurs enhanced their cognitive skills as foundational skills to learn other skills required for business scaling. Cognitive skills that emerged from the data are self-management, expressing voice and analytical skills.

Subtheme 1.1: Self-management skills

The data showed that self-management skills identified from mentorship include the ability to be vulnerable, self-awareness, assertiveness and autonomy. The industry experts explained further that vulnerability is when female business owners acknowledge their inexperience, refrain from feeling judged, never feel embarrassed to ask for assistance, are open-minded and avoid taking things personally. This makes it easier for the mentors to impart teachings, advice and guidance to their mentees, leading to stronger connections and personal growth. An example of personal growth includes being assertive:

> 'Assertiveness, and knowing what you want, and understanding what you want. Sometimes you might think this is the best offer and find your setting yourself … or shooting yourself in the foot and you find that a better offer would be coming next week.' (Participant 19)

To ensure that self-management was practised, some participants mentioned the need for mentors to hold them accountable, with some referring to mentors as their 'accountability partners', reminding them why they started the business in the first place. Self-management was an important outcome for both individual and group mentorship.

Subtheme 1.2: Expressing voice

Entrepreneurs who were part of a group mentorship expressed being able to articulate oneself more than those who received individualised mentorship. They highlighted the need for a voice, self-expression, public speaking and storytelling of their entrepreneurship journey. These skills underline the ability to express one's thoughts and ideas effectively. This is important for female entrepreneurs because it helps them clearly communicate their needs and requirements to the mentors and stakeholders involved in their ecosystem:

> 'Being … able to have a voice … I used to be a very reserved person and knowing that no idea or anything that I want to say, knowing that there's no stupid question. Knowing that I can put anything on the table, a point of discussion and not even care about being judged.' (Participant 17)

As introverts by nature, some participants said that mentorship helped them become more self-assured. One of the industry experts testified to have seen introverted female entrepreneurs lead business activities.

Subtheme 1.3: Building analytical skills

Analytical skills enhanced through mentorship were necessary for all groups. Female entrepreneurs face

TABLE 3: Theme analysis per participant.

Theme	Subtheme	Participants
Building cognitive skills	Self-management	P5, P6, P7, P10, P11, P12, P13, P19
	Expressing voice	P4, P5, P16, P17
	Analytical skills	P1, P2, P3, P5, P7, P9, P11, P12, P13, P15, P16, P17, P19
Business management skills and support	Financial management	P1, P2, P3, P4, P6, P8, P10, P11, P13, P16, P17. P18
	Strategic partnerships	P1, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8, P9, P10, P11, P12, P13, P14, P15, P17
	Professionalism and branding	P1, P2, P3, P4, P7, P8, P15, P16, P17, P18
	Technical support	P1, P2, P13, P17, P18
Leadership skills development	Setting direction	P3, P11, P14
	Leading from the sides	P7, P10, P11, P14, P17, P18
	Attributes	P3, P4, P5, P11, P12, P13
	Values	P1, P4, P7, P11, P12, P14, P15, P16, P18
Building resilience	Achievements	P1-P19
	Overcoming challenges	P1-P19
Business scaling	Achieving business growth	P1-P19
	Social impact	P2, P4, P7, P11, P12, P17

challenges in identifying and assessing opportunities, critically and meticulously analysing data in various contexts, and being aware of the needs of the business at different stages. The varying dimensions of entrepreneurial stages mean that strategies and actions should be tailored to the unique requirements of the enterprise during its growth phase and that decision-making should be future focused:

> 'So, the mentorship has assisted me in understanding the milestones, being realistic about what I'm able to do, and then giving clear action points on the next steps on how to get to where I want to go.' (Participant 3)

Theme 2: Leadership skills development

The participants highlighted aspects of leadership skills development through building leadership skills, such as setting the direction of the business, building relationships, leading from the sides, attributes and value systems. A notable difference is that the participants in group mentorship had more of these leadership skill development outcomes than those in individualised sessions.

Subtheme 2.1: Attributes

Transitioning from a founder entrepreneur to a business leader requires confidence and conflict management, while these entrepreneurs attempt to take long-term views with various stakeholders and adhere to mentorship guidance and advice. Participants emphasised the importance of creating a mentorship environment that fosters better career progression opportunities from operating as business founders to leaders. Such an environment helps women to develop confidence, especially for those who switched from full-time employment to full-time entrepreneurship:

> 'The ones I can recognise are confidence, discipline, and being very persistent. I always tell people I can now understand Nike's slogan "Just Do It."' (Participant 7)

Subtheme 2.2: Values

Entrepreneurs emphasised the importance of business values that they obtained from the mentorship sessions. Important values include kindness, gratitude, honesty, transparency and morality. Some participants stated that mentorship has increased their spiritual connection amidst some mentorship experiences that have not provided impactful support in their decision-making. Spirituality also helps female entrepreneurs instil ethics and moral standards as they run their businesses:

> 'But I also have spiritual mentors who pray for me, who hold me accountable to the ethics and the moral standards I expect of myself, and my spiritual standards expect of me.' (Participant 11)

Subtheme 2.3: Setting the direction of the business

The data showed that entrepreneurs need to have a clear vision during the growth phase. The female entrepreneurs in this study, together with their mentors, were able to articulate their enterprise's vision and enhance its future focus. For example, should they exit the business or still maintain its operations:

> 'I ran my business for the longest time, not thinking of my exit strategy. In that space, you're constantly thinking about the exit strategy and the discussions around it. As you're preparing for your exit strategy, what does that look like today? What does that look like tomorrow and the year after?' (Participant 14)

Subtheme 2.4: Leading from the sides

Participants talked about how they felt overwhelmed by the day-to-day management of the enterprise and how mentorship taught them to relinquish some control and learn to delegate. In the early business stages, entrepreneurs were responsible for all the daily operations of the business, but during scaling, they needed to delegate responsibilities to their team members. However, some participants believed that they could not fully delegate to their team because of the nature of their work and the industry they worked in, and that micro-managing was still necessary because consistency was essential to providing quality services:

> 'I think I have become more of a micro-manager, which is needed sometimes in a restaurant environment … At the end of the day, it's people that are making your food; it's not a machine.' (Participant 5)

The data show that mentoring helped entrepreneurs know when to micromanage and when to give the staff autonomy for the enterprise's success.

Theme 3: Building resilience despite limiting social conditions

Resilience in female entrepreneurship enabled by mentorship involves having reached some achievements, despite the limiting social norms, injustices and barriers, as well as their capacity to recover from setbacks. The resilience theme was dominant in both individual and group mentoring sessions.

Subtheme 3.1: Dealing with gendered challenges

Difficulties encountered by participants included discrimination based on age, gender and race, juggling personal and professional obligations, feeling intimidated, financial dependencies from or on family members and having to prove themselves. These challenges were predominant in specific economic sectors, especially those dominated by men. Mentorship helped the female entrepreneurs overcome the challenges in their business environments:

> 'And so, you have to now rely on what you have, and what you have here is male-dominated people in the business industry who do not perceive me as a woman to be in the industry of business.' (Participant 19)

These entrepreneurs emphasised that they learned how to deal better with these gendered challenges, especially when the mentors are in the same industry and of the same gender. Therefore, it is evident that finding and securing the most suitable mentor should take expertise and gender into consideration.

Subtheme 3.2: Triumph, despite limiting social conditions

Despite the negative experiences in the business environment, these entrepreneurs mentioned that they can garner resilience and find room to overcome adversities. These include moral support, mentors being ambassadors for the entrepreneurs, providing motivation, being a sounding board, a sisterhood relationship forged between the female entrepreneurs and their female mentors and experiencing excitement and gratitude:

> 'I'm extremely grateful that I did consider having a mentor because now he channels me in the right direction when I'm confused. When I feel like I'm in my midlife crisis, I'm feeling demotivated, he will say, "You are doing well; remember one step at a time. Don't overwork yourself; it is okay to rest.' (Participant 15)

Participants emphasised the importance of bespoke mentorship for gendered challenges, even in group mentorship, as it provides the greatest value to individuals.

Theme 4: Business management skills and support for business stability

The following categories demonstrate how mentoring helps a business scale up, as revealed during the interviews. It is essential to notice that entrepreneurs in individualised mentorship sessions could discuss business management issues in more detail than was the case in the group sessions.

Subtheme 4.1: Financial management

Participants identified mentorship as crucial for achieving financial literacy, financial management skills and sourcing funds, which can be challenging. The participants mentioned that they needed guidance in drafting management accounts and annual financial statements to provide a comprehensive financial picture of their business. Some participants admitted to not paying attention to the flow of funds within the business before the mentorship intervention. As the entrepreneurs planned to scale, they emphasised that attention was required to assess how each strategy will result in financial growth, another aspect covered in the mentorship sessions. Data showed that entrepreneurs who had individualised sessions reported having financial discussions with their mentors more than was the case in the group sessions. This could be attributed to the notion that it is challenging to discuss financial concerns with other people:

> '… I wasn't comfortable with discussing my finances … I just didn't want to see money leaving my account.' (Participant 18)

> 'Transparency. My challenges were that I had to be transparent in how I was running my money.' (Participant 2)

Subtheme 4.2: Professionalism and branding

Effective marketing strategies are crucial for the mentees to enhance brand recognition and business visibility, leading to increased visibility and customer confidence when appropriately handled. This category of skills was mentioned more often by entrepreneurs who had group mentoring than those who had individualised sessions:

> 'You find that sometimes they need a lot of help about how you can help them craft this value proposition.' (Industry Expert 1)

Subtheme 4.3: Strategic partnerships

Assistance sought by the mentees included improving stakeholder management, enhancing strategic relationships and facilitating business socialisation. Our data showed that mentors were a source of strategic partnerships. For example, entrepreneurs who attended individualised sessions focused more on strategic alliances through their mentors than did those in a mentorship group:

> 'Our clients are the parents. So, you need to maintain and have a good relationship with them and good communication with them. So, in terms of maintaining that relationship, I will give a thumbs up to the D6 Communicator because they've made that relationship professional.' (Participant 8)

Subtheme 4.4: Technical support

The mentees faced difficulties with technical support, specifically regarding legal and compliance processes, contracts and record-keeping systems. Entrepreneurs who were involved in individual sessions received more technical support than did those who were in group mentorship. The reason could be that it could be challenging to help entrepreneurs with their specific challenges if the group is diverse:

> 'When I started with the business, I just went in and did everything independently and learned as I went. So now that I am diversifying, I realise that I don't want to go through that whole process because it took me roughly six or five years to get to where I am to a point, where I was making a profit … I need the documentation to get the certifications and the regulations within that industry. So that's where a mentor could come in and assist me.' (Participant 1)

Mentees need help with organisational structure enhancement, contract security, compliance, regulation and

operational system improvement as the businesses expand. Technical support is essential for business continuity and to maintain the efficient running of systems and processes.

Theme 5: Business scaling because of mentorship-enabled skills

All entrepreneurs acknowledged the positive role of mentorship in business advancement and articulating social impact.

Subtheme 5.1: Business advancement

Mentors help entrepreneurs expand their businesses by planning resources and fostering a growth mindset. They also guide market entry and exit by advising on effective distribution methods. Mentorship can foster entrepreneurial ecosystems in mentees' operating areas, leveraging mentors' networks to support their growth and success. Finding solutions to reduce industry red tape and locating market gaps that can be filled with entry tactics is another component of the mentor's aid:

> 'Because of mentorship, I was able to test the product. Because of her help, I was able to take my business from the idea stage to the prototype stage. And now, we are ready for the market. I feel … it's better to have a mentor when you are going into business and it's able to save you a lot of mistakes.' (Participant 1)

Subtheme 5.2: Social impact

The indirect contribution that mentorship has for female entrepreneurs is through social and economic impact. The two factors of contribution are job creation and social impact. The participants increased their staff complement as most of them started their businesses with no employees other than themselves and perhaps one or two other staff members. A few participants either decreased their staff complement or opted not to grow their staff count, sometimes because of economic difficulty:

> 'I've been operating alone for a long time. I outsourced the sewing operations. In fact, there were three women that were making my clothes. So now I have just one guy.' (Participant 6)

> 'He has made me understand that the little that you have extra, go back and that's always what I've always wanted to do … I take it back to the community.' (Participant 4)

The findings showed that the mentors contributed to shaping entrepreneurs' businesses through various mechanisms.

Discussion

This article aimed to explore the role of mentorship among female entrepreneurs during the growth phase of their businesses. As depicted in the conceptual framework in Figure 2, the discussions in this section confirm, extend and contrast the findings from the interviews compared to the literature review. The study makes four contributions to the existing literature.

Firstly, the study developed a conceptual model that shows the role of mentorship during the growth phase. Through the conceptual model, this study contributes to the scant literature by demonstrating how mentorship helps entrepreneurs develop their cognitive and behavioural factors within an entrepreneurial environment. The model also shows that enhancing cognitive skills as foundational first-order constructs contributes to second-order constructs: business management skills, leadership skills and entrepreneurial resilience. The first-order constructs are more personal and have to do with the individual's attributes and motivation. They are critical as they influence how the individual relates to their environment (Bandura, 2001). The second-order constructs are complex as they comprise knowledge, skills and attributes that interact together to create competencies that result in superior performance (Boyatzis, 2009; Chouhan & Srivastava, 2014), and these require reinforcement. These skill sets are not mutually exclusive but constellations forming the third-order construct of entrepreneurial scaling competencies needed for the growth phase. These findings contribute to the SCT by providing the specific skill sets and behaviours entrepreneurs obtained from being mentored and that their constellations form high-order competencies. While formal education contributes to the development of competencies, our model shows that individual or group mentorship sessions serve as a cushion, helping entrepreneurs deal with their challenging business contexts and build entrepreneurial competencies for scaling.

Secondly, the study contributes to the existing literature by revealing the specific skill sets obtained from the mentorship sessions. While some studies have mentioned cognitive skills from mentorship, but to a limited extent (Bjursell & Florin Sädbom, 2018; Laukhuf & Malone, 2015; St-Jean & Tremblay, 2020), they do not indicate the kind of cognitive skills female entrepreneurs require for scaling. These cognitive skills include self-reflection, self-awareness, self-management, expressing own voice and analytical skills. While the existing literature shows that female entrepreneurs have low self-esteem (Meyer, 2018), our study expands by showing that mentorship helped them develop self-management skills, such as being vulnerable, reflective, self-aware, expressive, assertive and autonomous. The enhanced sense of self-management skills enabled the entrepreneurs to communicate and articulate their opinions and concepts. Self-management, also referred to as self-regulation (Goleman, 2017), is an important leadership skill that is the result of reflecting on actions and on personal and professional experiences (Liu et al., 2021; Maurer et al., 2020). Reflection also occurs through reflective conversations that can be facilitated by a coach or a mentor (Gray, 2006), which motivates the mentee to take action.

Another outcome of mentorship is that the entrepreneurs obtain business management skills and support. These included strategic partnerships, relationships, professionalism, branding, financial management and technical support. Entrepreneurs who had mentors in the same industry reported that their mentors could enable technical support and transfer some financial management skills. Mentors aided entrepreneurs to connect to their networks. This finding contradicts El Hallam and St-Jean (2016), who found that a mentor with an entrepreneurial career versus one working for

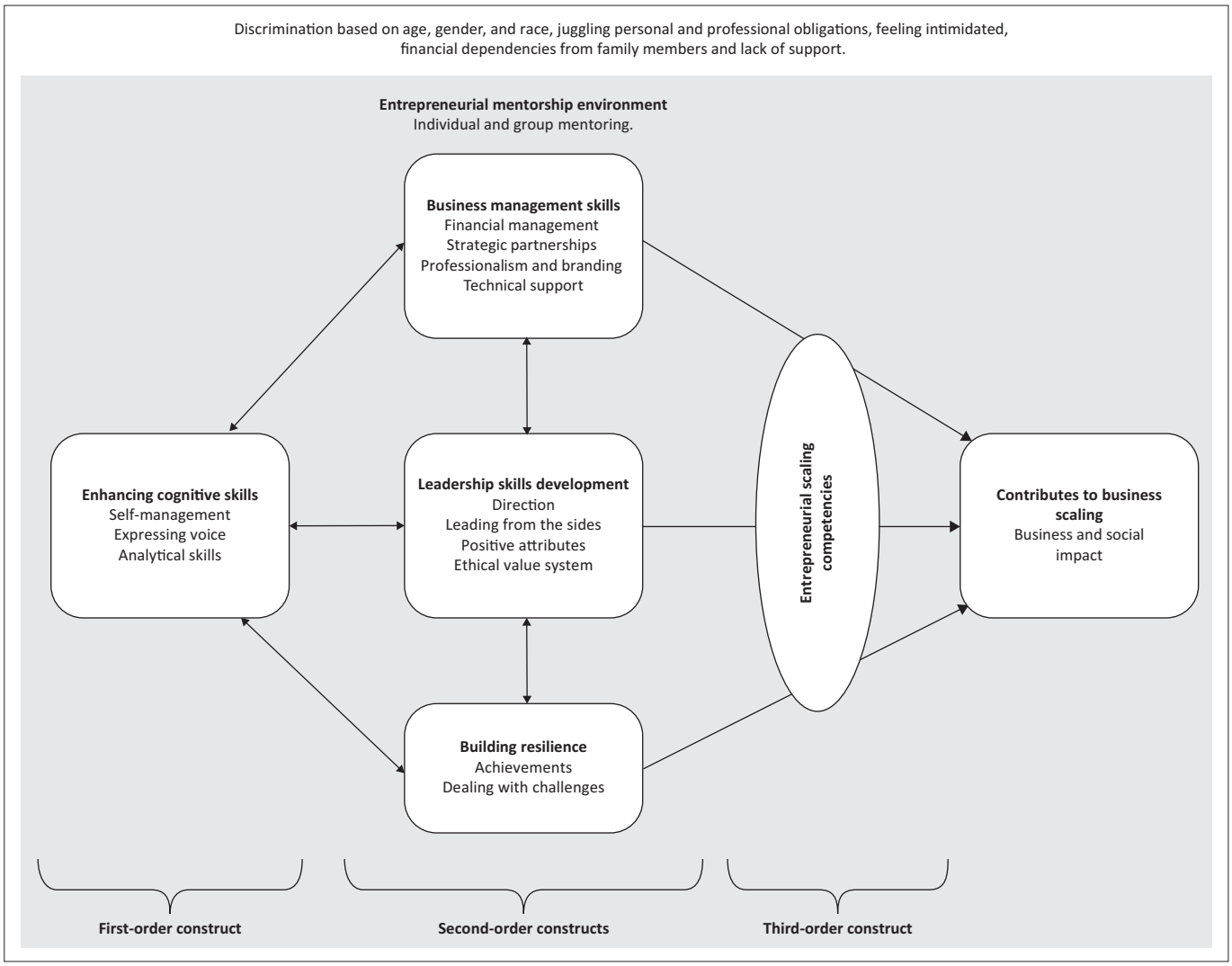


FIGURE 2: The role of mentorship in business scaling.

a public or private organisation did not influence the mentee's learning experience. Such contradictions indicate a need for future research to explore the mentors' characteristics and how they affect the mentee's experience. The research will provide insights into the design of the programmes.

Leadership skills development was another essential outcome for entrepreneurs. Entrepreneurs start the business as founders, operating like the jack-of-all-trades. The growth phase of the business requires them to be leaders of their team. Similar to existing studies, the skills developed during mentorship included attributes for leadership, setting the business direction, leading from the sides and business values of honesty and ethics (Elliot et al., 2020). Our findings showed that entrepreneurs regarded their mentors as role models for good leadership, suggesting that they learned from observing and imitating their mentors (Bandura, 2001). Therefore, the social exchange during mentorship enables the entrepreneurs to observe and learn from the engagements (Bandura, 2001).

Entrepreneurs operate in a challenging environment of setbacks and social discrimination (Al-Kwifi et al., 2020). Therefore, entrepreneurs require entrepreneurial resilience to counter the adversaries. In the context of this study, a sense of achievement and dealing with gendered challenges (discrimination) demonstrated entrepreneurs' resilience. While most studies focus on resilience in entrepreneurial activities, they do not show how it unfolds over time (Corner et al., 2017). We found that resilience was significant during the scaling activities. It unfolds throughout the entrepreneurial phases and could be salient, depending on the entrepreneurial environment.

Thirdly, the study's contribution is that the cognitive, business management, leadership and resilience skills derived from the mentorship experience form entrepreneurial scaling competencies. As entrepreneurial scaling competencies constitute the first-order constructs (cognitive skills) and second-order constructs (business management, leadership and entrepreneurial resilience), we regard them as third-order constructs, which are complex in nature. This contribution adds to existing literature, which focused on the list of skills, but it did not show the constellation of skills that form the third-order competencies for challenging activities such as scaling. For example, Man and Lau (2005)

found that the low rating of skills-based competencies, such as operational, human and strategic competencies in small firms, could be linked to simplified daily management activities. Our study argues that scaling requires a combination of these competencies as it is challenging and complex. These findings support the notion that competencies within the entrepreneurship literature should be studied based on the entrepreneurial tasks at hand (Unger et al., 2011). Our study found that entrepreneurial scaling competencies were required during business growth.

The last contribution is that the mentorship format has a significant role in developing entrepreneurial scaling competencies. Our findings showed that individual and group mentorship had both similar and different outcomes. All entrepreneurs reported that mentorship helped them build entrepreneurial resilience and advanced their scaling activities. Although cognitive skills were mostly similar, the difference was that entrepreneurs in groups expressed their voices more than those who received individual sessions. The difference could be explained by the observation that group discussions among participants could enhance their ability to articulate. Parallel studies in group coaching found that leadership skills can be developed in a group setting as a result of reflective conversations, inputs and feedback provided by peers as it stimulates self-awareness (Aas & Flückiger, 2016; Mbokota & Reid, 2022) and therefore, personal and social competence (Aas & Vavik, 2015). Even though there are distinct differences between individual coaching and mentoring, there are many similarities between coaching and mentoring in a group context. The purpose of group coaching is to leverage the wisdom of the group to learn (Aas & Flückiger, 2016).

Key differences were observed in business management skills and leadership skills development. Entrepreneurs in individualised mentorship sessions were comfortable discussing business-related issues with mentors, including their finances, while those in group sessions did not feel free to share their financial status. Instead, the group participants and their mentors focused more on developing leadership skills, which was dormant in individualised sessions. Our findings showed that peer mentoring is effective, but it can develop specific entrepreneurial competencies. Therefore, careful attention needs to be paid to how the mentorship is structured and how that is aligned with the respective stage of the business and the mentee's personal preference.

In conclusion, mentorship played a significant role in scaling business activities, enabling entrepreneurs to take their concepts to market. In the growth phase, mentorship helps entrepreneurs identify and exploit new opportunities. Scaling involved social impact, where entrepreneurs created job opportunities and worked with communities. Overall, the findings expand the research on mentorship in entrepreneurship.

Limitations of the study and suggestions for future research

The study focused on mentorship during the growth phase. Therefore, the findings only apply to this phase and suggest a need to explore the role of mentorship as the entrepreneurial phases unfold. Future studies could explore more intentionally the outcomes of individual and group mentoring with a larger sample. These would provide a more distinct set of competencies in terms of what could be achieved in an individual setting and group mentoring sessions. We also propose future research to test the competency model developed. As our study focused on the positive side of mentorship, future research could explore the negative outcomes of mentorship.

Conclusion and implications for practice

The aim of this study was to explore the mentorship role of mentorship for female entrepreneurs during the growth phase of their business. The study findings indicate that mentoring for female entrepreneurs enhances their cognitive skills, which are the foundation for enabling leadership and business management skills development, building resilience and business stability that leads to business growth. The study contributes a consolidated model to female entrepreneurship literature that shows how mentorship contributes to developing competencies required for business scaling during the growth phase. The study shows that there is a set of knowledge, skills and attributes that are not mutually exclusive but are a constellation that forms entrepreneurial scaling competencies. With these findings, the study contributes to the SCT by adding that skills obtained from mentorship should be classified as first-order, second-order and third-order skills; thus, from simple to more complex competencies, depending on the tasks performed. Lastly, our study has implications for practice by demonstrating that the format of mentorship, individual or group, has different outcomes on business scaling; therefore, practitioners who provide business development services and institutions who train entrepreneurs need to take this into consideration in designing their programme.

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Competing interests

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Authors' contributions

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Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, A.M., upon reasonable request.

Disclaimer

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