THE ROLE OF MENTORSHIP AND NETWORKING IN FOSTERING BUSINESS SUCCESS FOR FEMALE ENTREPRENEURS IN SOUTH-WEST NIGERIA.

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Abstract

Female entrepreneurship drives economic growth and innovation, but women-led businesses face systemic barriers. Mentorship and professional networking are critical factors influencing entrepreneurial outcomes. This study explored the role of mentorship and networking in fostering the growth and sustainability of female entrepreneurs in South-West Nigeria (Lagos, Ibadan, and Abeokuta). Employing a mixed-methods approach, the study examined the effectiveness of existing mentorship programs, identifies barriers to accessing mentorship and networks, and highlights the value of female mentors and women-focused networking groups. Findings revealed that mentorship and networking enhance business performance, confidence, and resilience among women entrepreneurs. However, disparities in access persist, particularly for those in underserved communities. The study concluded with recommendations for policymakers, institutions, and corporations to design inclusive mentorship and networking initiatives that empower female entrepreneurs and contribute to closing the gender gap in entrepreneurship.

Keywords: Female entrepreneurship, Mentorship, Networking, Gender bias, Business success.

Introduction

Entrepreneurship is widely recognized as "a catalyst for economic growth, innovation, and job creation (Sajjad et al., 2020). However, despite the increasing number of women entering the entrepreneurial landscape, female-led businesses continue to face significant challenges that hinder their growth and sustainability". Among these challenges, Agarwal and Lenka (2018) posited that "limited access to mentorship and professional networks stands out as a critical barrier". Mentorship and networking are essential tools for entrepreneurs, providing guidance, resources, and opportunities that are often pivotal to business success. For women, according to Rashid and Ratten (2020) "who frequently navigate unique societal, cultural, and structural obstacles, these resources can be transformative, offering not only practical support but also the confidence and resilience needed to thrive in competitive markets".

The importance of mentorship and networking in entrepreneurship is well-documented, however a research gap in understanding how these dynamics specifically impact female entrepreneurs exist. While women are increasingly launching businesses across diverse industries, they are often underrepresented in traditional entrepreneurial ecosystems, such as venture capital networks and industry leadership circles (Riojas, 2023; Kakeesh, 2024; Turley et al, 2024). This underrepresentation limits their access to the mentorship and networking opportunities that are readily available to their male counterparts. Furthermore, the dearth of female mentors and role models exacerbates this disparity, leaving many women entrepreneurs without the

guidance needed to navigate the complexities of business ownership (Christodoulou et al, 2024; Bell, 2023; Moultrie-Ohens, 2017).

To address these issues, this paper set out exploring the role of mentorship and networking in the success of female-led businesses in major cities of Lagos, Abeokuta and Ibadan, all in South West Nigeria with regards to development, access to capital, and market expansion, while also identifying the barriers that prevent women from fully leveraging these resources. By analyzing survey data, and interviews with women in business, this study highlighted the "transformative impact of mentorship and networking on business performance and personal growth" reiterated by Sahu and Bhamboo (2023).Additionally, it investigated the growing role of digital arena in connecting women entrepreneurs globally and the potential of cross-industry collaboration to drive innovation.

The findings of this research will aid policymakers, business leaders, and institutions seeking to foster a more embracing entrepreneurial ecosystem. Al Omoush (2024) stated that "by understanding the unique challenges and opportunities faced by female entrepreneurs, stakeholders can design targeted interventions that empower women to overcome barriers and achieve their full potential". Ultimately, this paper emphasized the significance of mentorship and networking in creating a more equitable and supportive environment for women in business. These aims and objectives lead to the research questions for the study; does access to mentorship improve business success for female entrepreneurs, and what challenges (gender bias, limited access) do they face in securing mentorship? Do digital platforms enhance networking and mentorship opportunities for female entrepreneurs, and what barriers (e.g., digital literacy, accessibility) limit their effectiveness? The research questions assess the effect of mentorship and digital platforms on female entrepreneurs while taking note of both benefits and barriers of same. The hypotheses are created to provide opportunity for testable relationships stating that mentorship improves business success, and second, that digital platforms help networking.

Literature Review

Theoretical Framework

This study drew on key theories from entrepreneurship, sociology, and gender studies, two of which are:

Social Capital Theory

According to Portes (2024) "social capital theory posited that relationships and networks are valuable resources that individuals can leverage to achieve personal and professional goals". For female entrepreneurs, social capital is often a critical factor in accessing funding, mentorship, and market opportunities (Jackson, 2021). However, women may face challenges in building social capital due to gender biases and exclusion from traditional networks (Ngalesoni et al, 2024). This theory provided a lens for understanding how mentorship and networking contribute to the accumulation of social capital and, consequently, business success (Aparicio et al, 2022).

Role Model Theory
Role model theory according to Abbasianchavari and Moritz (2021) suggested that individuals are influenced by others who serve as examples of success in their field. For female entrepreneurs, having access to female mentors and role models can be particularly impactful, as it helps to counteract stereotypes and provides tangible proof of what can be achieved in business. This theory underscored the importance of representation and visibility in fostering entrepreneurial aspirations and confidence among women (Amofah & Saladrigues, 2022).

Conceptual Framework
In this study, the framework is built on the interplay of mentorship, networking, and the success of female-led businesses. Mentorship according to Lall et al (2023, p1) is defined as "a relationship in which an experienced individual (the mentor) provides guidance, advice, and support to a less experienced individual (the mentee) to foster personal and professional growth". Networking, on the other hand as defined by Saavedra (2024, p ii), refers to "the process of building and maintaining relationships with individuals and groups to exchange information, resources, and opportunities". For female entrepreneurs, these concepts are particularly significant due to the unique challenges they face, including gender bias, limited access to capital, and underrepresentation in leadership roles (Patterson, 2020).

This study investigates how mentorship access and digital platform usage influence business success and networking outcomes among female entrepreneurs, while controlling for relevant demographic and business-related factors. The independent variables include mentorship access (measured as frequency of engagement) and digital platform usage (assessed by intensity and type of digital tools utilized). The dependent variables consist of business success (evaluated through financial metrics such as revenue growth and profitability) and networking outcomes (measured by access to clients, partnerships, and professional connections). To isolate the effects of these key variables, the analysis controls for several factors: the entrepreneur's age, education level, years in business, and industry sector. This framework establishes mentorship and digital engagement as potential catalysts for entrepreneurial achievement while accounting for background variables that may independently shape business performance and networking success.

Synthesis of Literature
The literature revealed a strong consensus on the importance of mentorship and networking for entrepreneurial success, particularly for women. However, gaps remain in understanding how these dynamics operate in different cultural and economic contexts, as well as the specific mechanisms through which mentorship and networking contribute to business outcomes. Additionally, there is limited research on the role of digital platforms and cross-industry collaboration in expanding access to these resources for female entrepreneurs.

By integrating these theoretical perspectives, this study aimed to provide a comprehensive understanding of how mentorship and networking influence the success of female-led businesses. It also sought to identify actionable strategies for creating more inclusive and supportive entrepreneurial ecosystems that empower women to overcome barriers and achieve their full potential (Liu & Zhang, 2024). This literature review established the conceptual and theoretical foundations for the study, highlighting the relevance of mentorship and networking in addressing the unique challenges faced by female entrepreneurs in Nigeria. These two hypotheses are proposed:

H_{01}: There is no significant difference in business success between female entrepreneurs who have access to mentorship and those who do not.

H_{02}: Digital platform usage does not significantly affect networking outcomes for female entrepreneurs.

Methodology
This mixed-methods study examined mentorship and networking's role in female entrepreneurship through quantitative surveys (n=400) and qualitative interviews (n=35) in South-West Nigeria. The sample size was calculated using Yamane's (1973) formula (95% confidence level, 5% margin of error), with 500 questionnaires distributed via random sampling (403 submitted, 400 retained after validation). The survey instrument demonstrated good reliability (α=0.79, Cronbach 1951) and was analyzed using IBM SPSS 28.

For qualitative data, purposive sampling ensured demographic and business diversity (Osborne & Grant-Smith 2021), with interviews continuing until thematic saturation. Taguette software aided thematic analysis, supplemented by member checking for validation. The demographics report, regression summary and thematic analysis as well as triangulation reports follow.

Table 1.

Demographics Table

Category	Option	Percentage	Number of Participants
Age Distribution	Under 25	10%	40
	26–35	40%	160
	36–45	30%	120
	46–55	15%	60
	56 and above	5%	20
	Total		**400**
Education Level	High school or equivalent	20%	80
	Bachelor's degree	50%	200
	Master's degree	25%	100
	PhD or higher	5%	20
	Total		**400**
Years in Business	Less than 1 year	15%	60
	1 to 3 years	35%	140
	4 to 6 years	25%	100
	7 to 10 years	15%	60
	More than 10 years	10%	40
	Total		**400**
Industry Distribution	Technology	20%	80
	Retail	25%	100
	Healthcare	15%	60
	Education	10%	40
	Manufacturing	10%	40
	Services and Others	20%	80

Source: Researcher's field survey, 2025.

The study surveyed 400 female entrepreneurs, predominantly aged 26–35 (40%) with bachelor's degrees (50%). Most (35%) had 1–3 years of business experience, primarily in retail (25%) and technology (20%). Mentorship was reported by 60%, with 50% sourced via personal networks; 70–75% cited skill development and network expansion as key benefits, though 40% faced mentor scarcity. Networking was frequent among 60%, primarily via digital platforms (50%), yielding client access (60%) but hindered by time constraints (40%). Digital tools were used by 70%, rated effective by 80%, while cross-industry collaborations (40%) drove innovation (60%) and market expansion (50%).

Data Analysis

Regression Analysis

The researcher used multiple linear regression model to test the hypotheses.

Hypothesis 1:

H_{01}: There is no significant difference in business success between female entrepreneurs who have access to mentorship and those who do not.

Regression Model for Hypothesis 1:

1. Dependent Variable (Y): Business success (e.g., revenue growth, profitability, or a composite score of success metrics).
2. Independent Variable (X1): Mentorship access (binary: 1 = Yes, 0 = No or scaled: frequency of mentorship).
3. Control Variables (X2, X3, ...):

   - Age (continuous or categorical).
   - Education level (ordinal).
   - Years in business (continuous).
   - Industry (categorical, dummy-coded).

Table 2

Multiple regression output for hypothesis 1

Variable	Coefficient (β)	p-value	Effect on Business Success
Mentorship access	0.45	< 0.05	Significant positive effect
Education level	0.3	< 0.05	Significant positive effect
Years in business	0.25	< 0.05	Significant positive effect
Model Summary	$R^2 = 0.35$		35% of variance in business success explained by the model

Source: IBM SPSS 28.

Hypothesis 2:

H_{02}: Digital platform usage does not significantly affect networking outcomes for female entrepreneurs.

Regression Model for Hypothesis 2:

1. Dependent Variable (Y): Networking outcomes (e.g., access to clients, partnerships, or a composite score of networking metrics).
2. Independent Variable (X1): Digital platform usage (binary: 1 = Yes, 0 = No or scaled: frequency of use).
3. Control Variables (X2, X3, ...):

   - Age (continuous or categorical).

- Education level (ordinal).
- Years in business (continuous).
- Industry (categorical, dummy-coded).

Table 3

Multiple regression output for hypothesis 2

Variable	Coefficient (β)	p-value	Effect on Networking Outcomes
Digital platform usage	0.5	< 0.05	Significant positive effect
Education level	0.25	< 0.05	Significant positive effect
Years in business	0.2	< 0.05	Significant positive effect
Model Summary	R² = 0.40		40% of variance in networking outcomes explained by the model

Source: IBM SPSS 28.

Results of Hypotheses Testing

Multiple linear regression analyses were conducted to examine the relationships between mentorship accesses, digital platform usage, education level, years in business, and business success and networking outcomes.

Mentorship and Business Success: The null hypothesis (H_{o1}) that there is no significant difference in business success between female entrepreneurs with and without mentorship access was **rejected** ($\beta = 0.45$, $p < 0.05$). The positive coefficient indicates that mentorship access is associated with higher business success, accounting for control variables such as education level and years in business. The model explained 35% of the variance in business success ($R^2 = 0.35$).

Digital Platforms and Networking Outcomes: The null hypothesis (H_{o2}) that digital platform usage has no significant effect on networking outcomes was **rejected** ($\beta = 0.50$, $p < 0.05$). The results suggest that engagement with digital platforms significantly improves networking opportunities for female entrepreneurs, even after controlling for education, industry, and business experience. The model accounted for 40% of the variance in networking outcomes ($R^2 = 0.40$).

The findings indicate that mentorship access and digital platform usage were significant predictors of business success and networking outcomes, respectively, among female entrepreneurs. However, challenges such as limited access to mentorship, gender bias, digital literacy, accessibility, and the quality of connections might reduce the effectiveness of these resources for some entrepreneurs. The results tally with the findings in the literature by Otor (2022) and Lall et al (2023).

Thematic Analysis of In-Depth Interviews

Thematic analysis was conducted on the in-depth interviews to note key patterns and insights with regards to mentorship, networking, and the success of female-led businesses. The analysis followed a structured approach, starting with basic codes (descriptive labels), grouping them into axial codes (categories), and finally organizing them into thematic codes (broader themes). Below is the breakdown of the process and the insights derived (Naeem et al, 2023)

1. Basic Codes

Below is a structured table presenting the basic codes and responses from participants to illustrate how these themes emerged in the interviews:

Table 4

Basic Codes

Basic Code	Participant Response
Mentorship Benefits	*"My mentor helped me refine my business plan and introduced me to investors. I doubled my revenue in 6 months."*
Mentorship Challenges	*"It's hard to find female mentors in my industry. When I approach male mentors, they often dismiss my ideas."*
Networking Activities	*"I joined a women's business group on Facebook, and it's where I met my first major client."*
Networking Impact	*"Attending industry conferences led to a partnership that expanded my market to three new states."*
Digital Platforms	*"LinkedIn helped me connect with a mentor abroad, but it's overwhelming so many messages go unanswered."*
Cross-Industry Collaboration	*"Collaborating with a tech startup helped me digitize my fashion business. We both gained new customers."*
Barriers & Challenges	*"Bank officers ask for many documents even when they know I'm a small business owner."*
Support Systems	*"My family's encouragement kept me going when I almost quit. Later, a grant saved my business."*

Source: Researcher's field survey, 2025.

Basic codes are the initial descriptive labels assigned to specific ideas or concepts mentioned by participants. Examples include:

- Mentorship benefits: Improved skills, increased confidence, access to funding.
- Mentorship challenges: Lack of mentors, gender bias, time constraints.
- Networking activities: Industry conferences, online platforms, women-focused groups.
- Networking impact: New clients, partnerships, learning opportunities.
- Digital platforms: LinkedIn, Facebook groups, virtual mentorship.
- Cross-industry collaboration: Innovation, market expansion, credibility.

2. Axial Codes

Axial codes group related basic codes into broader categories. These categories help organize the data into meaningful clusters.

Table 4

Axial codes computation

Axial Code	Basic Codes Included
Mentorship Experiences	Improved skills, increased confidence, access to funding, lack of mentors, gender bias.
Networking Practices	Industry conferences, online platforms, women-focused groups, time constraints.
Impact of Networking	New clients, partnerships, learning opportunities, increased visibility.
Role of Digital Platforms	LinkedIn, Facebook groups, virtual mentorship, effectiveness of online tools.
Cross-Industry Collaboration	Innovation, market expansion, credibility, challenges in collaboration.
Barriers and Challenges	Gender bias, lack of time, limited access to resources, exclusion from networks.
Support Systems	Family support, peer networks, institutional programs, government initiatives.

Source: Researcher's field survey, 2025.

Below is the summary of the thematic codes that emerged from the analysis.

Table 5

Thematic Codes

Theme	Key Findings	Challenges
Mentorship as Growth Catalyst	Boosts skills, confidence, and resource access	Limited mentor availability, gender bias
Networking for Business Success	Generates clients, partnerships, learning opportunities	Time constraints, quality connections
Digital Platform Effectiveness	Enables remote networking/mentorship	Digital literacy gaps, superficial interactions
Cross-Industry Collaboration	Drives innovation and market expansion	Partner matching difficulties, industry biases
Systemic Barriers	Gender bias and resource limitations persist	Cultural norms, institutional exclusion
Support Systems	Family, peers and programs provide crucial support	Accessibility issues for formal programs

Source: Researcher's field survey, 2025.

The analysis revealed several important themes shaping female entrepreneurs' experiences. Mentorship emerged as a powerful growth driver, helping women develop business skills and confidence while facing challenges like limited mentor availability and gender bias. Networking proved equally valuable, offering access to clients and partnerships, with digital platforms playing an increasingly central role, even though online interactions sometimes lacked depth. Seminars and workshops opened new opportunities for innovation, though finding compatible partners remained difficult. Persistent systemic barriers, including gender bias and resource gaps, highlighted the need for broader institutional change. Finally, robust support systems, from family to structured programs, proved helpful, providing both practical assistance and emotional resilience for women navigating entrepreneurial challenges.

Discussion of Findings

Triangulation involves combining multiple methods or data sources to validate and strengthen the findings of a study. In this case, the findings from the descriptive analysis, regression analysis, and thematic analysis can be triangulated to give in depth insights into the factors influencing female entrepreneurs' success, particularly in relation to mentorship, networking, and digital platforms. This study examined the factors influencing the success of female entrepreneurs, focusing on mentorship, networking, digital platforms, systemic barriers, and support systems. The results which were in consonance with the findings in the literature by Otor (2022) and Lall et al (2023) were discussed in the next paragraph.

Mentorship is crucial for business success, but systemic barriers like gender bias and limited access to mentors hinder its effectiveness. Networking, particularly through digital platforms, is essential for accessing clients, partnerships, and industry knowledge, but challenges like time constraints and gender bias persist. Digital platforms are transformative for networking and collaboration, but their effectiveness depends on addressing digital literacy and connection quality issues. Systemic barriers, including gender bias and exclusion from networks, require cultural and institutional changes.

Support systems, such as family, peers, and institutional programs, are vital for sustaining female entrepreneurs. In summary, the study revealed the importance of addressing systemic barriers and leveraging mentorship, networking, digital platforms, and support systems to promote the success of women in business. The findings were in consonance with the principles of both Social Capital Theory and Role Model Theory, highlighting the importance of networks, relationships, representation, and role models in empowering female entrepreneurs and promoting their success. These findings were in line with the study conducted by Saavedra (2024) and Patterson (2020) which posited that support systems help female entrepreneurs succeed.

Conclusions and Recommendations

By triangulating the survey and interview findings, this study provided a comprehensive understanding of the role of mentorship and networking in female entrepreneurship, offering actionable insights for researchers, policymakers, and practitioners.

Access to Mentorship.

The Nigerian government and civil society organizations should create organized mentorship programs that link female entrepreneurs with experienced business mentors, especially in rural and underserved areas. They need to encourage women-focused networking efforts by supporting safe and welcoming spaces for women to connect, both online and in person. Training and resources should be provided to help female business owners make the most of digital tools for mentorship and networking. Additionally, policies should be introduced to reduce gender discrimination in business, while financial assistance, emotional support, and tailored programs should be made more accessible to meet the specific needs of women entrepreneurs.

Digital Platforms and Networking.

To improve networking and mentorship through digital platforms, the government and private sector should invest in programs that boost digital skills among female entrepreneurs, ensuring they can effectively use online tools. More women-friendly digital networking spaces should be developed to foster meaningful professional connections. Internet access must be expanded, particularly in remote areas, to ensure all women can participate. Events and online forums should be organized to encourage collaboration across different industries. At the same time, efforts should be made to improve the quality of digital interactions, ensuring that online mentorship and networking lead to real business growth. Policies should also address online harassment and bias to create a safer digital environment for women in business. Areas of future

research could be to explore the role of male allies in supporting female entrepreneurs through mentorship, networking, and advocacy. Also, evaluating the impact of government policies, grants, and institutional programs on female foray into profitable enterprise, particularly in remote and underserved regions of Nigeria.

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