



# Navigating Uncharted Territory: A post Covid-19 Exploration of the Resilience of Women-Owned Small Businesses in the Wake of the Pandemic

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## Abstract

Resilience has long been acknowledged in the literature as a crucial aspect of the entrepreneur's character and personality. Additionally, it is acknowledged as a vital component of the entrepreneurial process that propels businesses to great outcomes. However, to the researchers' knowledge, there remains limited understanding regarding how women-owned small businesses in South Africa withstand and function during challenging social and economic crises like the COVID-19 pandemic. In the post-modern period we live in today, women will inevitably play an important part in business and economic development, and they are eager to become involved and make a difference in their communities. The COVID-19 pandemic has intensified the challenges faced by female entrepreneurs in growing their businesses. This research investigates how resilient South African women entrepreneurs have responded to the pandemic. Drawing from resilience theory, the study employed a qualitative approach to gather and analyze data from a group of 15 women entrepreneurs based in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa, using thematic analysis. The following four themes emerged from the findings: business agility, optimistic outlook, leveraged digital technology, and business networks. This research enhances existing resilience theory by integrating fresh insights from the resilience strategies employed by female entrepreneurs in times of crisis. Results from the study are also expected to contribute to sustaining South African women-owned small businesses and empowering their resilience despite adversities.

**Keywords** *Resilience, women entrepreneurs, COVID-19 pandemic, crisis, resilience theory, South Africa*

## INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic, which can be likened to uncharted territory for businesses worldwide, has severely impacted small businesses globally (Wagner, 2021). Based on data from 41 surveys conducted worldwide between February and June 2020 on the impact of COVID-19 on SMEs, more than half of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) faced significant disruptions, with a third facing potential closure within a month and a half during the initial three months (Cusmano & Raes, 2020). This situation was particularly challenging for businesses owned by women, as the additional responsibilities of caregiving and homeschooling often drew women entrepreneurs away from their ventures (Kaberia & Muathe, 2021; Popović-Pantić et al., 2020; Ratnaningrum et al., 2023; Sithole et al., 2024). Despite governments' claims of solidarity, Bagheri et al. (2023) argued that vulnerable groups, including women, tend to bear the heaviest burdens during crises. Throughout history, women have consistently suffered more profound impacts during crises, as seen in the 2008 global economic downturn and the recent COVID-19 pandemic (Cowling et al., 2020; Yu et al., 2024). The 2008 global economic downturn, according to Antonopoulos (2014), disproportionately affected women-owned small businesses compared to

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those owned by men as women entrepreneurs often face greater challenges in accessing credit and financial resources, exacerbated by pre-existing gender biases in lending practices.

Additionally, women-owned businesses were more likely to be in service sectors that were harder hit by the recession, such as retail and hospitality (Geambasu et al., 2020; Suryawan et al., 2021). These factors combined to create a more severe and prolonged impact on the growth and sustainability of women-owned small enterprises during the economic crisis. As Peck (2012, p. 629) noted, "Austerity bites, [however] never equally."

In South Africa, women have emerged as a driving force in the entrepreneurial landscape, making substantial advancements in establishing and expanding businesses across diverse sectors (Odeku, 2020). Their contributions have been pivotal in fostering economic development, creating employment opportunities, and challenging traditional gender roles within the business sphere. However, the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic brought forth a sequence of unparalleled challenges that have put the resilience of these female entrepreneurs to the test (Iwu et al., 2022). Despite the challenges posed by crises such as the pandemic, numerous women entrepreneurs across the globe have demonstrated remarkable resilience by successfully navigating the disruptions and achieving success, even when public policy interventions have been limited or ineffective (Bagheri et al., 2023). This serves as a testament to their ability to persevere and flourish, even in the face of adversity. Against this backdrop, the exploration of the resilience of South African women entrepreneurs becomes imperative. Their ability to withstand and overcome adversities and contribute to economic recovery warrants a comprehensive examination. However, the existing literature in most emerging economies has overlooked some more holistic focus on gender and entrepreneurial resilience during crisis, particularly in understanding the unique challenges and adaptive strategies of women-owned small businesses in the wake of crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Additionally, there is a paucity of research on the long-term impacts of such crises on women's business sustainability and growth. As such, this study aims to fill these gaps by providing a nuanced analysis of the resilience strategies employed by women entrepreneurs by specifically looking at the South African context, which is an emerging economy. This study will contribute valuable insights into policy and support mechanisms that can enhance the resilience of women-owned businesses in future crises. Duchek (2020) highlighted a lack of comprehension regarding the sources and motivators of resilience among female entrepreneurs, especially in unstable economic and social environments.

Prior studies have overlooked women entrepreneurs' unique challenges by assuming that entrepreneurial resilience is not influenced by gender (Pergelova et al., 2019). Given that women entrepreneurs often encounter more difficulties than men in times of crisis, this research seeks to investigate how they navigate these challenges and build resilience. By advancing research in these domains, we can deepen our comprehension of how women-led small and medium-sized businesses withstand challenges amid the COVID-19 crisis. Employing Van Breda's (2001) resilience theory, which emphasizes an organization's ability to rebound from the adverse effects of various crises, is instrumental in realizing this objective efficiently. The theory emphasizes collective resilience, as various researchers developed it over the years. Although there has been significant growth in the theory recently, further research is needed to understand how small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) can ready themselves for unexpected disruptions or global crises like the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic highlighted the importance of preparedness and resilience for the success of SMEs (Ozanne et al., 2022). Genuine resilience not only facilitates recovery but also facilitates progress. Thus, the main objective of this scientific inquiry is to thoroughly investigate the resilience strategies implemented by female-owned small businesses in addressing the diverse operational challenges presented by the pandemic. By employing rigorous

research methodologies, we aim to uncover the nuances of these strategies, providing empirical evidence to inform policymaking, business practices, and support initiatives.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Resilience Theory

According to [Hillmann \(2021\)](#), developing resilience is crucial for the survival and success of women-owned enterprises. These businesses need to be able to respond to and capitalize on unexpected events that could threaten their survival. Resilience is essential in overcoming unexpected challenges and coming out stronger than before ([Duchek, 2020](#)). To this end, the study utilized [Van Breda's \(2001\)](#) resilience theory. Unlike other theories, resilience theories are not a set of predetermined hypotheses or principles. Instead, they are a framework that continues to evolve as researchers learn more from studies and analyses ([Masten, 2018](#)). The resilience theory explains one's ability to recover from stressors or shocks. The relevance of the resilience theory to this study lies in its developmental approach, which concentrates on strengths and capabilities instead of vulnerabilities ([Chineka & Mundau, 2019](#)). This approach underscores the significance of focusing on solutions that provide a suitable conceptual framework for addressing women-owned businesses' formidable challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic. The theory's relevance becomes particularly evident in the context of women's entrepreneurship during the COVID-19 pandemic, where unprecedented challenges have tested the mettle of business owners worldwide. Resilience theory underscores the significance of adaptation to change ([Carlson et al., 2012](#)), and for women entrepreneurs facing the disruptive forces of the pandemic, resilience is not merely survival but the capacity to thrive in the face of adversity ([Jahanshahi et al., 2023](#)). Within the study context, the Resilience theory provides insights into creating supportive environments. In particular, policymakers, recognizing women entrepreneurs' specific challenges, can design policies that address gender-specific hurdles and foster a resilient entrepreneurial ecosystem.

### Entrepreneurial Resilience

In the entrepreneurship literature, resilience is commonly viewed as a trait individuals rely on when facing challenges ([Doern, 2016](#); [Antonio, 2021](#)). While some scholars see resilience as an inherent personality characteristic (e.g., [Chadwick & Raver, 2020](#)), others consider it as a quality that can be cultivated over time ([Jancenelle et al., 2018](#)). However, only some studies delve into resilience as a process of building the ability to engage with the environment positively and persistently. The exploration of resilience among women entrepreneurs in emerging economies remains relatively scarce ([Bagheri et al., 2023](#)). However, existing findings (e.g., [Choowattanapakorn et al., 2010](#)) suggest differences between men and women in terms of what influences resilience and its outcomes. Notably, one study highlighted greater resilience in women entrepreneurs compared to men, attributing this to their distinct experiences and the development of protective factors ([Shelton & Lugo, 2021](#)).

Additionally, religion, viewed through a feminist lens, has been identified as a resilience source for women entrepreneurs ([Tlaiss & McAdam, 2021](#)). Furthermore, research indicates that women entrepreneurs' resilience post-business failure empowers them to thrive despite various constraints ([Loh & Dahesihari, 2013](#)). Exploring entrepreneurial resilience among women in Africa holds immense potential for uncovering innovative strategies and solutions. African women have a long history of entrepreneurship, often engaging in informal and formal sectors simultaneously ([Boateng & Boateng, 2018](#)). Their ability to navigate complex and dynamic environments demonstrates a form of resilience that may offer valuable insights for global entrepreneurship discourse.

### Impact of COVID-19 on Women-Owned Small Businesses

Odeku (2020) asserts that the effects of COVID-19 on businesses have been diverse across industries. However, one demographic group, namely women-owned small businesses, has experienced significant hardships in South Africa. This is primarily due to the imposition of lockdown measures, disruptions in supply chains, reduced consumer demand, and financial constraints, which have led to the closure or significant downsizing of many enterprises (Odeku, 2020). However, not all firms have seen the same effects of the epidemic, with others exhibiting amazing resilience. Women entrepreneurs have historically faced a wide range of difficulties, including problems with access to capital (Tola & Chimucheka, 2018), gender-based prejudices and stereotypes (Odeku, 2020), sociocultural expectations, and problems juggling work and family obligations (Tan & Yew, 2023; Alhothali & Al-Dajani, 2022). Women-owned enterprises are frequently at risk due to these structural hurdles, particularly when exogenous shocks like the COVID-19 outbreak occur. Despite these difficulties, literature has demonstrated female entrepreneurs' tenacity and capacity to utilize certain talents and approaches (Abebe et al., 2020). Studies have emphasized how the pandemic has disproportionately affected women-owned small enterprises. Compared to enterprises owned by males, those owned by women saw bigger losses in economic activity and were more likely to close their doors permanently, according to research by Fairlie (2020). This difference can be ascribed to the gender-based obstacles and biases that women entrepreneurs already face, as well as the industries that are predominately dominated by women-owned businesses, which were particularly hard hit by the pandemic.

### RESEARCH METHOD

The research involved 15 female entrepreneurs from the Buffalo City Metropolitan Municipality in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa. The sample size was not arbitrarily chosen but instead was guided by a combination of practical and theoretical factors. Firstly, the decision aligns with qualitative research norms, which often prioritize depth of understanding over breadth. In qualitative research, sample sizes are typically smaller to allow for a more in-depth exploration of participants' experiences and perspectives. According to Creswell and Poth (2016), qualitative studies often involve samples ranging from 5 to 25 participants, which allows for a comprehensive and detailed examination of each case. Secondly, this sample size was determined based on the principle of data saturation. Data saturation refers to the point at which no new information or themes are observed in the data (Vasileiou et al., 2018). During the initial data collection and analysis stages, it became evident that the 15 participants provided sufficient depth and variety in their responses. Ngumbela (2023) notes a rise in entrepreneurial activities among women in this province. We conducted interviews until no new information emerged, following the principle of theoretical saturation. Participants who were diverse in age, business size, and industry were recruited voluntarily through snowball sampling. The demographic characteristics of the participants are summarized in Table 1. The inclusion of respondent characteristics such as the type of business operated, marital status, age, and education level in this study allows for the development of targeted policy recommendations. Policymakers can use this information to design support programs that cater to the specific needs of different groups within the population of women-owned small businesses, ensuring that assistance is equitable and effective.

**Table 1.** Demographic characteristics of the participants

Participant	Business operated	Marriage status	Age	Education level
1	Fashion and Clothing	Single Parent	48	High school
2	Restaurant	Married	39	Primary
3	Bed and Breakfast	Divorced	40	Tertiary dropout

Participant	Business operated	Marriage status	Age	Education level
4	Saloon	Single parent	23	High school
5	Fashion and Clothing	Married	55	High school
6	Jewellery	Single	38	Tertiary
7	Saloon	Single	24	Primary
8	Tour operator	Married	39	High school
9	Restaurant	Single	28	Tertiary
10	Agriculture	Married	44	High school
11	Bakery	Widowed	43	Tertiary
12	Agriculture	Divorced	36	High school
13	Tutoring services	Married	39	Tertiary
14	Herbal life	Single parent	24	High school
15	Construction	Widowed	51	Tertiary

Source: Authors construct

The research adopted a qualitative method, utilizing interviews to explore participants' experiences, feelings, and socio-economic shifts (Aspers & Corte, 2019). Semi-structured interviews were employed to explore the phenomenon and grasp participants' varied experiences (Nguyen, 2015). Snowball sampling was utilized, wherein initial participants helped identify subsequent ones through their social networks (Handcock & Gile, 2011). Several female entrepreneurs were identified through personal connections and further facilitated the recruitment of others—a research assistant aided in participant screening and data collection. The saturation point was reached after the 15th interview, indicating no new insights would be gained (Guest et al., 2020). Each interview lasted between 20 to 30 minutes. All interviews took place in February and March of 2023. The transcripts from the digital recordings were transcribed verbatim and then analyzed using thematic analysis (Feenstra et al., 2023). Upon analysis completion, participants were invited to review and provide feedback on the findings and interpretations. This member-checking process ensured that the participants' perspectives were accurately represented and helped validate the data's authenticity.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

From our analysis, Business Agility, Optimistic outlook, leveraged digital Technology, and Business Networks emerged as the key themes that promote the resilience of small businesses owned by women amid the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. In order to achieve these themes, reflecting on their experiences, participants were prompted to identify critical factors that contributed to their business's ability to persevere through the COVID-19 pandemic. Questions like, "Looking back at your experiences during the pandemic, what do you believe were the most critical factors that contributed to your business's ability to persevere through difficult times?" and "Reflecting on the past year, what were some of the most significant lessons you learned about yourself as an entrepreneur and as a leader of your business?" were crafted to capture introspective perspectives of participants. In this segment, we examine in detail the outcomes of our investigation.

### Business Agility

Our investigation found that the sentiments expressed by participants highlighted an overarching theme - agility was crucial for maintaining business continuity and adaptability. By analysing the sentiments expressed by participants, it became clear that the capacity to adjust their

operations and embrace change swiftly was instrumental in safeguarding entrepreneurial pursuits against the disruptions brought on by the pandemic. This is highlighted by the responses below.

*"I really had to find an operating model that allowed me to quickly scale my bed and breakfast business a level up as the demand was low and there were sometimes operational restrictions... for example, I reduced my rates and leased some of my rooms on a long-term basis not exceeding 6 months though." -P3, 40 years old, Bed and Breakfast*

The sentiments expressed by some other participants vividly convey survival as a core motivator behind the entrepreneurial agility exhibited during this unprecedented era.

*"During the pandemic, survival became my main objective as I placed less consideration on earnings and growth. I had to adapt my business quickly to abrupt changes brought on by the pandemic, and I remained spirited." - P15, 51 years old, Construction*

*"I found myself at a crossroads when the pandemic hit, our traditional revenue streams evaporated overnight. The need to survive was palpable, and it became abundantly clear that I had to face the pandemic head-on (laughed)." P6, 38 years old, Jewellery*

### **Optimistic Outlook**

Delving into the sentiments expressed by participants amidst the tumultuous landscape of the COVID-19 pandemic, another impactful theme emerged – the profound influence of an optimistic outlook on entrepreneurial resilience. Analysing the participants' sentiments indicates the significant impact that a positive mindset may have, particularly during difficult times such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

*"I am an optimist, and believing that things will get better indeed makes it easier to live with any challenging circumstances, like those brought on by COVID. It actually increased my ability to deal with the COVID-19 challenges as a woman." - P1, 48 years old, Fashion and Clothing*

*"I think that a positive mindset can be helpful in trying times, like the pandemic. I personally handled the pandemic with a lot of self-assurance, which was incredibly helpful when dealing with my business." - P13, 39 years old, Tutoring services*

One participant noted how spirituality also cultivated the spirit of optimism which she indicated as key in ensuring entrepreneurial resilience. She had this to say,

*"Through my belief in Christ, I see the glass as halfway full rather than half empty. So, despite the period being so tough, I remained calm and observed how the situation developed ... I thank God I don't get scared quickly or give up hope easily." - P4, 23 years old, Saloon*

When entrepreneurs act with optimism when faced with a crisis, it can boost employee's spirits and create a climate of hope and tenacity throughout the entire enterprise (Steers, 2013). True to this some participants revealed how their positive mindset during these challenging times played a pivotal role in fostering perseverance among the workforces.

*"I always pass on my positive attitude to the employees when they see that I am upbeat, and we talk about things together then employees will look to me as an example which really motivate.... I guess that is what kept us going." - P10, 44 years old, Agriculture*

### **Leveraged Digital Technology**

As we further analysed the results shared by the participants, a compelling narrative unfolds, one that testifies to the resilience exhibited by women entrepreneurs in the face of the formidable challenges presented by the global pandemic. Specifically, participants, through their sentiments, vividly communicate that, the imperative to harness digital technology, emerged as a catalyst for resilience and survival amidst the adversities of the COVID-19 era. Furthermore, participants collectively recognised that digital technology served as a lifeline during the pandemic, allowing businesses to maintain operations, connect with customers, and explore new avenues of growth.

*"Let us consider the positive aspects of the pandemic. We were encouraged to use technologies and pick up new skills that we otherwise would not have. That kept my business running .... I mean, I got to know Gumtree and Facebook marketplace, thanks!" - P5, 55 years old, Fashion and Clothing*

From the interviews, we also found instances where the entrepreneurs had to analyse the market adequately to apply the proper technology necessary to survive the pandemic. This signals the imperativeness of an entrepreneur's analytical skills:

*"From the beginning, we conducted a market analysis and kept a close eye on the problem at hand. Things moved forward quickly, but I had to make quick choices like turning our ordering system into a virtual one." - P5, 55 years old, Fashion and Clothing*

*"I started closely studying the market and any emerging technology as a result of the crisis in order to make any adjustments that would enable my business to prevail during the pandemic." - P8, 39 years old, Tour operator*

### **Business Networks**

Another compelling narrative highlighted the instrumental role of business networks in fostering resilience among women entrepreneurs during the pandemic. The participants consistently conveyed that the establishment and active engagement in business networks during the pandemic significantly contributed to their ability to navigate and overcome the unique challenges brought about by the pandemic. For instance, they expressed how being part of business networks facilitated collaborative problem-solving. The diverse expertise within these networks allowed women entrepreneurs to share insights, strategies, and solutions, contributing to a collective pool of entrepreneurial knowledge. The responses below serve as an excellent illustration,

*"Having the opportunity to establish networks with others during the pandemic was beneficial to my business. While it was a different period, I realised operating in isolation was not a great idea. Networking helped me to stay afloat and get to share ideas on how to manage through the pandemic. I intend to keep it this way." - P3, 40 years old, Bed and Breakfast*

*“Here in Southernwood, we had the notion to create a women's small business forum, but we lacked the time to do so. The pandemic pressured us since it has given us time to reflect on this project and decide to move forward with it. This helped us to share insights, strategies, and solutions to the challenges as well as stay informed about changing market conditions as a result of the pandemic.” - P5, 55 years old, Fashion and Clothing*

One participant involved in agriculture elaborated on how the networks were still informal and the need for the government to establish programs that connect entrepreneurs through business networks, enhancing their chances of success as a team. Last, beyond immediate benefits offered by the networks, one participant also emphasized the emotional support gained through business networks:

*“You know, naturally, as women, we have emotions when compared to our male counterparts. As such we really found solace in discussing challenges openly amongst ourselves and this emotional support reinforced our resilience.” -P15, 43 years old, Construction*

## **Discussion**

Consistent with the study's findings, building entrepreneurial resilience, as expressed by the participants, involves remaining adaptable to new crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. [Xing et al. \(2020\)](#) argued that agility is an emerging characteristic that has become necessary for entrepreneurs to adopt and practice in both professional and personal contexts. For successful entrepreneurial ventures, agility and entrepreneurship are interdependent when faced with unprecedented situations and a fluctuating economy ([Rashid & Ratten, 2021](#)). Thus, understanding the experiences of agile women entrepreneurs during the crisis can provide insights into the elements of their operating models that proved effective in building resilience during the COVID-19 pandemic. In support, [Rajah \(2021\)](#) found that women entrepreneurs who managed the impact of the COVID-19 crisis more effectively were also those with agile practices deeply ingrained in their enterprise operating models.

The most exciting finding observed from the women entrepreneurs' perceptions was acknowledging and confirming the viability of maintaining an optimistic outlook during COVID-19 as a resilience strategy. Optimistic entrepreneurs tend to exhibit higher levels of psychological resilience, which involves the ability to bounce back from adversity, which is a key component of resilience theory. Emphasising the significance of optimism, [Ledesma \(2014\)](#) avers that optimism contributes to positive framing, adaptive capacity, effective coping mechanisms, risk-taking, motivation, and the development of strong support networks, all of which are key components of resilience theory. Thus, maintaining an optimistic outlook can empower women entrepreneurs, reinforcing their confidence and ability to make impactful business decisions ([Wafeq et al., 2019](#)). According to [Lepeley et al. \(2019\)](#), women face unique challenges that differ from those of their male counterparts, and fostering optimism during crises can contribute to their ability to adapt, overcome setbacks, and sustain their businesses. The pandemic's lack of certainty and its unpredictable nature, as evidenced by various studies ([Mashapure et al., 2021](#); [Hughes, 2022](#); [Odeku, 2020](#)), presented a significant challenge for many female entrepreneurs in foreseeing the future and deciding on the most effective strategies to employ. Despite the anxiety and pressure brought about by the pandemic, female entrepreneurs have shown a hopeful outlook towards reopening and sustaining their businesses by adjusting to the COVID-19 circumstances ([Afshan et al., 2021](#)).

Our data suggests that business networks are powerful tools for women entrepreneurs to build resilience against the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, in addition to cultivating



optimism to foster resilience against adversities. A study by [Neumeyer et al. \(2019\)](#) found that networks provide a supportive ecosystem that fosters collaboration, resource sharing, and access to information. Participants in our study agreed that women entrepreneurs can leverage these networks to stay informed about changing market conditions and adapt their business strategies accordingly. Studies have confirmed that connections within business networks play a crucial role in supporting business activities ([Zardini et al., 2023](#)). Female entrepreneurs rely on collaborating with others to tap into resources during crises, leveraging dependable business networks ([Bullough et al., 2015](#)). Furthermore, participants highlighted the intrinsic value of business networks, as collectively, their enterprises increased their resilience to external shocks resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Participants acknowledge that embracing and mastering technology during the pandemic yielded significant benefits, facilitating the transition of many businesses from traditional methods to digital integration. [Schepers et al. \(2021\)](#) corroborate these findings, highlighting how digitalization bolstered entrepreneurs' resilience amid the pandemic, sustaining productivity, reducing uncertainty, and fostering agility amidst market disruptions. Lockdown measures prompted numerous women entrepreneurs to utilize online platforms for marketing, given their effectiveness in reaching clientele ([Sörensson & Ghannad, 2024](#)). [Lee et al. \(2021\)](#) propose that the pandemic's lasting impact may steer businesses towards greater reliance on technological entrepreneurship, necessitating a more strategic crisis management approach. Collectively, the study's results, which focus on South African women entrepreneurs, enrich the nascent field of entrepreneurship research in crisis contexts and fill a notable void in the crisis management literature, which has predominantly featured advanced nations. By highlighting these women's experiences, resilience strategies, and adaptability during the COVID-19 pandemic, the study provides unique insights into how entrepreneurs in emerging markets navigate unprecedented challenges such as COVID-19.

## CONCLUSIONS

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on businesses has been undeniably negative and detrimental, particularly for women entrepreneurs in Africa who have faced additional challenges. This study aims to shed light on the resilience of these women and how they have managed to survive and even thrive during the pandemic. By conducting an exploratory study using qualitative methodology, the researchers analyzed women entrepreneurs' unique strategies to build resilience and overcome the difficulties they faced during the crisis. The study identified several key themes that have shaped the post-pandemic trajectory of women-owned small businesses, including Business Agility, Optimistic Outlook, Leveraged Digital Technology, and Business Networks. These findings provide valuable insights into the dynamic interplay between resilience factors and the challenges faced by women-owned small businesses, which can be used to inform policy decisions, support initiatives, and further research aimed at fostering an inclusive and resilient entrepreneurial ecosystem. The study's implications extend beyond women-owned small businesses, offering broader lessons on building resilience in global crises. Overall, the research underscores the remarkable resilience of women entrepreneurs and highlights the importance of understanding and supporting their unique challenges.

From a theoretical standpoint, this paper presents an alternative viewpoint on women's entrepreneurship within the gendered context of entrepreneurship, emphasizing the promotion of entrepreneurial resilience during times of crisis, specifically within the South African context. This study holds significant implications for policyholders, women entrepreneurs, and corporations, particularly from a practical standpoint. For example, the South African authorities must establish a lasting and robust plan to prepare for future pandemics, supported by detailed strategies that

promote women's entrepreneurship locally and nationally. The imperativeness of such a preparedness framework is grounded in several critical insights gleaned from the research. Women entrepreneurs in the study exhibited remarkable resilience during the pandemic, emphasizing their ability to adapt in adversity. Recognizing this resilience, the government's pandemic preparedness strategy should acknowledge and build upon women-owned businesses' strengths and unique characteristics.

### LIMITATION & FURTHER RESEARCH

While the research presents intriguing findings, it is constrained by several factors. Firstly, its narrow focus on a specific time frame and issue potentially restricts the broader applicability of its conclusions. Secondly, the decision to halt participant interviews upon reaching data saturation may have overlooked valuable perspectives from diverse participant demographics. Moreover, the utilization of snowball sampling could have skewed the representation of the study population. Additionally, the study's confinement to a single province in South Africa raises concerns about the generalizability of its findings.

Future comparative studies involving diverse geographical areas or nations could shed light on how various contextual elements impact the ability of women-owned businesses to bounce back, thereby aiding in the discovery of adaptable strategies and policy suggestions to aid their recovery and advancement after the pandemic. Additionally, integrating both qualitative and quantitative approaches could offer a comprehensive comprehension of the resilience tactics utilized by women-led small enterprises in the aftermath of COVID-19, facilitating a deeper exploration of individual stories alongside broader statistical assessments. A comparative analysis with male entrepreneurs could also offer a broader perspective on entrepreneurial resilience during the crisis. Thus, future research could indeed benefit from examining the experiences of male entrepreneurs alongside female entrepreneurs. Such a comparison could reveal critical differences and similarities in gender resilience strategies. Last, it would be valuable for future studies to conduct a comparative analysis of resilience strategies across different demographics, such as age groups, business sizes, and industries when faced with a crisis, as this could provide deeper insights into tailored resilience practices for diverse organizational contexts.

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