



## RESEARCH ARTICLE

**REVISED** Understanding networking behaviors among Indian startups: A qualitative study

[version 2; peer review: 3 approved with reservations]

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**Abstract****Background**

Networking plays a pivotal role in achieving business success and mitigating startup failures. The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore the networking experience of startup entrepreneurs for the growth of their businesses.

**Methods**

A qualitative semi-structured interview was conducted mainly in Bangalore and the Delhi regions of India. Using a cluster sampling method, interviews were held with 36 startup entrepreneurs. These startup owners were mainly from Bangalore and Delhi. The age group, gender, demographic profile, and popular startup sector of these startup owners have also been analyzed in this study. The data were analyzed using Atlas. Ti software.

**Results**

The qualitative findings revealed four overall themes related to networking, namely, the "role of networking for the success of the startups", "supportive environment for networking", "crucial stages of networking" and "role of past working experience of entrepreneurs". It was found that most entrepreneurs leverage prior work experience to interact effectively in business, utilizing skills such as communication, leadership, and market intelligence.

**Conclusion**

Entrepreneurs mainly prefer networking with colleagues and their ex-

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bosses in building and creating formal networking. During crises, network members provide expert advice, moral support, and connections to specialists, which helps them solve problems and access new opportunities. Networking is crucial mainly in the early stage of a startup, where connections and relationship structures are needed for navigating upcoming challenges.

### Keywords

Entrepreneurship, Formal Networking, Informal Networking, Networking Behavior, Startups, Experience, India



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**REVISED Amendments from Version 1**

Added India-specific context (caste, family-led businesses, gender norms, regional ecosystems).

Updated the literature review with 2020–2025 references, focusing on post-COVID networking and Indian startup dynamics.

Explicitly grounded the study in Social Network Theory, drawing and recent works (2021–2024).

Justified focus on Bangalore and Delhi (key startup hubs) and FinTech/HealthTech sectors (post-COVID relevance).

Included gender-disaggregated analysis highlighting male-female networking differences.

Described ATLAS.ti usage, coding queries, and theme development.

Explained data saturation determination and peer debriefing process.

Used participant quotes more critically, highlighting contradictions and negative cases.

Added a subsection on networking failures.

Clarified that networking intensity varies by startup stage.

Revised conclusions to reflect nuances and contradictions.

Acknowledged limitations in gender and regional representation.

**Any further responses from the reviewers can be found at the end of the article**

## 1. Introduction

Entrepreneurs are generally socially oriented individuals who are actively involved in community affairs. They also possess a strong sense of global trends and market opportunities. Additionally, these successful entrepreneurs prioritize building social trust among their colleagues and business partners, which leads to broad support and mutual benefits. In today's highly competitive business environment, networking stands out as an essential tool for achieving success. Networking is crucial for startups to grow and thrive. It is a process of building relationships that work together to enhance. Networking is a way to reduce the risk of a new firm by improving its credibility and alleviating some of the problems experienced by startups, such as lack of funds, workplace issues, technology support, mentoring, expertise, marketing strategy, sales difficulties, and capital allocation issues (Albourini *et al.*, 2020; Ferreira *et al.*, 2022).

The startup ecosystem in India is unique in the ways that it influences resource mobilisation and entrepreneurial networking. The nation's post-pandemic recovery has been swift, and technology startups have spread geographically, with more founders and venture activity appearing outside of conventional hubs (NASSCOM & Zinnov, 2023). Additionally, national entrepreneurship monitoring indicates that, following COVID-19, there were changes in the patterns of opportunity recognition and startup formation (Global Entrepreneurship Monitor India, 2021–22). Additionally, business communication and informal platformed networking have accelerated in urban and semi-urban areas due to digital adoption (smartphones, UPI, messaging platforms) (Hokmabadi *et al.*, 2024).

Networking can involve one-time or continuing interactions and can be planned or unexpected. It involves the formation and maintenance of a variety of inter-organizational social ties depending on the needs of startups. Partnerships and familial ties are examples of these networks that have an impact on decision-making and business efficiency. These networks help the entrepreneur's business in a variety of ways, including business growth, partner discovery, taking advantage of the right opportunity at the right time, and increasing visibility. Making relationships with the right people at the right time is important in networking. The survival and success of a startup depend upon the networking habits of the startup founders. Establishing and nurturing relationships with professionals across various industries enables business owners and professionals to access valuable resources, information, and opportunities. Networking serves as a means to expand knowledge, keeping individuals abreast of industry trends. Moreover, it can lead to valuable business partnerships, collaboration, and referrals, ultimately enhancing business outcomes. By tapping into a broad network of potential clients, investors, and partners, networking can significantly contribute to increased sales and revenue (Ibrahim & Roslin, 2018). Networking also provides a platform for skill development and learning from industry experts and peers. Overall, it plays a pivotal role in broadening reach, gaining valuable insights, building strategic alliances, and driving growth and success.

Networking behavior in business refers to intentional actions aimed at establishing and nurturing connections to achieve specific business outcomes. Actively engaging in networking behaviors, such as cultivating internal and external contacts, participating in professional and community activities, and raising one's profile within the company, allows organizations to expand their network and access diverse opportunities. This strategic approach enables businesses to leverage relationships and social connections for a competitive advantage, leading to various positive business outcomes (Albourini *et al.*, 2020).

Previous research has primarily focused on the role of networking in the early stages of business development, such as startup formation and initial growth. There is limited research on the challenges faced by entrepreneurs and startups in sustaining and expanding their networks as they progress beyond the startup phase (Albourini *et al.*, 2020; Ferreira *et al.*, 2022). A review of existing studies reveals that most are predominantly quantitative, relying heavily on questionnaire-based methodologies. However, there is a noticeable gap in understanding entrepreneurs' perceptions of networking behavior and its impact on their startups. This study seeks to bridge this gap by enriching the existing knowledge body and offering a fresh perspective on entrepreneurial networking practices. This research gap highlights the need for further investigation into the various aspects of networking in the context of startups, including understanding the role and impact of effective networking strategies, identifying supportive network members, exploring the timing and sequence of networking activities, and examining the influence of past working experience in the context of startups. The objective of this study is to understand the entrepreneur's experience and examine the networking behavior of startups. An exploratory method was used to analyze the most important themes and concepts that drive networking behavior in Indian startups to do this. The paper is segmented into five main areas including literature review, methodology, findings, management implications, limitations, and future research directions.

## 2. Literature Review

It is commonly known that entrepreneurial networking is essential for identifying opportunities, mobilising resources, and expanding a business (Burt, 2020). Networks give people access to market data, mentorship, financial resources, and social capital. However, most of the existing literature ignores the sociocultural and regional subtleties found in emerging economies like India in favour of concentrating primarily on Western contexts.

India has distinct socioeconomic characteristics that affect networking among entrepreneurs. Caste relations and the preponderance of family-run enterprises greatly influence social capital and resource accessibility. When establishing networks, entrepreneurs from particular caste backgrounds frequently encounter structural advantages or obstacles (Rao *et al.*, 2023). Furthermore, states have very different regional entrepreneurial ecosystems. Bangalore, for example, is well known for its booming tech sector, while Delhi offers a complex blend of established and new industries, such as fintech and healthtech (Mehta & Sharma, 2021). We take into consideration local network formation patterns that might not coincide with global trends by placing the study in these contexts.

In India, networking is still significantly influenced by gender. In networks that are dominated by men, female entrepreneurs usually face obstacles that restrict their access to mentorship and funding (Kaur & Banerjee, 2023). In a similar vein, social capital influences growth paths and entrepreneurial decisions and is frequently mediated by family and community networks. Taking into account gender-disaggregated data guarantees nuanced insights into how networking dynamics differ among entrepreneurs.

Networks are crucial to the post-COVID entrepreneurial recovery, according to recent studies. Startups used peer collaborations, online communities, and digital networks to access skilled labour, secure funding, and manage supply chain disruptions (Patel *et al.*, 2023; Singh & Rao, 2023). These post-2020 studies show that Indian entrepreneurs specifically relied on familial and regional networks, highlighting the significance of contextual analysis even though earlier research has highlighted the advantages of networking for crisis support (Albourini *et al.*, 2020).

The study has a strong foundation in social network theory, which highlights how the nature and structure of interpersonal and interorganisational relationships have a significant impact on entrepreneurial outcomes (Granovetter, 1985; Uzzi, 1997). We can investigate the complex ways that networking affects startup performance, opportunity identification, and crisis management using this conceptual lens. Crucially, the study places these dynamics in the context of the Indian socioeconomic environment, taking into account elements that influence the creation, calibre, and usefulness of entrepreneurial networks, including caste, regional ecosystems, gender roles, and family-led business structures (Burt, 2020; Raju & Kaur, 2023). Social network theory combined with these India-specific factors provides new insights into how social theory functions differently in emerging economies than in Western settings, providing contributions that go beyond simply validating preexisting findings.

Accordingly, this framework suggests that the creator's ability to strike a balance between embeddedness and openness—using family trust for early survival while fostering weak-tie relationships for innovation and scaling—determines how effective entrepreneurial networking is, in addition to the quantity and quality of ties. The ability to sustain flexible, cross-border networks becomes a crucial factor in determining the success of FinTech and HealthTech startups, where regulatory navigation and knowledge diffusion are crucial.

A strong framework for comprehending these dynamics is offered by network theory. Resource access and entrepreneurial performance are influenced differently by strong and weak ties, network density, and structural gaps (Burt, 2020). Weak ties frequently transcend immediate social circles in India, giving business owners access to capital, guidance, and market expertise from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds. Through the explicit integration of network theory with socio-economic factors unique to India, this study provides a comprehensive perspective that goes beyond simply validating previous findings.

Social networks affect entrepreneurial behavior, signifying that entrepreneurs with robust social connections are inclined to actively participate in entrepreneurial activities. Moreover, networking also provides startups with a platform to showcase their products or services, increasing visibility and attracting potential customers or clients (Anderson *et al.*, 2010; Ferreira *et al.*, 2022). By networking startups can establish a strong support system and increase their chances of success in a competitive business environment (Witt, 2004; Ferreira *et al.*, 2022). The development of relationships both inside and outside the company as well as participation in professional events are examples of networking behaviors that have a favorable impact on the success of entrepreneurial ventures. The networking behavior that has the biggest influence on the success of entrepreneurial startups is cultivating external contacts (Albourini *et al.*, 2020). In entrepreneurial incubation hubs, networking promotes the growth of start-ups by exchanging ideas and experiences. Networking is essential for promoting the entire incubation process and helping start-ups grow through the exchange of ideas and experiences. Startups must first establish a network to work together successfully (Ferreira *et al.*, 2022). Through the infusion of ideas and experiences, networking plays a critical role in facilitating the overall incubation process and assisting start-ups in their development. Start-ups can only successfully collaborate if they begin to network (Karambakuwa & Bayat, 2023).

Three context-relevant dynamics that influence entrepreneurial networking in India are highlighted in recent empirical and policy reports; as a result, they demand special attention. First, family networks frequently provide legitimacy, informal finance, and crisis support; family businesses and family ties continue to be a significant source of social capital and early-stage resources in India's small-firm sector (SPJIMR Centre for Family Business & Entrepreneurship, 2023). Second, while Bengaluru and the Delhi NCR continue to be important hubs, a bigger percentage of new businesses are now originating from tier-2 and tier-3 cities, which is altering the makeup of the institutional and external connections that are available (NASSCOM & Zinnov, 2023). Third, the COVID-19 pandemic fast-tracked digital adoption and changed the way entrepreneurs networked: sectoral online communities, virtual mentoring, and messaging platforms like WhatsApp have become key hubs for quick information sharing, market intelligence, and ad hoc problem solving (Petropoulou *et al.*, 2024; Hokmabadi *et al.*, 2024).

Strong and weak ties on social media offer various forms of support, which is crucial for the growth of startup businesses. The most helpful contacts for startups were friends, business angels, and business partners, but they also leverage weak ties to get different kinds of help. Although business incubators were utilized by a large number of entrepreneurs, their assistance in creating external networks and connections was not well recognized (Durda & Ključnikov, 2019). Formal and informal networking is crucial to the success of a startup (Sharafizad, 2014). Formal networking refers to intentional and structured efforts to establish connections with other professionals and organizations (Witt, 2004). On the other hand, informal networking refers to the natural and spontaneous relationships that develop through day-to-day interactions and personal connections. These informal networks often include friends, family, colleagues, and mentors who can provide support, advice, and potential business opportunities (Abou-Moghl & Al-Kasasbeh, 2012; Albourini *et al.*, 2020; Gloor *et al.*, 2018; Ferreira *et al.*, 2022). The combination of both formal and informal networking can provide startups with a wide range of benefits. Formal networking allows startups to expand their professional network, connect with industry leaders and experts, and gain access to valuable resources such as funding opportunities, partnerships, and market insights. On the other hand, informal networking helps startups build relationships based on trust and personal connections. These relationships can provide emotional support, mentorship, and access to informal knowledge and advice. Additionally, formal networking can provide startups with credibility and visibility within their industry, enhancing their reputation and attracting potential customers or clients (Klerk & Saayman, 2012; Sharafizad, 2014; Stuart & Sorenson, 2007). On the other hand, informal networking offers startups a support system of trusted individuals who can provide guidance, feedback, and referrals (Sharafizad, 2014; Witt, 2004).

Particularly in the post-COVID era, recent studies emphasise the vital role that entrepreneurial networks play in bolstering startup resilience. In times of uncertainty, networking makes it easier to access resources, share knowledge, and form strategic alliances—all of which are critical for survival and expansion (Sharma & Gupta, 2023; Li & Wang, 2024). Although previous research mostly concentrated on Western settings (e.g., Witt, 2004; Stuart & Sorenson, 2007), new data indicates that regional and cultural factors have a big impact on network dynamics in India. For example, social connections and family-run businesses are important in crisis support and resource mobilisation (Kumar & Rao, 2023). According to post-pandemic research, Indian startups are using digital networking platforms more and more to get around geographic restrictions and access funding, opportunity for collaboration, and mentorship (Patel *et al.*, 2023). By going beyond the replication of earlier Western-centric insights and providing context-specific contributions to theory and practice, these findings highlight the necessity of studying entrepreneurial networking within India's distinct socio-cultural and economic landscape.

Networks play a critical role in the performance of small businesses during both their startup and expansion phases. A study discovered a favorable correlation between small business performance throughout both the startup and expansion phases and the utilization of entrepreneurial networks. As a company advances from the start-up to the growth stage of the business life cycle, small business performance improves (Tendai, 2013). In the early stage, networks are crucial for information and resource access, and performance is positively impacted by these networks (Tendai, 2013). The development of critical capabilities through networking is particularly important in the founding, start-up, and production phases (Laurell *et al.*, 2017). As startups expand, strategic alliances and specific ties become more beneficial (Chu and Yoon, 2021). However, the size and occupational background of the network can also influence the success of the startup (Greve, 1995). The importance of establishing strong relationships at the beginning of network formation is emphasized (Jørgensen and Ulhøi, 2010). Depending on their business phase and startup incentives, women entrepreneurs have different networking behaviors and structures within their networks. In the pre-startup stage, there were no variations in the networking practices and frameworks of the various categories of female entrepreneurs; nevertheless, during the startup and established stages, disparities surfaced (Sharafizad and Coetzer, 2017).

Prior experience of entrepreneurs is positively correlated with business performance in a minor but significant way, with the experience and cultural context acting as moderators (Jiao *et al.*, 2023). Previous work experience and the success of entrepreneurial enterprises were found to be positively correlated by a study (Siddique *et al.*, 2022). An entrepreneur's decision to pursue a business takeover or launch a new firm is influenced by their prior job experience. Starting a new business as a means of pursuing entrepreneurship is more likely when one has both management experience and experience in the same industry (Xi *et al.*, 2018). The previous experience of entrepreneurs allows them to identify opportunities, anticipate challenges, and make informed decisions (Dorcas *et al.*, 2021). Work experience equips entrepreneurs to navigate the challenges of running a business and increase their chances of success (Lee & Tsang, 2001). Prior work experience plays a significant role in an entrepreneur's skills and knowledge, influencing his or her ability to recognize and act on opportunities, manage new ventures, and address the changing role of a business founder (Martin and Smith, 2010). This experience can also decrease uncertainty and motivate entrepreneurs (Othman *et al.*, 2016).

### 3. Methods

#### 3.1 Study design and setting

This study adopted qualitative research methods by conducting semi-structured interviews with 36 startup entrepreneurs based in the Bangalore and Delhi regions in India. The startup owners constitute a higher percentage of males as compared to female startup owners in this study.

Since Bengaluru and the Delhi-NCR area together account for the majority of India's funded startups and venture capital activity, especially in the FinTech and HealthTech sectors, the study focused on startup founders based in these two areas. Often referred to as India's Silicon Valley, Bengaluru is home to a large number of technology parks, accelerators, and international venture networks that support quick experimentation and digital scaling (NASSCOM & Zinnov, 2023). In contrast, Delhi-NCR has developed into a financial and regulatory hub, offering easy access to early-stage investors, angel networks, and policy stakeholders—all of which are crucial in the FinTech and HealthTech innovation ecosystems (Invest India, 2023). FinTech and HealthTech further highlights their crucial contributions to India's digital transformation: FinTech has pushed financial inclusion through digital lending and UPI-enabled services, while HealthTech hastened the adoption of AI-based diagnostics and telemedicine following COVID-19 (Mehta *et al.*, 2024). These industries also serve as excellent examples of how data-driven cooperation, trust networks, and regulatory frameworks affect venture scaling.

## Sampling strategy

Based on the suggestions of [Gibbons \*et al.\* \(2019\)](#) and [McWhirter \*et al.\* \(2013, 2019\)](#), this study created and executed an intervention based on a culturally sensitive framework. An extensive examination of how networking behaviour among Indian startups contributes to their business success is made possible by this approach, which places an emphasis on interpreting and contextualising the meanings derived from entrepreneurs' experiences. Given the possible influence of networking behaviour on the success of entrepreneurs, it became essential to conduct a thorough analysis of this phenomenon. Because of their adaptability, which allows for a deeper examination of subjects that might come up unexpectedly and necessitate additional research during the semi-structured interviews was selected as the preferred method of gathering data.

Due to the paucity of research in this field, these interviews made it possible to gain a more thorough understanding of the experiences of entrepreneurs. During the iterative data collection phase of our mixed methods study, questions regarding the networking process were systematically incorporated into the topic guide to further explore this aspect. These questions were developed using information from preliminary interviews, guaranteeing a thorough investigation of networking dynamics in the context of entrepreneurship. The study received ethical approval from the institutional Ethics Committee, and prior to the start of the interviews, participants provided consent. Some responses were noted for conducting interviews, and some interviews were captured on audio files. All of the interviews took place between May and July of 2023.

In-depth interviews were judged to be the most suitable method for answering the research questions because of the study's goal, which was to investigate entrepreneurs' opinions and preferences about networking behaviour in Indian startups.

Particularly in the post-COVID era, when digital connectivity and resource access became crucial, fintech and healthtech startups were chosen because they reflect two of India's most innovative and network-dependent industries ([Sharma & Gupta, 2023](#)). Because of their distinct but complementary startup ecosystems, Bangalore and Delhi were selected as the main focus areas.

Startup associations, incubators, and professional networks were used to get in touch with participants. The purpose of the semi-structured interview guide was to investigate the networking tactics, difficulties, and results of founders. The guide went through a two-step procedure to guarantee validity:

1. Expert review: The guide was assessed for comprehensiveness, clarity, and relevance by three subject-matter experts in networking, entrepreneurship, and innovation ecosystems. Suggestions for improving the wording and sequencing of the questions were included ([Guest \*et al.\*, 2020; O'Leary, 2021](#)).
2. Pilot testing: To evaluate the questions' lucidity, coherence, and contextual relevance, a pilot study involving four startup founders was carried out. Small changes were made to enhance understanding and guarantee that answers reflected complex experiences.

Virtual interviews lasted between forty-five and sixty minutes each. Transcripts were anonymised for analysis, and audio recordings were safely stored. Participants had the chance to check the accuracy of the transcripts (member checking). To reduce potential biases, reflective notes were kept during the entire research process. Thematic analysis was reached when themes were repeated and no new codes emerged, indicating that data collection was completed ([Guest \*et al.\*, 2020](#)).

## Coding and analysis

After [Braun and Clarke \(2021\)](#), thematic analysis was used. Primary codes and subcodes were outlined in a comprehensive codebook. Consistency was ensured by resolving disagreements through dialogue and consensus. To present a balanced perspective, quotes were critically analysed and negative examples (such as networking failures and decreased activity after establishment) were specifically included.

A systematic coding approach was used to analyse the qualitative data. First, a preliminary codebook was created using the literature review, research goals, and themes that emerged from a subset of the transcripts. To guarantee uniformity, codes were established with precise definitions and inclusion/exclusion standards.

The ATLAS.ti software was used in this study to systematically manage and analyse qualitative data. All codes, their operational definitions, and inclusion/exclusion criteria were included in the comprehensive codebook that was created. We were able to find trends and connections among participant responses by effectively organising and retrieving data using coding queries in ATLAS.ti. Codes like “networking for funding” and “mentorship support,” for instance, were combined under the more general heading of “Resource-based Networking.” To guarantee a nuanced understanding, divergent cases—such as situations in which networking did not provide benefits—were investigated independently. A thorough thematic analysis method was used to examine the interview transcripts (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Based on early data readings, a draft codebook was created and iteratively improved to capture new trends. To maintain uniformity and lessen prejudice, disagreements were settled through dialogue. To give a balanced view, negative cases—such as networking that impeded growth or lacked outside incubator support—were methodically found and examined in addition to positive networking outcomes.

### Participant demographics

To put the results in context, demographic information was methodically documented. Participants ranged in age from 25 to 45 years, with 10 female and 22 male participants. The participants’ degrees of formal education, prior work experience, and exposure to the industry varied, and their startup experience ranged from two to twelve years. These demographics made it possible to investigate the possible effects of experience, gender, and geographic location on networking practices.

The study improves transparency, replicability, and contextual understanding of networking dynamics in the Indian startup ecosystem by providing specifics about the recruitment process, sampling strategy, and participant characteristics.

Readers can better grasp the lens through which data were interpreted and gain a deeper understanding of networking behaviours among Indian startup entrepreneurs by using these strategies and explicitly acknowledging researcher positionality.

### 3.2 Interview guide

These interview questions were asked to the participants about their experiences in the networking process (Table 1). The focus of the interviews centered on entrepreneurs’ networking behavior and subsequent business outcomes. The average length of the interviews ranged from 20 to 30 minutes.

**Table 1. An interview guide for exploring participants’ experiences in networking behavior.**

| Questions   | Prompts                                   |
|---|---|
| Is there any role of networking in the success of your start-up?                  | What Are They?                            |
| Does networking help you to get support from other start-up owners?               | Positive/Negative Aspects?                |
| Is your prior work experience helping you interact with more people?              | Yes- How/No                               |
| How do you collect information related to business while interacting with others? | Laptop, Book, Mind, No Need, Google Key   |
| Who do you look for in your guidance and mentorship?                              | Family, Friends, Or Outsiders             |
| With whom you would like to maintain the networking more (i.e., a known group?)   | Family, Friends, Or Outsiders             |
| Which network is important in getting more business opportunities?                | Team/Informal and Others                  |
| Do network members help you in facing business crises or problems?                | If Yes, How Do They Support and Help You? |
| At what stage of business do you think networking is important for you?           | Early, Expansion, Growth, and Decline     |
| What motivated you to start networking and expand your network?                   | Finance, Competition, Growth              |

### 3.3 Tools for analyzing data

Thematic analysis was selected as the method of analyzing the interview transcripts, given that it is a flexible approach that can accommodate diverse ontological and epistemological perspectives (Braun & Clarke 2006). Thematic analysis is a systematic framework for coding qualitative data to identify meaningful patterns across the data (Braun & Clarke, 2014). Thematic analysis is a particularly popular approach to qualitative research with some areas of application that crossover towards other kinds of applied policy and practice-focused discourse, not dominant in the academics (Braun & Clarke, 2014). The thematic analysis consists of several distinct steps, such as familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes followed by searching for them, and reviewing to then define themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Field notes and reflexive memos were written immediately after each interview, which was the unit of data collection. The data were coded initially and as each stage of the coding progressed from initial to developed themes. We used Atlas. Ti software for the data analysis. We coded the data in ATLAS.ti 23.2.1 for Mac and produced the following four themes from our analysis.

(ATLAS.ti Scientific Software Development GmbH. (2023). ATLAS.ti Mac (version 23.2.1) [Qualitative data analysis software]. <https://atlasti.com>). Data analysis can also be done by various alternative software, such as QDA Miner Lite (<https://provalisresearch.com/products/qualitative-data-analysis-software/freeware/>), and Gephi (<https://gephi.org/>). These software also includes features like coding, annotation, and visual analysis).

## 4. Results

Startup owners who are between 30-50 years old represent the largest demographic profile, followed closely by those over 50 years. Conversely, the youngest age group, under 20 years, constitutes a lower percentage in the study. The startup age is between one to five years of operating a startup, some of the startups are based on Fintech, Edtech, and Healthtech. The Fintech and Health sectors seem to be a popular choice for startup sectors, followed by the education sector. Networking across various sectors and business models is vital for survival, growth, and legacy planning. Four main themes during the interviews and after the coding analysis of the interviews.

Theme 1- Role of networking in the success of startups

Theme 2- Supportive environment and people for networking

Theme 3- Crucial stages of networking

Theme 4- Role of the prior work experience of an entrepreneur

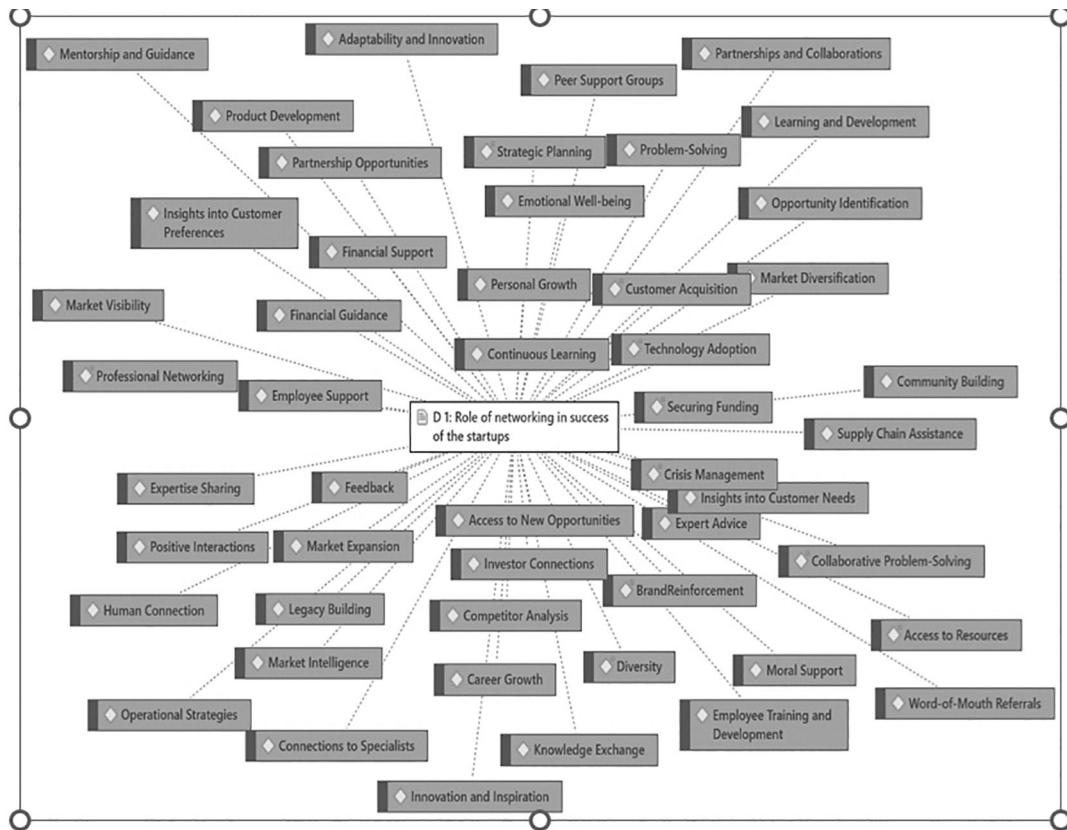
Each theme is analyzed explicitly with the support of past literature, references, and a network diagram to gain deeper insights into this study.

### 4.1 Theme 1: Role of networking in the success of startups

Based on the insights gathered from the interviews, some of the references are mentioned below with a thematic map, as provided in Figure 1. Networking serves as a multifaceted tool that contributes significantly to various aspects of a startup's journey. It facilitates product development by providing avenues for collaboration, feedback, and idea exchange with industry experts, potential customers, and fellow entrepreneurs. This collaborative environment fosters innovation and helps refine the startup's offerings to better meet market needs.

Networking helps startups obtain financial support. By connecting with investors, venture capitalists, and other funding sources, entrepreneurs can secure the necessary capital to fuel their growth and expansion plans. It also helps in problem-solving and allows entrepreneurs to tap into the collective expertise and experiences of their network to overcome challenges and navigate obstacles more effectively. Additionally, networking provides new opportunities for startups, including potential collaborations, joint ventures, and market expansion prospects. By expanding their professional network, entrepreneurs increase their chances of discovering and capitalizing on these opportunities.

Reference 1- '*... We collaborate with like-minded professionals with whom we feel comfortable and aligned. Our ability to assemble teams on a project-by-project basis not only meets the demands of our current endeavors but also facilitates the expansion of our business capacity ...*'.



**Figure 1. Role of networking in the success of startups.** Source: ATLAS. Ti thematic map.

Reference 2- '.... Networking transcends merely exchanging business cards; it is about building meaningful connections. Given the impracticality of following up with everyone met at these events, selectivity becomes crucial. Instead of spreading oneself thin, it is more effective to prioritize contact with individuals deemed valuable for maintaining ongoing relationships ....'.

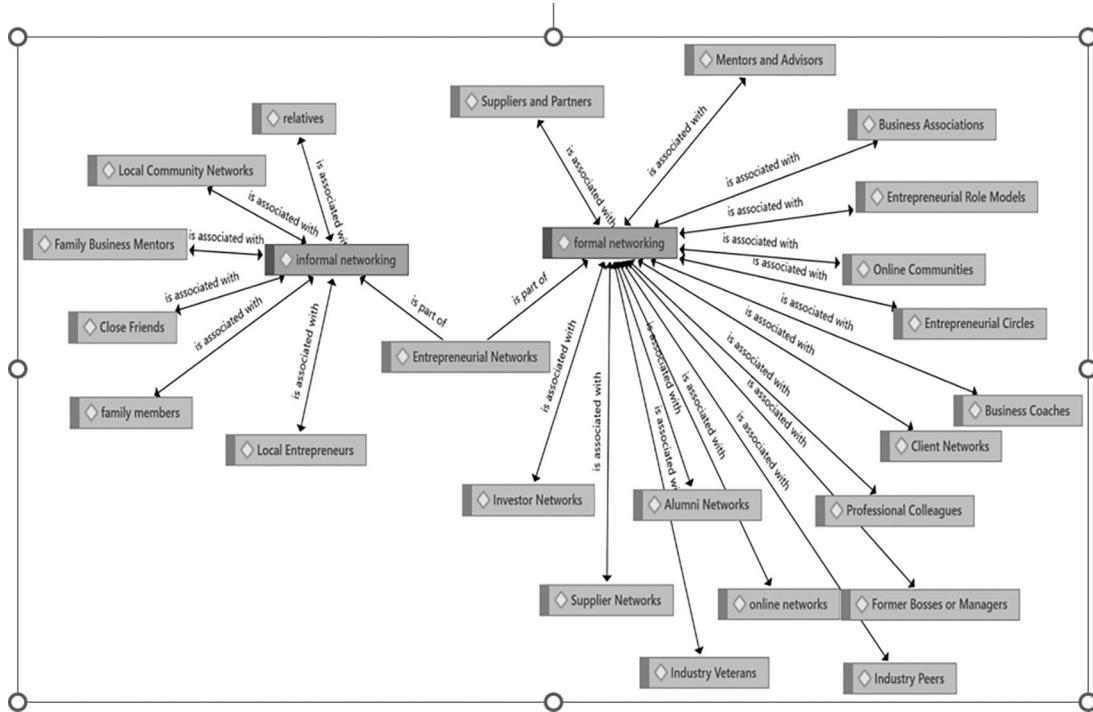
Reference 3- '... Well, I wanted to make my career grow until I retire that's what everybody wants even if they're working for someone else. I also get a lot of satisfaction out of working for myself ....'.

#### 4.2 Theme 2: Supportive environment and people for networking

Drawing from the insights obtained from the interviews, a selection of references is included below, accompanied by a thematic map, as shown in Figure 2. This shows that collaborating with peers can lead to innovative solutions and enhanced customer experiences while also attracting top talent and increasing brand visibility. Industry events and conferences provide face-to-face networking opportunities and access to industry experts and potential collaborators. Alumni networks from educational institutions can serve as a valuable resource for making connections with fellow entrepreneurs who share similar backgrounds and experiences. Additionally, business mentor networks offer access to seasoned professionals who can provide guidance and support based on their entrepreneurial journeys.

Reference 1- 'We maintain enduring business relationships with partners we have engaged with for over two decades—individuals we trust implicitly. Their track record of consistent delivery is a testament to their reliability. Despite potential cost differentials, our confidence lies in their steadfast commitment to honoring their words. This trust ensures peace of mind, knowing that they will follow through on their promises ...'.

Reference 2- '... I consulted with a select group of individuals, including friends, family members, and my then-husband, before finalizing my decision ...'.



**Figure 2. Insights into supporting members for networking.** Source: ATLAS. ti thematic map.

Reference 3- '.... I maintain a close circle of friends with whom I frequently engage in discussions about my plans and decisions. Their guidance and support have been invaluable to me, and I continue to rely on them as a trusted informal source of advice ....'.

Reference 4- '... I reached out to a friend who operates a similar business, and she graciously provided me with valuable advice and insights. Since our venture did not require a substantial loan from a bank, we utilized our existing capital to establish it and proceeded from there. We spread the word about our business among friends, fellow school moms, and through word-of-mouth marketing channels ....'.

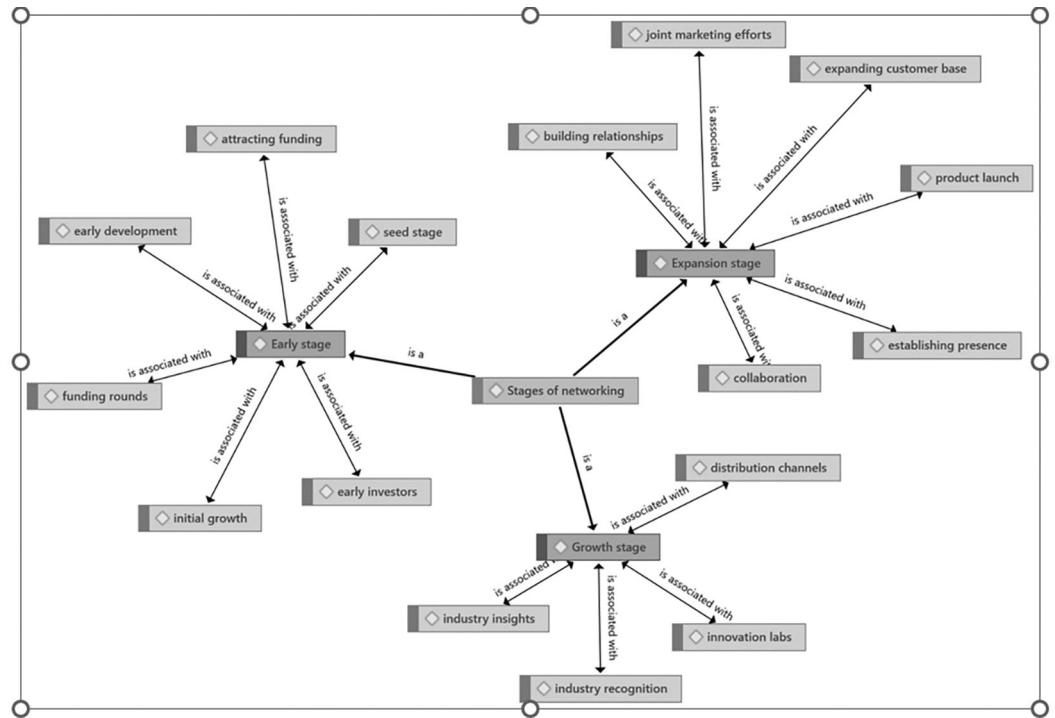
Reference 4- "My accountant attends several seminars and keeps me informed about any changes in regulations or laws that may impact my business. With this arrangement, I rely on their expertise to stay up-to-date, allowing me to focus on other aspects of running the business ....'.

Reference 5- '.... Most of my business derives from informal networking and word-of-mouth referrals. As a small-scale enterprise, I find little necessity to attend to formal business functions. Instead, my primary source of clientele stems from connections within the school mom community ....'.

#### 4.3 Theme 3: Crucial stages of networking

The participants' view on the crucial stages of networking in the success of the startups has pointed out certain things mentioned below in the references (Figure 3). At the seed stage, networking helps in establishing initial connections with potential partners, mentors, and investors. These connections are instrumental in gaining market feedback, refining business ideas, and attracting the necessary resources to kickstart operations. As the business progresses, networking becomes essential for securing partnerships, expanding the customer base, and accessing new markets. It also aids in scaling operations efficiently, attracting funding, and gaining industry recognition, positioning the business as a market leader. Ultimately, networking is an ongoing effort that provides valuable opportunities and support throughout the business lifecycle. By actively engaging with various stakeholders, entrepreneurs can leverage their networks to drive growth, innovation, and resilience in the face of challenges.

Reference 1- '.... In the initial stages of starting up, I dedicated significant time to conducting thorough research. I reached out to diverse organizations and engaged in discussions with numerous professional contacts both within and beyond my community ....'.



**Figure 3. Need for networking at different stages of startup.** Source: ATLAS. Ti thematic map.

Reference 2- '....During our initial stages, we dedicated significant effort to attending numerous network functions and building relationships within the community to establish our presence. However, our reliance on such activities has diminished as our business has become more established. We now prioritize networking efforts primarily when exceptional opportunities arise, ones that we believe could significantly benefit our business or align with our goals ....'.

Reference 3- '....Mainly networking is required at the expansion stage of the business because that time helps us to build connections and can lead to more customer base ....'.

Reference 4- '... While networking is mainly in the initial stage it is required to be on the network, you need networking at every stage because networking is important for all stages to stay connected with others. For example, Flipkart's business started with networking, and it continues with networking for its sales ....'.

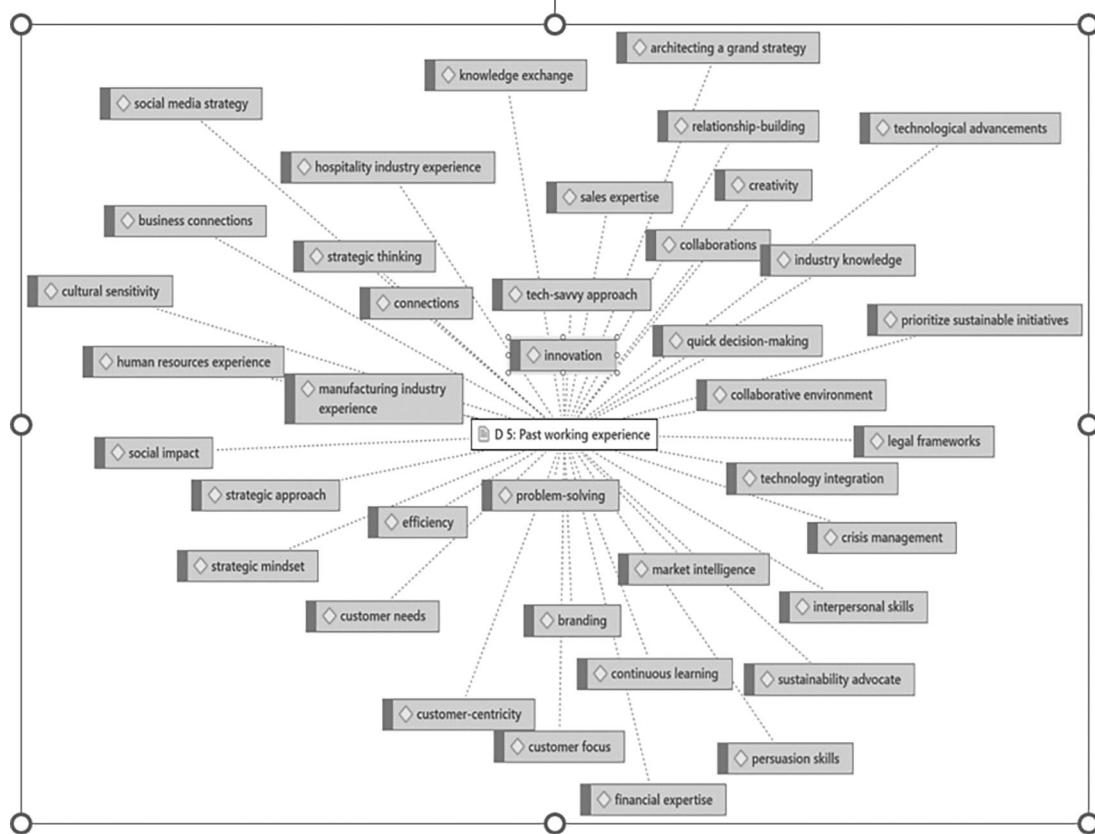
#### 4.4 Theme 4: Role of the prior work experience of an entrepreneur

Based on the information gathered from the interviews, the thematic map presented in Figure 4 is included in the list of sources that follow. Past working experiences of entrepreneurs shape their interactions with people. These perspectives encompass a wide array of skills and attributes, each contributing uniquely to their ability to connect and thrive in their ventures. These entrepreneurs excel in building meaningful relationships with stakeholders and fostering trust and collaboration, and their strong networking abilities facilitate access to resources and opportunities. Sales and customer support skills ensure exceptional service delivery and customer satisfaction, while crisis management abilities mitigate risks and preserve business continuity. Agility enables them to adapt swiftly to changing market dynamics, while sustainability initiatives promote responsible business practices and environmental stewardship.

Reference 1- '... Before becoming an entrepreneur, I was working in the banking sector due to enormous pressure and overworking I quit the job, and during that time I learned many things like—a strategist approach to tackling any situation be it interacting with investors or developing the market strategy ....'.

Reference 2- 'My salesperson job helped me to learn about customer interaction, and I applied this to my startup to make it a more customer-driven approach ....'.

Reference 3- '....My learnings from the previous job helps me with the right decision-making and problem-solving skills ....'.



**Figure 4. Role of prior work experience in an entrepreneur's skills and knowledge.** Source: ATLAS. ti thematic map.

Reference 4- ‘....I was a travel blogger before starting my startup, so I have no experience working, but I got to know more about dealing with people, so that experience gives me some kind of comfort in my startup ....’.

#### 4.5 Analysis

##### Applying participant quotations and theoretical understanding critically

Participant quotes are employed in the updated analysis as analytical tools to show both similarities and differences in entrepreneurial networking practices, rather than just as illustrative examples. By highlighting inconsistencies, conflicts, and contextual subtleties within the Indian startup ecosystem, this method deepens interpretation.

“In the early stage, it was my cousin’s network that helped us connect with angel investors — it’s more about trust than formal pitches,” said one founder, underscoring the benefits of using personal and familial ties for early investment and operational support (Founder, Delhi-based Fintech). These instances highlight how networking has two sides: close relationships can result in dependency, less critical feedback, and less creativity. This is consistent with earlier research showing that homogeneous and dense networks can limit growth by decreasing strategic agility and encouraging conformity (Ferreira *et al.*, 2022; Jack & Anderson, 2023).

These adverse examples highlight the fact that network ties’ quality, diversity, and governance are more important than their quantity. The study offers a more realistic and balanced understanding of entrepreneurial networking in developing ecosystems like India by highlighting examples where networking hampered rather than aided growth.

Other participants, however, pointed out the drawbacks of such intimate networks, especially with regard to exposure and innovation: Being overly dependent on family or local networks can sometimes limit exposure. These opposing viewpoints highlight the ways in which networking can both support and impede the advancement of entrepreneurship. Additionally, the move to digital networking following COVID brought with it both new opportunities and difficulties.

Although the previous analysis emphasises the ways in which networking makes resources, mentorship, and legitimacy more accessible, it is equally critical to acknowledge that not all networking encounters result in favourable outcomes. In order to provide a fair analysis, the study also looks at instances where relational embeddedness and an excessive dependence on well-known relationships hampered creativity, judgement, and company expansion. A more comprehensive grasp of the dual function of networks—as both facilitators and possible obstacles—in India's developing startup ecosystem can be gained by investigating these counterexamples.

Although the study focusses mostly on networking's advantages, it is important to identify situations in which networking efforts did not produce the desired results. A number of participants stated that they occasionally did not receive adequate support from their interactions with incubators, accelerators, or outside partners. One Fintech entrepreneur, for instance, stated: "We were linked to an incubator, but the advice was general and unsuited to our particular difficulties. For us, the alleged network didn't actually open doors."

"We reached out to potential collaborators through our network, but many were not responsive or lacked the resources to help," another Healthtech founder said. Networking occasionally seemed like a waste of time. These failures also represent structural and socioeconomic issues in the Indian context. For example, the effectiveness of networks is impacted by sector-specific constraints, regional differences, and fluctuating incubator quality. By acknowledging these failures, entrepreneurs and policymakers can create supportive ecosystems that prioritise resource alignment, strategic engagement, and targeted mentoring over merely expanding contacts (Li & Qian, 2021; Adegbite & Oladipo, 2023).

The inclusion of these examples gives the study a balanced viewpoint and acknowledges that networking has two sides: it can help startups if connections are weak or misaligned, but it can also impede growth when used effectively.

The study found clear gendered trends in the establishment, maintenance, and utilisation of networks by entrepreneurs.

For mentorship and early-stage funding support, female founders frequently turned to informal, trust-based networks, mainly peers, family, and incubators that catered to women. They also mentioned difficulties obtaining credibility in male-dominated professional circles and restricted access to high-value investor networks. This supports earlier research indicating that social and structural barriers prevent women entrepreneurs from gaining access to professional and financial networks (Gupta & Turban, 2023; Singh, 2024).

In order to obtain quicker funding rounds and wider market connections, male founders, on the other hand, were more likely to take advantage of professional and institutional networks, such as accelerator programs, alumni associations, and venture capital communities. However, some male entrepreneurs pointed out that an excessive dependence on homogeneous networks hindered diversity in innovation and teamwork.

The study highlights the relationship between social capital and gender by incorporating gender-disaggregated perspectives. It shows that although networking improves entrepreneurial outcomes for everyone, network quality and inclusivity are still uneven. The findings add to the expanding body of knowledge regarding gender-sensitive entrepreneurship ecosystems in India, where access to opportunities and resources is influenced by a combination of institutional factors, gendered expectations, and cultural norms.

## 5. Discussion

This qualitative analysis revealed that networking is an important tool that ranges from accessing new opportunities and resources to fostering adaptability, innovation, and brand building, which aligns with previous studies (Ford & Mouzas, 2013; Ferreira *et al.*, 2022). This study further supports the importance of networking as a crucial tool for accessing new opportunities and resources and fostering adaptability, innovation, and brand reinforcement. Additionally, the study highlights the alignment of these findings with previous studies that emphasize the significance of networking in achieving business success (Ford & Mouzas, 2013). Networking is a multifaceted tool that not only facilitates career growth and collaborative problem-solving but also plays a vital role in community building, competitor analysis, and continuous learning. Crucially, during times of crisis, the strength of one's network becomes most evident as members rally to offer expert counsel, unwavering moral support, and crucial connections to specialist resources. This collaborative effort helps in a problem-solving approach that opens doors to unforeseen opportunities and bolsters the resilience of startups. It also drives the benefits of networking, such as accessing specialized expertise, maintaining connections, and facilitating ongoing personal and professional development (Ferreira *et al.*, 2022). By understanding the significance of each aspect, individuals and businesses can prioritize their networking efforts effectively to achieve specific goals, whether by expanding their brand's visibility, securing funding, or fostering collaborative partnerships.

Although our results are consistent with earlier research that shows the useful advantages of entrepreneurial networks, we go beyond that research by identifying three mechanisms unique to India that describe how networks function in the context of Indian startups. First, family and community safety nets: tight family and community ties frequently offer quick moral, reputational, and localised problem-solving support that replaces some formal resources, rather than just serving as avenues for financial rescue. Second, platformed micro-networks: our sample of entrepreneurs reported using sectoral online forums, alumni channels, and WhatsApp groups strategically as quick, high-speed tools for market intelligence and troubleshooting. This shift was exacerbated after COVID-19 and was documented in the literature on SMEs' digital adaptation (Petropoulou *et al.*, 2024; Hokmabadi *et al.*, 2024). Third, stage-contingent tie activation: founders rely more and more on weak, external ties for market diversification and scaling, but they primarily activate dense, trust-based ties during the ideation and early legitimacy phases. This study goes beyond "networking helps" to demonstrate which networks matter, when, and why in India's changing ecosystem by defining these mechanisms and their boundary conditions (family vs. non-family founders, metro vs. non-metro).

Formal networking can provide startups with credibility and visibility within their industry, enhancing their reputation and attracting potential customers or clients (Klerk & Saayman, 2012; Sharafizad, 2014; Stuart & Sorenson, 2007). This research revealed that formal networking serves as the lifeblood of startup success, acting as a multifaceted catalyst for growth and resilience. It operates as a dynamic engine that propels ventures forward, facilitating pivotal roles such as forging strategic partnerships, securing crucial investments, expanding customer bases, and nurturing a culture of innovation. By engaging with fellow entrepreneurs and ex-bosses, individuals gain not only invaluable support but also access to a wealth of insights and potential avenues for investment. Additionally, some participants have argued that business coaches also emerge as significant people in networking circles, offering valuable mentorship and guidance to entrepreneurs, which aligns with the past literature (Ferreira *et al.*, 2022). Guidance for personal and professional development emanates from a plethora of sources, including seasoned industry veterans, dedicated mentors, and vibrant online communities. This study underscores the importance of strategic networking efforts, which guide individuals and businesses toward avenues that offer the greatest potential impact and opportunities for growth.

It has also been found that networking is moderately important at the initial/early stage, serving as a critical means to establish initial connections and garner support from the entrepreneurial community. Conversely, some participants feel that as businesses progress into the expansion and growth stages, networking becomes increasingly important, with higher densities indicating widespread adoption to access new markets, forming alliances, and sustaining scalability, which aligns with the findings of some researchers (Ford & Mouzas, 2013; Pittaway *et al.*, 2004). While the importance of networking persists throughout a venture's lifecycle, its significance is particularly pronounced during nascent stages. Here, it serves as a vital conduit for market feedback, the formation of strategic alliances, and the navigation of early-stage challenges, laying the groundwork for sustained growth and success. Notably, networking during the decline stage, while relatively important, exhibits a lower prevalence, possibly indicating a shift in focus toward internal restructuring and crisis management. The acknowledgment of the stages of networking itself underscores the awareness of its dynamic nature throughout the business lifecycle.

Drawing upon past experiences, entrepreneurs use many different skills they have learned from past jobs to run their businesses. They learnt to communicate well, lead confidently, and understand the market they were in. They learnt these skills by talking to others at events, researching the market, and receiving advice from mentors. This helps them make smart choices for their business. These findings align with previous research showing that prior work experience plays a significant role in an entrepreneur's skills and knowledge, influencing their ability to recognize and act on opportunities, manage new ventures, and address the changing role of a business founder (Martin and Smith, 2010). This experience allows them to identify opportunities, anticipate challenges, and make informed decisions (Dorcas *et al.*, 2021).

We contrasted the networking dynamics of Indian startups with those of other emerging economies, including Brazil, Nigeria, and South Africa, in order to put our findings into context. Entrepreneurial networks are essential for sharing knowledge, mobilising resources, and providing crisis support in each of these nations (Adegbite & Olawale, 2023; Silva & Pereira, 2024). However, there are noticeable variations due to institutional and cultural factors. For instance, Brazilian and South African startups frequently use official incubators and government programs, while Indian startups typically rely on family and caste-based networks to obtain early-stage funding and mentorship (Nascimento & Costa, 2023; Van der Merwe, 2023). Like in India, informal networks in Nigeria offer vital assistance during times of economic instability, but they rely more heavily on peer-to-peer digital platforms (Okafor *et al.*, 2024). Our results show that although the advantages of networking are generally the same in emerging economies, India's sociocultural structures and post-COVID digital platform adoption produce unique networking and resource access patterns, underscoring the significance of context-specific research.

## 6. Managerial Implications

Entrepreneurs are dependent mainly on their social networks to obtain crucial resources, information, and opportunities, underscoring the pivotal role that social connections play in entrepreneurship. Networking helps startups expand their reach, access valuable resources, build partnerships, gain insights, and stay abreast of industry trends. Since networking is essential at all stages of a startup, the nature and focus of the networks may change as the startup progresses, and small and new firms should focus on building networks along with their preparation of business plans. These early network relationships are crucial for sustained innovation in small entrepreneurial firms.

Another aspect of startup success is past work experience, which shapes an entrepreneur's skills and knowledge. Entrepreneurs who have previously worked in similar industries or roles gain valuable insights, expertise, and a deep understanding of market dynamics. If an entrepreneur has previous work experience, he or she can use these contacts and connections for partnerships, funding, and mentorship. If he/she is a novice, the experience of his/her team or social/informal networks can serve as a valuable resource for knowledge sharing, collaboration, and accessing necessary resources. The strategic use of these connections helps in building credibility and gaining the trust of potential investors, clients, and partners. Since entrepreneurs with varied work experience exhibit greater entrepreneurial skills relevant to starting and growing a firm, starting a venture in a known industry increases the likelihood of success. The supportive environment of network members can be useful for improving interpersonal skills, communication, problem-solving, customer-centricity, continuous learning, strategic thinking, cultural sensitivity, global connections, collaboration, crisis management, and so on.

Specifically, we suggest the development of government-led networking hubs and incubators for women and rural entrepreneurs, aiming to enhance access to mentors, investors, and peer networks. Regionally tailored programs are also recommended to leverage local ecosystems and promote inclusive startup growth across India (Sharma & Verma, 2023; Rao & Nair, 2021).

## 7. Research Limitations and Future Scope

The empirical analysis in this study has limitations due to the relatively small sample size, so there might be more to learn by studying more people and using different research methods. To address this constraint, future research should adopt a mixed-methodological approach with a more extensive sample to enhance generalizability. Future research could explore additional factors, including family background, skills, recognition, and self-realization, to enrich the understanding of their impact on their startups. There is scope for utilizing larger datasets encompassing a wide range of startups to investigate cross-country variation in networking behavior. There is a need to look at how networking differs among men and women entrepreneurs. Additionally, there is a lack of research on the cultural and gender-related challenges that entrepreneurs and startups may face in networking. Exploring these challenges can provide valuable insights into the barriers that diverse entrepreneurs and startups encounter in networking and inform the development of inclusive strategies to overcome them.

We recognise that this study's novelty is limited in terms of general networking behaviours, even though it supports a number of well-established findings on entrepreneurial networking. Nonetheless, our study offers distinct perspectives on the context unique to India. For example, cultural elements like trust-based relationships, hierarchical social structures, and family involvement in business influence networking behaviours differently than in Western contexts. Bangalore and Delhi's different regions have an impact on mentorship opportunities, industry-specific networks, and resource accessibility. Additionally, gender dynamics in entrepreneurial networking became a significant factor, emphasising the ways in which female entrepreneurs navigate networks in a different way than their male counterparts. The literature is expanded beyond widely accepted principles by these context-specific insights, which help to provide a more nuanced understanding of networking behaviours among Indian startups.

## 8. Conclusion

The qualitative analysis of networking experiences was conducted among entrepreneurs through semi-structured interviews in which four main themes were explored: the role of networking in startup success, supportive network members, crucial stages of networking, and the influence of prior work experience on entrepreneurial skills. This study reaffirms the significance of networking in achieving business success. Formal networking has emerged as a critical aspect of startup success, providing credibility, visibility, and opportunities for growth. While networking remains important throughout the business lifecycle, its significance is particularly found in the early stages because it lays the foundation for sustained growth by facilitating market feedback, strategic alliances, and early-stage challenges navigation. Prior work experience plays a significant role in shaping entrepreneurial skills and knowledge, influencing the ability to recognize opportunities, manage ventures, and make informed decisions. By understanding and leveraging the

dynamics of networking, entrepreneurs can effectively navigate challenges, capitalize on opportunities, and build successful startups.

The study's conclusions highlight how intricate and varied entrepreneurial networking is in Indian fintech and healthtech companies. Although it is evident that networking makes it easier to access resources, mentorship, and crisis support, our data also highlight significant inconsistencies and nuances. Family-run business founders, for example, frequently rely on internal networks, which can both speed up early decision-making and reduce exposure to a variety of outside opportunities. Gender disparities also surfaced, with female founders pointing out that even with strong social capital, they had trouble connecting with some investor networks.

These inconsistencies imply that contextual elements like industry type, founder background, and local ecosystem affect how effective networking is. By incorporating these nuances explicitly, our research goes beyond broad assertions and offers a more comprehensive understanding of the functioning of entrepreneurial networks in India, especially in the context of post-COVID recovery.

### **Ethical approval and consent**

Ethical approval was provided by the Institutional Ethical Committee of Manipal (MAHE) for this research endeavor, which was carried out as part of a Ph.D. study, and approval was given on 14 January 2023, under reference number IEC-2022-328. It ensures that all study participants provided informed consent in strict accordance with ethical norms. Before providing consent, participants were required to complete a consent form that was intended to ensure that they were fully informed about the study's objectives, methods, and any risks and advantages of participating.

Participants have provided written consent in the form of yes and no statements in the data sheet while collecting information for interviews (transcription applies only to interviews). They will also consent to the anonymous use of data for publication purposes.

All confidential data has been secured by password-protected computers which are accessible only to the research team members of this project. Personal data will undergo anonymisation, with identifying details replaced by unique alphanumeric codes. During the transcription process, audio recordings are anonymized, which ensures that all personally identifiable information is removed before utilizing analytical software.

### **Author contributions**

The contributions of each author to this study are as follows:

Sheetal Singh - Substantial contributions to the conception or design of the work, searching articles, conceptualization, analysis of data, first draft of the paper write-up, and interpretation of data for the work.

Dr. Basri Savitha - Substantial contributions to the conceptualization, analysis of the data, and review of the manuscript and final draft of the paper.

### **Data availability**

#### **Underlying data**

The raw data for this study are not available due to the privacy concerns of the participants. Only the rough version of the interview transcript has been provided as supplementary material. If required, readers can email the first author for further information on the study.

### **Extended data**

This project contains the following extended data:

Figshare: Dataset for An analysis on understanding entrepreneurial networking behavior among Indian startups, <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.27968547.v2> (Singh, S., 2024).

- A questionnaire and demographic profile on understanding entrepreneurial networking behavior among Indian startups (quantitative questionnaire)
- Transcript as a supplementary material (rough data)

Data are available under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International license \(CC-BY 4.0\)](#).

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# Open Peer Review

## Current Peer Review Status: ? ? ?

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### Version 1

Reviewer Report 29 October 2025

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### Muhammad Hasan

Universitas Negeri Makassar, Makassar, Indonesia

This paper, "*Understanding Networking Behaviors among Indian Startups: A Qualitative Study*," addresses a timely and relevant topic, given India's vibrant startup ecosystem and the growing scholarly interest in entrepreneurial networking. The qualitative approach using semi-structured interviews provides valuable insights into the lived experiences of entrepreneurs and highlights the role of networking across stages of startup growth. However, while the manuscript demonstrates clear organization and ethical rigor, it would benefit from stronger theoretical framing, methodological transparency, and contextual depth.

The **introduction and literature review** provide a general overview of networking and its importance but rely heavily on dated references (e.g., Witt, 2004; Stuart & Sorenson, 2007) and lack discussion of recent developments such as post-COVID digital networking, virtual ecosystems, or gendered networking patterns. The review would be strengthened by incorporating contemporary sources (2023–2025) and clarifying how India's cultural, institutional, and regional factors—such as caste, family-led business traditions, and digital infrastructure—uniquely shape entrepreneurial networking. Doing so would enhance the paper's originality and contribution.

The **methodology** section is sound in its use of semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis via ATLAS.ti, but important details are missing. The paper should explain how participants were recruited, how saturation was reached, and whether the interview guide was validated or piloted. The coding process should be elaborated—detailing codebook development, intercoder reliability, and theme generation. Including reflexivity (the researchers' positionality and how their interpretations may influence analysis) would enhance credibility and trustworthiness. Providing sample coded excerpts and a thematic map appendix would also help demonstrate analytical rigor.

The **findings and discussion** clearly identify four themes, each supported by participant quotes. However, the interpretation remains largely descriptive. The paper should delve deeper into analytical contrasts—for example, exploring when networking *fails* or when over-networking creates dependency or fatigue. Integrating formal network theory (e.g., Granovetter's "strength of weak ties," Burt's "structural holes," or Nahapiet & Ghoshal's "social capital") could provide conceptual coherence and connect the themes to broader entrepreneurship theory. Additionally, distinguishing more sharply between early-stage and growth-stage networking behaviors would

clarify nuances within the data.

The **conclusion and managerial implications** appropriately summarize the main points and emphasize the role of prior experience, but they tend to overgeneralize. Claims such as “networking is important at all stages” should be nuanced to reflect participant diversity. It would also be valuable to expand the policy and ecosystem implications—for instance, how incubators, government initiatives, or university entrepreneurship cells can foster inclusive networking, especially for women or rural entrepreneurs. Finally, data transparency should be improved: while privacy must be respected, anonymized excerpts or controlled-access transcripts could enhance reproducibility and scholarly trust.

In summary, this study presents a relevant and potentially impactful contribution to understanding entrepreneurial networking in emerging economies. By updating the literature, deepening theoretical grounding, clarifying methodological rigor, and contextualizing India’s unique ecosystem, the authors can substantially enhance the paper’s scholarly value and international appeal.

**Is the work clearly and accurately presented and does it cite the current literature?**

Partly

**Is the study design appropriate and is the work technically sound?**

Partly

**Are sufficient details of methods and analysis provided to allow replication by others?**

Partly

**If applicable, is the statistical analysis and its interpretation appropriate?**

Partly

**Are all the source data underlying the results available to ensure full reproducibility?**

Partly

**Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results?**

Partly

**Competing Interests:** No competing interests were disclosed.

**Reviewer Expertise:** Entrepreneurship Education Economics Education Economic Literacy Knowledge Transfer

**I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard, however I have significant reservations, as outlined above.**

Reviewer Report 02 October 2025

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Johannes Baptista Halik

Management, Paulus Christian University of Indonesia, Makassar, South Sulawesi, Indonesia

Peer Review Report

**Article title:** *Understanding networking behaviors among Indian startups: A qualitative study*

**Authors:** Singh S. & Basri S.

**Journal:** F1000Research, 2025

### Summary of the Article

This study investigates the networking behaviors of Indian startup entrepreneurs through a qualitative design. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 36 entrepreneurs based primarily in Bangalore and Delhi. Thematic analysis of the interview data, supported by ATLAS.ti, revealed four overarching themes:

1. The role of networking in startup success.
2. Supportive environments and people in networking.
3. Crucial stages of networking across the business lifecycle.
4. The influence of prior work experience on networking behaviors.

The authors argue that networking is pivotal for startup success, particularly in early stages, and that prior experience enhances entrepreneurs' ability to build and leverage networks. The paper concludes with managerial implications, emphasizing the importance of formal/informal networks, and identifies avenues for future research.

### Evaluation Against Review Criteria

**Is the work clearly and accurately presented and does it cite the current literature?**

**Answer:** Partly

- **Strengths:** The manuscript is generally well-written, with a logical structure and clear expression. The literature review covers foundational ideas such as formal/informal networking and strong/weak ties.
- **Weaknesses:**
  - Over-reliance on dated sources (e.g., Witt, 2004; Stuart & Sorenson, 2007). Only 8 of 38 references are post-2020, which undermines the claim of addressing a "gap."
  - Contextualization is superficial. While India is an important entrepreneurial ecosystem, the paper does not adequately explain what is unique about Indian startups (e.g., caste, regional ecosystems, family-led businesses).
  - Findings such as "networking aids crisis support" echo prior work (e.g., Albourini et al., 2020) without offering strong novelty.

**Suggestions:** Update the literature review with 2023–2025 studies, especially post-COVID networking research. Contextualize the study in India more explicitly (e.g., cultural, gender, and regional factors). Highlight contributions beyond confirming established findings.

**Is the study design appropriate and is the work technically sound?**

**Suggestions:**

- Justify why Bangalore/Delhi and Fintech/Healthtech were prioritized, or acknowledge this as a limitation.
- Incorporate network theory explicitly to strengthen the conceptual foundation.
- Provide details on the coding process: codebook development, coder agreement, and how disagreements were resolved.
- Include a reflexivity statement to address researcher positionality.

**Are sufficient details of methods and analysis provided to allow replication by others?****Suggestions:**

- Expand the methods section with details on sampling, recruitment, and demographics.
- Provide an appendix with sample codes and excerpts showing the transition from codes to themes.
- Explain how data saturation was determined.

**If applicable, is the statistical analysis and its interpretation appropriate?**

- The study is purely qualitative and does not involve statistical analysis. The use of thematic analysis is appropriate for the design.

**Are all the source data underlying the results available to ensure full reproducibility?**

**Suggestions:** Consider depositing anonymized transcripts or excerpts (e.g., with identifiers removed) in a secure repository with controlled access. This would balance ethical concerns with transparency.

**Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results?****Suggestions:**

- Revise conclusions to reflect nuances and contradictions in the data.
- Avoid overgeneralizations—differentiate clearly between early-stage and later-stage networking dynamics.
- Explicitly acknowledge limitations in novelty and highlight where new insights (e.g., Indian-specific dynamics) emerge.

**Overall Recommendation**

The study addresses an important topic in an underexplored context and offers practical insights for startup entrepreneurs. However, significant revisions are needed to strengthen its academic rigor and contribution. With improvements in theoretical framing, methodological transparency, and contextual justification, the article has the potential to make a valuable contribution to the entrepreneurship and networking literature.

**Recommendation: Major Revisions****Is the work clearly and accurately presented and does it cite the current literature?**

Partly

**Is the study design appropriate and is the work technically sound?**

Partly

**Are sufficient details of methods and analysis provided to allow replication by others?**

Partly

**If applicable, is the statistical analysis and its interpretation appropriate?**

Not applicable

**Are all the source data underlying the results available to ensure full reproducibility?**

Partly

**Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results?**

Partly

**Competing Interests:** No competing interests were disclosed.

**Reviewer Expertise:** Entrepreneurship, Digital Marketing, Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs), Innovation Management, and Qualitative/Quantitative Research Methods (SEM-PLS).

**I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard, however I have significant reservations, as outlined above.**

Reviewer Report 14 August 2025

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**Shah Muhammad Kamran**

Mehran University of Engineering and Technology, Sindh, Pakistan

"Understanding networking behaviors among Indian startups: A qualitative study"

Dear Editor,

Thank you for the opportunity to review this manuscript. The topic is highly relevant, especially given India's growing startup ecosystem, and addresses a gap in qualitative research on entrepreneurial networking beyond early-stage ventures.

This research study examines the networking behavior among Indian entrepreneurial startups (36) located in Bangalore and Delhi. Applying thematic analysis through semi-structured interviews, four themes were identified (1) networking's role in startup success, (2) supportive environments/people, (3) crucial stages for networking, and (4) the influence of past work experience. Study emphasize on the importance of networking, for crisis support, opportunities, and resources sharing/pooling, especially at early stages. It further highlights the importance of formal and informal ties and kind of prior experience.

Final Remarks

Though the study addresses a current topic but the identified themes are so general and obvious, furthermore, significant methodological and contextual limitations reduce its academic impact.

Major Revisions are required to justify its novelty, enhance rigor, and ensure ethical reproducibility. With significant change this manuscript can be improved and contribute in the existing body of literature in the field of entrepreneurial research.

## Recommendation: Major Revisions

Dear Author(s),

This study about networking behavior among early-stage startups in India is addressing a timely topic. Though the manuscript is well written and articulated. However, there is always room for improvement. The following are comments and suggestions for the betterment of the manuscript; Strengths

1. **Relevant Topic:** Focuses on understudied networking dynamics in a key emerging economy, like India.
2. **Clear Structure:** Well-organized sections (intro, methods, results, discussion).
3. **Thematic Richness:** Identifies nuanced themes (e.g., crisis support, stage-specific networking).
4. **Practical Implications:** Offers actionable insights for entrepreneurs (e.g., leveraging past experience, building formal/informal networks).
5. **Ethical Rigor:** Institutional approval and participant consent documented.

## Critical Assessment & Weaknesses

### 1. Clarity, Accuracy & Literature Integration

- **Strengths:** Writing is generally clear; literature review covers foundational concepts (e.g., strong/weak ties, formal/informal networks).
- **Weaknesses:**
  - **Superficial Contextualization:** Fails to justify *why India* warrants specific study. Cultural nuances (e.g., family-led businesses) are ignored, weakening the contribution.
  - **Dated Citations:** Over-reliance on pre-2020 sources (e.g., Witt 2004, Stuart & Sorenson 2007) despite claiming a "gap" in recent literature. Only 8/38 references are post-2020.
  - **Redundant Claims:** Findings (e.g., "networking aids crisis support") echo prior work (e.g., Albourini et al. 2020) without novel insights.

### 2. Study Design & Academic Merit

- **Strengths:** Qualitative design is appropriate for exploring subjective experiences.
- **Weaknesses:**
  - **Sampling Flaws:**
  - **Demographic Gap:** 75% male participants; gender dynamics in networking remain unexplored.
  - **Regional Bias:** Though the title states India, only two regions, Bangalore/Delhi entrepreneurs (60% of Indian startups) are studied. Justification is needed for the exclusion of other Rural/underrepresented regions.
  - **Sector Imbalance:** Heavy focus on Fintech/Healthtech (no justification). Ignores manufacturing/social enterprises.
  - **Lack of Theoretical Framework:** No grounding in network theory (e.g., Burt's structural holes, Granovetter's strength of weak ties).

### 3. Methodological Transparency & Replicability

- **Critical Weaknesses:**
  - **Interview Guide:** Provided (Table 1) but lacks validation (e.g., pilot testing, expert review).
  - **Coding Process:** Vague description. How were themes derived? No inter-coder reliability measures, risking bias.
  - **Analytical Rigor:** Claims "thematic analysis" but omits critical steps (e.g.,

- reflexivity journal, divergent case analysis).
- **Software Use:** Mentions ATLAS.ti but no details on coding structure/queries.

#### 4. Statistical Analysis

- Not applicable (qualitative study).

#### 5. Data Availability & Reproducibility

- **Unacceptable Limitations:**

- Raw data "not available due to privacy concerns" (Section 8). Only "rough transcripts" shared.
- Anonymized data could be archived (e.g., via controlled access). Current stance undermines reproducibility and ethical transparency.

#### 6. Conclusions Supported by Results?

- **Partial Support:** Conclusions align with themes but overstate novelty:

- Theme 4 ("past experience") is well-supported by quotes (e.g., banking skills aiding strategy). *Note: "Past Experience" can be replaced with "Prior Experience" as experience always comes with the past.*
- **Overgeneralization:** Claims about "all stages" of networking (Ref. 4, p.9) contradict participant data (e.g., Ref. 2, p.8: reduced networking post-establishment).
- **Ignored Contradictions:** No discussion of cases where networking *failed* (e.g., incubators' poor external support, p.4).

### Suggestions for Improvement

#### 1. Theory & Context:

- Ground in network theory (e.g., social capital framework).
- Integrate India-specific socio-economic factors (e.g., caste, regional ecosystems).

#### 2. Methods:

- Justify sampling strategy (e.g., purposive sampling for diversity).
- Include gender-disaggregated analysis.
- Detail coding process: codebook development, resolution of disagreements.

#### 3. Analysis:

- Use quotes more critically (e.g., highlight contradictions).
- Explore negative cases (e.g., networking that *hindered* growth).

#### 4. Data Sharing:

- Archive anonymized transcripts/audio via secure repositories (e.g., UK Data Service) with access protocols.

#### 5. Literature:

- Update references (e.g., cite 2023–2025 studies on post-COVID networking).
- Compare findings with similar economies (e.g., Brazil, Nigeria, South Africa).

#### 6. Implications:

- Add policy recommendations (e.g., government-led networking hubs for women/rural entrepreneurs).

**Is the work clearly and accurately presented and does it cite the current literature?**

Partly

**Is the study design appropriate and is the work technically sound?**

Partly

**Are sufficient details of methods and analysis provided to allow replication by others?**

No

**If applicable, is the statistical analysis and its interpretation appropriate?**

Not applicable

**Are all the source data underlying the results available to ensure full reproducibility?**

Partly

**Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results?**

Partly

**Competing Interests:** No competing interests were disclosed.

**Reviewer Expertise:** Economics, Qualitative and Quantitative Research, Entrepreneurship, Analytics

**I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard, however I have significant reservations, as outlined above.**

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