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Networking Competency and Performance of Women-Owned Smes in Kenya: Assessing the Mediating Role of Legal and Regulatory Frameworks

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Abstract

This study investigated the relationship between networking competency and the performance of women-owned Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) in Kenya, with particular attention to the mediating role of the legal and regulatory framework. Guided by Ronald Burt's Network Theory of Entrepreneurship and anchored in a pragmatist research philosophy, the study adopted a mixed-method sequential explanatory design, integrating both quantitative and qualitative approaches. The target population comprised 710 women-owned SMEs, from which a sample of 385 respondents was drawn using proportionate stratified sampling. Data collection involved structured questionnaires, interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), and secondary sources such as government reports, academic journals, policy documents, and financial institution records. Networking competency was measured through partnership formation, diversity of networks, and event participation. Performance was evaluated using resource growth, profit margin, and market share, while the legal and regulatory framework was assessed using regulatory compliance, rate of adoption to legal change, and frequency of legal disputes. The objective was to examine existing networking practices and their impact on SME performance. Correlation analysis revealed a significant and strong positive relationship between networking competency and enterprise performance ($r = .681, p < .001$). Regression analysis further confirmed this relationship, indicating that networking competency significantly predicts performance ($\beta = .681, p < .001$). A unit increase in networking competency was associated with a 68.1% improvement in enterprise performance. The study also established the mediating effect of the legal and regulatory framework. These findings align with Burt's theory, affirming that robust social networks enhance access to critical resources and business opportunities, thereby improving SME performance among women entrepreneurs in Kenya.

Keywords: Networking Competency, Women-Owned SMEs, Enterprise Performance, Legal and Regulatory Framework, and Entrepreneurship in Kenya.

INTRODUCTION

In the global entrepreneurship literature, networking competency is increasingly recognized as a critical driver of firm performance. For instance, Kalhor et al. (2023) analyzed LinkedIn data from millions of users in the UK and US IT sector, finding that women with stronger social connectivity had significantly higher odds of

reporting job promotions—highlighting the payoff of strategic networks for women (Kalhor et al., 2023). Similarly, Mullally et al. (2022) demonstrated in Nepal that access to mobile-based entrepreneurial training—and thus expanded networks—enabled women to raise income and control over livelihoods (Mullally et al., 2022). Most recently in France, Labbé et al. (2025) showed that network diversity and professional affiliations enhanced access to varied financing sources for female founders, underscoring relational capital as a gatekeeper to resources (Labbé et al., 2025)

Across Africa, studies have explored the interplay between social networks and female-led enterprise performance. Shah and Verma (2024), in a study of women’s involvement in SMEs in Calabar, Nigeria, established that business networking opportunities such as industry associations and trade fairs serve as key enablers of women’s financial independence and skills development (Shah & Verma, 2024). In South Africa, Polori (2021) conducted qualitative research highlighting that inadequate formal networks among women entrepreneurs often limit firm growth and sustainability (Polori, 2021). Further, Meyer et al. (2024) in the GEM South Africa report noted that lack of peer networks and mentorship were primary barriers to scale for women entrepreneurs, even as entrepreneurial aspirations continue to rise (Meyer et al., 2024).

In Kenya, women-owned SMEs face both opportunities and constraints within the national business ecosystem. Kenyan women entrepreneurs often struggle with regulatory compliance, limited exposure to formal networks, and slow adaptation to legal changes, all of which impede business growth and competitive positioning (Kimani & Mwangi, 2024; Njoora et al., 2024). Government and policy documents report that many women-led SMEs remain informal and unlicensed, hampering access to procurement opportunities and limiting inclusion in formal networks (Cheptepkeny Korir, 2022). Furthermore, the absence of structured networking platforms decreases opportunities for partnerships and resource sharing (Meyer et al., 2024).

Despite policy efforts to support women entrepreneurs, empirical research specifically linking measurable dimensions of networking competency—such as partnership formation, network diversity, and event participation—to performance indicators like resource growth, profit margin, and market share, while accounting for mediating effects of the legal and regulatory framework (e.g., compliance levels, rate of legal adaptation, frequency of disputes), remains scarce in Kenyan literature (Karimi & Nyang’au, 2023; Kariuki, 2022).

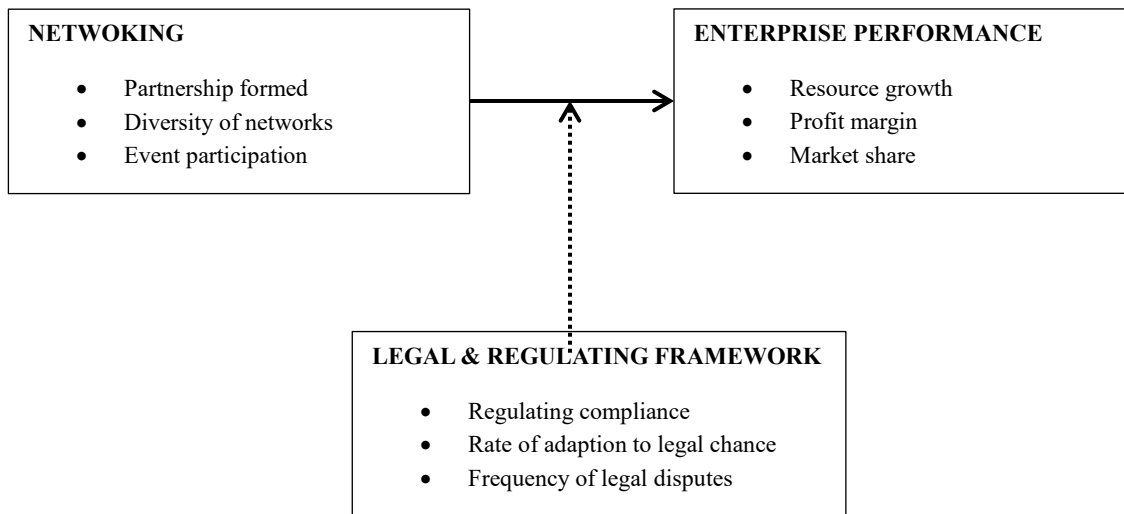
Gap and Purpose

While global and regional literature affirm the value of social capital and networking for women entrepreneurs, and Kenyan policy documents highlight structural challenges, studies combining quantitative and qualitative evidence on how networking competency affects women-owned SME performance in Kenya—specifically through the mediator of legal/regulatory framework—are lacking. This study seeks to address that gap by adopting a mixed-method sequential explanatory design rooted in pragmatist philosophy, to investigate network practices and their performance outcomes among Kenyan women-led SMEs.

Conceptual Framework

This study was anchored in Ronald Burt’s Network Theory of Entrepreneurship, which posits that individuals occupying “structural holes” in social networks can access diverse, non-redundant information and resources that others cannot. These “brokers” gain competitive advantages, making their firms more adaptable, innovative, and profitable. Networking Competency allows women entrepreneurs to span structural holes through partnerships and diverse linkages. However, the Legal and Regulatory Framework may mediate this access either enabling or constraining the benefits drawn from social capital. The result is reflected in the

Performance of Women-Owned SMEs, measurable through tangible outcomes such as resource growth, profit margin, and market share.



INDEPENDENT VARIABLE

INTERVENING VARIABLE

DEPENDANT VARIABLE

FIGURE 2.1 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORKS

The interaction of variables in the conceptual framework Networking Competency, Legal and Regulatory Framework, and SME Performance can be effectively explained using Ronald Burt's Network Theory of Entrepreneurship. This theory posits that individuals who occupy structural holes in social networks can access diverse, non-redundant information and resources that are unavailable to others. In the context of women-owned SMEs in Kenya, networking competency, which includes forming partnerships, engaging in diverse networks, and participating in events, enables entrepreneurs to bridge structural holes and tap into unique sources of information, opportunities, and support.

These networking activities allow women entrepreneurs to gain critical insights into the legal and regulatory environment, which in turn helps them navigate compliance requirements, adapt to changing legal conditions, and reduce the frequency or severity of legal disputes. This mediating role of the legal and regulatory framework translates networking efforts into tangible strategic advantages. In essence, networks provide not just access to markets and resources but also empower SMEs to act more effectively within the regulatory landscape.

As a result, SMEs that effectively leverage their networking competencies and channel them through an improved understanding and adaptation to legal frameworks tend to perform better. They experience growth in resources, improved profit margins, and increased market share. These outcomes align with Burt's argument that strategic positioning within networks leads to better access to actionable information and, consequently, superior performance. Thus, the variables in the framework interact in a way that practically demonstrates the principles of the Network Theory of Entrepreneurship.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Kalhor et al. (2023) analyzed LinkedIn data from approximately ten million users in the UK and US, demonstrating that women with stronger online social connectivity—such as affiliations with Big Tech connections—experienced significantly higher rates of promotions and relocations. Notably, social connectivity

had a stronger positive effect for women than men, illustrating the differential payoff of online networks for female professionals. Although not focused solely on SMEs, the implications for networking competency diversity and reach of connections—are clear, especially in terms of access to advancement opportunities.

Biswas (2021), using World Bank Enterprise Survey data, found that female-owned firms in India had higher probabilities of innovation when women entrepreneurs had access to internal funding and networked social capital. Firms located in safer regions or with young leadership showed the strongest innovation outcomes. This supports the notion that network ties—both internal and external—drive innovation, a key determinant of business performance.

A study of Bangladeshi women entrepreneurs highlighted social capital—defined via bonding, bridging, and linking ties—as a determinant of business performance. Afshan et al. (2021) and others emphasize how entrepreneurs derive critical resources, legitimacy, and information via networked relationships, which in turn improve firm growth measures like resource access and revenue. The social capital construct aligns closely with measurable networking competency variables.

Sithole and Ruhode (2021) examined cloud-computing adoption by SMEs in South Africa and found that while connectivity technologies offered performance advantages, perceived lack of regulatory support acted as a barrier. Here, the mediating role of the regulatory environment becomes apparent—network-enabled technological adoption alone was insufficient without enabling policies. Similarly, Lekoloane et al. (2023) investigated the role of mentorship and networking in accelerating growth among female-owned enterprises. Through qualitative interviews with female entrepreneurs, the study revealed that structured mentorship and peer support strengthened managerial and leadership competencies, facilitating business scaling and performance improvement.

Akintimehin and Ogbechie (2021) surveyed 400 Nigerian female SME owners in the informal sector and used structural equation modeling to show that both internal and external social capital significantly boosted enterprise performance. External social capital (e.g. connections to suppliers, customers) had a stronger effect than internal ties. Another Nigerian study by Aliyu et al. (2024) found that social networks positively influenced women's MSME performance, with innovation mediating the relationship—thus, network diversity and innovation-enhancing ties translated into better business outcomes.

Sendawula et al. (2023) explored how entrepreneurial networking, mediated by innovation, fostered small business performance in Uganda. Using quantitative methods, they demonstrated that networking (e.g. partnerships, external linkages) significantly predicted performance outcomes when mediated by innovation capacity, illustrating the pathway from social ties to resource acquisition and thus to stronger market outcomes. Although they do not directly study legal frameworks, the mechanism of mediation via innovation provides an analytical model similar to regulatory mediation.

Kenyan-focused empirical literature remains limited in rigorously linking measurable networking competencies to performance outcomes, especially with legal and regulatory frameworks as mediators. Existing policy work and preliminary case studies indicate that women-owned SMEs often operate informally, with low regulatory compliance and limited adaptation to legal changes. This environment constrains partnership formation, event participation, access to formal markets, and resource acquisition. Consequently, performance measures—such as resource growth, profit margin, and market share—are suppressed. Studies also report frequent legal disputes and slow adoption of regulatory changes, which undermine business resilience and growth potential.

The global literature establishes a positive linkage between networking competency and entrepreneurial performance, where network diversity, partnerships, and broader connectivity contribute to innovation,

advancement, and firm success. In regional African contexts, similar patterns hold: external social capital exerts strong influence, mentorship and networking enhance managerial competencies, and regulatory constraints emerge as potential inhibitors. In Uganda, innovative outcomes mediate the networking–performance link.

However, within Kenya, empirical studies rarely combine these dimensions—networking competency variables (partnerships, network diversity, event participation) measured alongside performance indicators (resource growth, profit margin, market share), while incorporating legal/regulatory factors (compliance, adaptation, legal disputes) as mediators. Moreover, mixed-method sequential explanatory designs anchored in theoretical frameworks such as Burt’s network theory are absent.

METHODOLOGY

The research employed a mixed-methods sequential explanatory design under a pragmatist philosophy, integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches to investigate how networking competency affects the performance of women-owned SMEs in Kenya, particularly in the North Rift region (Creswell & Creswell, 2024; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2023). The pragmatic paradigm was appropriate as it allows for methodological pluralism and focuses on real-world problem-solving, which is crucial for capturing both measurable and experiential dimensions of entrepreneurial performance (Morgan, 2023; Saunders et al., 2023). The study targeted 710 women’s groups supported by the Women Enterprise Fund between 2019 and 2021, ensuring coverage of enterprises at varying stages of development (Kamau & Njoroge, 2021). A proportionate stratified sampling technique was employed to ensure fair representation across counties, guided by a proportional allocation method for determining sample sizes based on each county’s share of the total population (Mugenda & Wainaina, 2023; Kothari, 2022). Simple random sampling was then applied within each stratum to minimize selection bias and ensure the generalizability of results (Bryman, 2021).

Data collection incorporated structured questionnaires, key informant interviews, focus group discussions, and document reviews, using well-designed tools such as interview guides, FGD protocols, and checklists to enhance data reliability and validity (Hair et al., 2023; Saunders et al., 2022). Quantitative data were analysed using SPSS version 28, applying descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, frequencies) to summarize characteristics and inferential techniques including correlation, multiple regression, and factor analysis to test hypothesized relationships (Creswell & Creswell, 2024; Maxwell, 2024). To assess mediation effects, the study employed the Baron and Kenny method, supplemented by bootstrapping techniques to test the significance of indirect effects without relying on normality assumptions (Hayes, 2022). Structural equation modelling (SEM) was used to assess overall model fit and examine direct and indirect relationships among variables (Hair et al., 2023).

The objective was analysed through both qualitative thematic analysis and quantitative techniques, with thematic coding used to interpret patterns in networking experiences and challenges, while regression analysis quantified the predictive strength of networking competency on performance outcomes (Mugenda & Mugenda, 2021). The mediating role of the legal and regulatory framework was examined to understand how regulatory compliance, adaptation, and dispute management influence the relationship between networking and SME performance (Kariuki & Odhiambo, 2021). Findings were presented using tables, charts, graphs, and narrative summaries, ensuring clarity, accessibility, and relevance to policymakers, researchers, and entrepreneurship practitioners (Creswell & Creswell, 2021; Maxwell, 2024).

Diagnostic tests carried out were essential in validating the reliability and robustness of regression models by identifying potential statistical issues such as normality, multicollinearity, and heteroscedasticity. To test for normality, the study used descriptive statistics including skewness and kurtosis, as well as the Shapiro-Wilk test, where a significance level below 0.05 indicates non-normal distribution, thereby questioning the suitability

of parametric analyses (Field, 2023). Multicollinearity was assessed through the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) and Tolerance values, with a VIF above 10 and Tolerance below 0.1 suggesting problematic intercorrelations among independent variables; acceptable values ensure each variable contributes uniquely to the model (Smith, 2024). To detect heteroscedasticity, the Breusch-Pagan and White's tests were applied, both of which examine whether the variance of residuals changes with different levels of the independent variables—an issue that can lead to biased coefficient estimates and unreliable inferences (Hadi et al., 2022). Collectively, these diagnostic procedures help ensure the validity and interpretability of the regression results.

RESULTS

Qualitative Analysis

The study also sought to explore networking practices among women entrepreneurs in Kenya and their influence on the business. The thematic analysis of open-ended questions revealed two subthemes: (1) successful partnerships impact a business positively, and (2) network diversity positively contributes to business growth and new opportunities. From these subthemes, the key theme of “women entrepreneurs in Kenya embrace partnerships and diversity to boost business performance, growth, and opportunities” was developed.

The Table below demonstrates how the key themes and subthemes were developed, including their respective codes.

Table Showing Thematic Analysis Networking Competency

Theme	Subthemes	Codes
Women-owned enterprises in Kenya embrace partnerships and diversity to boost business performance, growth, and opportunities.	Successful partnerships impact a business positively.	Increase sales (partnerships with investors) Steady product supply (supplier partnerships) Improved brand visibility and sales High-quality products Reduced cost expenses More returning clients Improved brand awareness
	Network diversity positively contributes to business growth and new opportunities.	Innovative ideas/practices New market penetration/expansion Great supplier relationships Cost-friendly prices Securing quality products Obtaining expert consultation services

The thematic analysis reveals that women entrepreneurs in Kenya are increasingly embracing strategic partnerships and network diversity as mechanisms to enhance enterprise performance, achieve growth, and seize new opportunities. These approaches are not only improving operational capacity but also contributing significantly to the competitiveness and sustainability of women-owned enterprises.

The first subtheme highlights the positive impact of successful partnerships on enterprise performance. Strategic collaborations, whether with investors, suppliers, or service providers, are seen as essential to improving business outcomes. For instance, partnerships with investors help boost sales by injecting capital into the business, enabling expansion, and increasing production capacity. Supplier partnerships contribute to a steady and reliable supply of products, ensuring that enterprises can meet customer demand consistently and avoid stock-outs, which in turn enhances customer loyalty. In addition, these partnerships often result in reduced operational costs, as suppliers may offer bulk pricing or long-term discounts to trusted partners. Such collaborations also enhance brand visibility and awareness, leading to increased sales and more returning

clients. Importantly, strategic partnerships can improve the overall quality of products, as entrepreneurs are better positioned to source high-standard inputs and adopt improved production processes. Overall, these alliances help build resilience and efficiency in women-led businesses.

The second subtheme underscores how network diversity contributes positively to business growth and opportunity development. Women entrepreneurs benefit significantly from having access to diverse networks that provide fresh perspectives, resources, and expertise. For example, being part of a broad business network opens up access to innovative ideas and practices that may not be readily available within a single enterprise. Such exposure often sparks creativity and leads to the adoption of new methods, products, or technologies. Additionally, diverse networks facilitate market expansion, enabling women entrepreneurs to penetrate new markets through referrals, collaborations, or shared platforms. Strong networks also help forge favorable supplier relationships, often resulting in cost-effective pricing, easier access to quality materials, and expert consultation services—all of which contribute to the enterprise's long-term success.

Collectively, the findings reveal that partnerships and network diversity are not peripheral strategies, but rather central pillars of business success among women entrepreneurs in Kenya. These strategies enable women to overcome resource limitations, improve product and service quality, access critical knowledge, and remain competitive in an ever-changing market environment.

In conclusion, for women-owned enterprises, embracing partnerships and cultivating diverse networks is a key strategy for business growth, performance, and innovation. Development programs and support agencies should prioritize creating platforms that foster collaboration, encourage investor engagement, and enhance networking opportunities among women entrepreneurs. By doing so, they can help unlock the full potential of women-led businesses in driving economic development and inclusive growth in Kenya.

Quantitative Analysis

Descriptive Statistics on Networking Competency

The respondents were asked to indicate the extent they agreed with the following statements on partnership formation in networking competency. Their responses are presented in the Table below:

Table on Respondents' Responses on Partnership Formation

Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Actively forming partnerships with other businesses or entrepreneurs has been a key strategy in the growth and success of my business.	29.4% (113)	61.3% (236)	5.2% (20)	2.1% (8)	2.1% (8)
Forming partnerships has positively contributed to the expansion of my business and the range of services/products we offer.	46.8% (180)	40.5% (156)	6.2% (24)	4.4% (17)	2.1% (8)
I /We are indifferent about the impact of forming partnerships on the overall success of my business.	22.9% (88)	46.8% (180)	19.7% (76)	10.6% (41)	0.0% (0)
The process of forming partnerships is often challenging and does not yield significant benefits for my business.	22.3% (86)	40.8% (157)	13.0% (50)	19.7% (76)	4.2% (16)
I believe that forming partnerships has little to no impact on the growth or success of my business.	2.1% (8)	6.2% (24)	11.7% (45)	69.9% (269)	10.1% (39)

Average of Partnership Formation	Mean	Std. Error of Mean	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
	3.5974 (71.95%)	.02421	.4751	2.80	4.60

The table above shows 29.4% of the respondents strongly agreed that actively forming partnerships with other businesses or entrepreneurs was a key strategy in the growth and success of their businesses, 61.3% agreed, 5.2% neither agreed nor disagreed, 2.1% disagreed, and 2.1% strongly disagreed. On whether forming partnerships has positively contributed to the expansion of their businesses and the range of products and services they offer, 46.8% strongly agreed, 40.5% agreed, 6.2% were not sure, 4.4% disagreed, and 2.1% strongly disagreed. Regarding being indifferent about the impact of forming partnerships on the overall success of their business, 22.9% strongly agreed, 46.8% agreed, 19.7% neither agreed nor disagreed, 10.6% disagreed, and none strongly disagreed. On whether the process of forming partnerships is often challenging and does not yield significant benefits for their businesses, 22.3% of the respondents strongly agreed, 40.8% agreed, 13.0% were unsure, 19.7% disagreed, and 4.2% strongly disagreed. On the same partnership formation construct, 2.1% believed that forming partnerships has little to no impact on the growth or success of their businesses, 6.2% agreed, 11.7% neither agreed nor disagreed, 69.9% disagreed, and 10.1% strongly disagreed.

On average, the degree of respondents' agreement with partnership formation in networking competency was found to be 71.95% (mean = 3.5974, standard deviation = 0.4751), which can be rated as moderately high. Thus, from this finding, it is conclusive that most women entrepreneurs in Kenya endorse partnership formation as ideal in establishing strong and valuable connections or networks.

How frequently do you actively seek and form partnerships with other businesses or entrepreneurs?

	N	%
Never	16	4.2%
Often	154	40.0%
Sometimes	215	55.8%

The data reveals that 4.2% of respondents never actively seek or form partnerships, while 40.0% reported they often do, and 55.8% indicated they sometimes engage in forming business relationships with others. Additionally, respondents were asked to express their level of agreement with several statements concerning network diversity as part of their networking competency, with their responses summarized in the subsequent table.

Table on Respondents' Responses on Diversity of Network

Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
The diversity within my professional network, including various industries, backgrounds, and demographics, has been instrumental in the success and growth of my business.	54.0% (208)	43.9% (169)	2.1% (8)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)
The diverse nature of my network has provided valuable perspectives, leading to innovative ideas and business opportunities.	27.5% (106)	67.0% (258)	5.5% (21)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)
I /We are indifferent about the impact of the diversity of my professional network on the overall success of my business.	20.5% (79)	52.2% (201)	15.6% (60)	11.7% (45)	0.0% (0)
Maintaining a diverse network is challenging and does not significantly	9.9% (38)	39.5% (152)	4.9% (19)	31.4% (121)	14.3% (55)

contribute to the success of my business.

I/We believe that the diversity of my professional network has little to no impact on the growth or success of my business

Average of Diversity of Network	Mean	Std. Error of Mean	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
	3.5392 (70.78%)	.0220	.4317	2.80	4.60

The findings indicate a strong consensus among respondents on the positive role of network diversity in business success. A combined 97.9% either agreed or strongly agreed that diversity in their professional networks—across industries, backgrounds, and demographics—was instrumental to the growth of their businesses. Similarly, 94.5% agreed that such diversity provided valuable perspectives that sparked innovation, with no disagreement recorded. Regarding indifference to diversity's impact, 72.7% disagreed with being indifferent, though a small portion (11.7%) disagreed with its relevance. When asked if maintaining a diverse network was challenging and not beneficial, opinions were mixed 49.4% agreed or strongly agreed, while 45.7% disagreed or strongly disagreed. On whether diversity had little to no impact on business growth, 79.7% disagreed, indicating widespread recognition of its value. Overall, the mean agreement level was 3.54 with a standard deviation of 0.43, reflecting a moderately high perception of the importance of network diversity. These results suggest that most women entrepreneurs in Kenya recognize and support the value of diversity in enhancing networking competency and business performance.

Additionally, participants were asked to indicate to what extent they agreed with the following statements relating to event participation in networking competency. Their responses are recorded in Table below:

Table on Respondents' Responses on Event Participation

Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Regular participation in industry events, conferences, or networking gatherings enhances my business's visibility and growth.	36.1% (139)	58.2% (224)	5.7% (22)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)
Through event participation, I have established valuable connections that have positively impacted my business.	35.1% (135)	55.1% (212)	7.5% (29)	2.3% (9)	0.0% (0)
Participation in industry events has directly led to new business opportunities or partnerships.	39.5% (152)	49.4% (190)	11.2% (43)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)
Despite challenges, participating in events is essential for staying competitive in my industry.	41.8% (161)	47.5% (183)	6.2% (24)	4.4% (17)	0.0% (0)
Event participation has been crucial in expanding my professional network and business reach.	42.3% (163)	43.6% (168)	6.0% (23)	6.2% (24)	1.8% (7)
Average of Event Participation	Mean	Std. Error of Mean	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
	4.2535 (85.07%)	.0233	.4564	3.20	5.00

The findings indicate a strong endorsement by women entrepreneurs in Kenya on the role of event participation in enhancing networking competency and business success. A significant 94.3% of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that attending industry events, conferences, and networking gatherings improves business visibility and growth, with none expressing disagreement. Similarly, 90.2% confirmed having formed valuable business connections through such events, while only 2.3% disagreed. Regarding event participation leading to

new business opportunities, 88.9% agreed or strongly agreed, with no negative responses. Furthermore, 89.3% viewed regular participation in events as essential for staying competitive, even amid challenges. In terms of expanding professional networks and business reach, 85.9% agreed or strongly agreed, while only a small fraction (8.05%) disagreed.

Overall, the mean response score was 4.25 with a standard deviation of 0.46, indicating a relatively high level of agreement. In summary, the data suggests that the majority of women entrepreneurs highly value active participation in professional events as a vital tool for expanding networks, increasing visibility, and fostering growth in their businesses. The respondents were also asked how often they participate in networking events, conferences, or industry gatherings. The findings are shown in Table below.

Table on Frequency of Participating in Networking Events

How often do you participate in networking events, conferences, or industry gatherings?

	N	%
Often	156	40.55%
Sometimes	229	59.5%

Table indicates that 40.55% of the participants indicated that they often partake in networking events, conferences, or industry gathers. Still on the same, 59.5% of the respondents affirmed that they sometimes (occasionally) engage in networking events, conferences, or industry gatherings. Respondents were further requested to say whether they have ever secured any significant business opportunity or partnership from the networking events they have attended. The responses are indicated in Table below

Table on Respondents' Responses on Significant Opportunities or Partnerships from Event Participation

Have any significant business opportunities or partnerships emerged from your participation in events?

	N	%
No	15	3.9%
Yes	370	96.1%

The table indicates that 96.1% of the respondents agreed that they have ever secured significant opportunities or partnerships from events they have participated in. On the other hand, 3.9% indicated that they have never secured valuable opportunities or partnerships from events they have attended before.

The table that follows includes the average respondents' contentment with networking competency in their business. As shown in the table, the level of participants' satisfaction with networking competency within their businesses is 75.45% (mean = 3.7967, Std. Deviation = 0.3044), which can be rated as remarkably high. From this average, it is conclusive that most women entrepreneurs in Kenya acknowledge networking competency as crucial for improved performance.

Table on Average of Networking Competency

Average of Innovation Competency	Mean	Std. Error of Mean	Std. Deviation	Minim	Maxim
	3.7967 (75.93%)	.0155	.3044	3.00	4.33

Inferential Analysis on Influence of Networking Competency on Enterprise Performance

The objective of the study was to investigate the existing networking practices and their effect on the performance of women entrepreneurs in Kenya. To satisfy this objective, the study tested the following null hypothesis (H01):

H01: The existing networking practices do not have a significant effect on the performance of women entrepreneurs in Kenya.

To test this null hypothesis, the study adopted the linear regression analysis method. Diagnostic tests were conducted to assess the model's goodness of fit and accuracy to the dataset. Correlation analysis was also conducted to assess the strength and direction of the relationship between networking competency and enterprise performance among women-managed businesses in Kenya. Regression analysis was further conducted to check whether networking competency influences or predicts enterprise performance among women-managed enterprises in Kenya

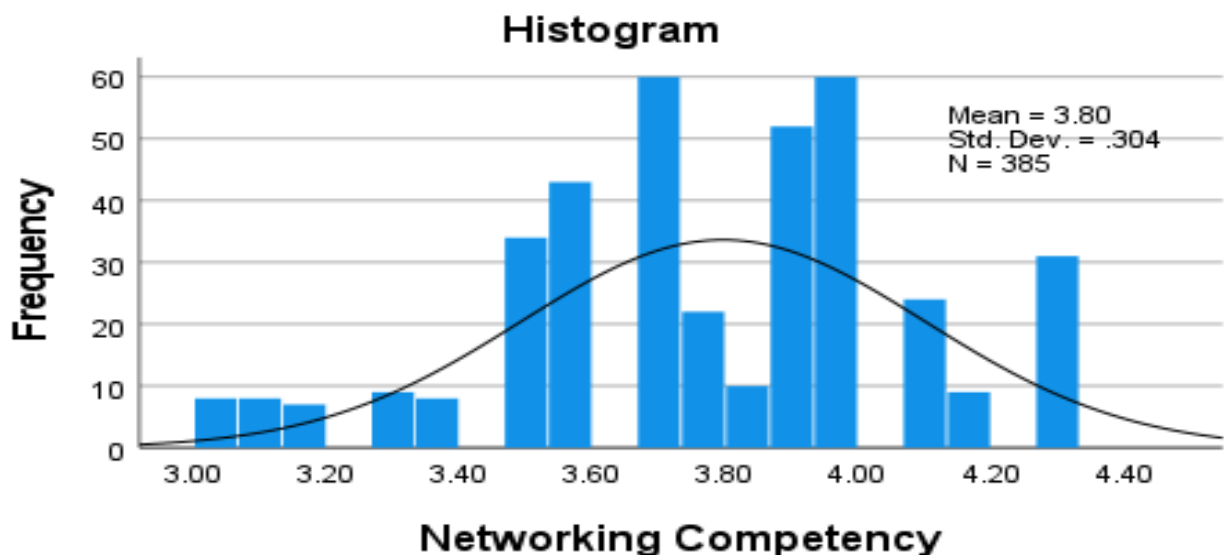
Diagnostic Tests

A series of diagnostic tests were conducted to ascertain the goodness of fit of the linear regression model in assessing the causal and effect association between networking competency and enterprise performance among women entrepreneurs in Kenya. These assumption tests included: normality test, multicollinearity tests, heteroscedasticity test, and linearity test. The findings are presented in tables

4.6.2.2.1.1 Normality Test

Linear regression and correlation analyses require a normal distribution of data. A histogram was used to assess and check if the dataset for innovation competency followed a normal distribution. The findings are shown in Figure below

Histogram for Normality Test for Networking Competency



The figure above shows that the histogram for the normality test is roughly symmetrical in shape, as indicated by the distribution curve line, indicating that the dataset for networking competency was roughly normal.

Multicollinearity Test

Linear regression and correlation analyses also require that the condition of multicollinearity is not violated. The table below summarizes the multicollinearity test on the variable datasets. The VIF value is 1, which is between the required range of 1 and 5. Thus, the value indicates that multicollinearity will not be a problem in the regression analysis.

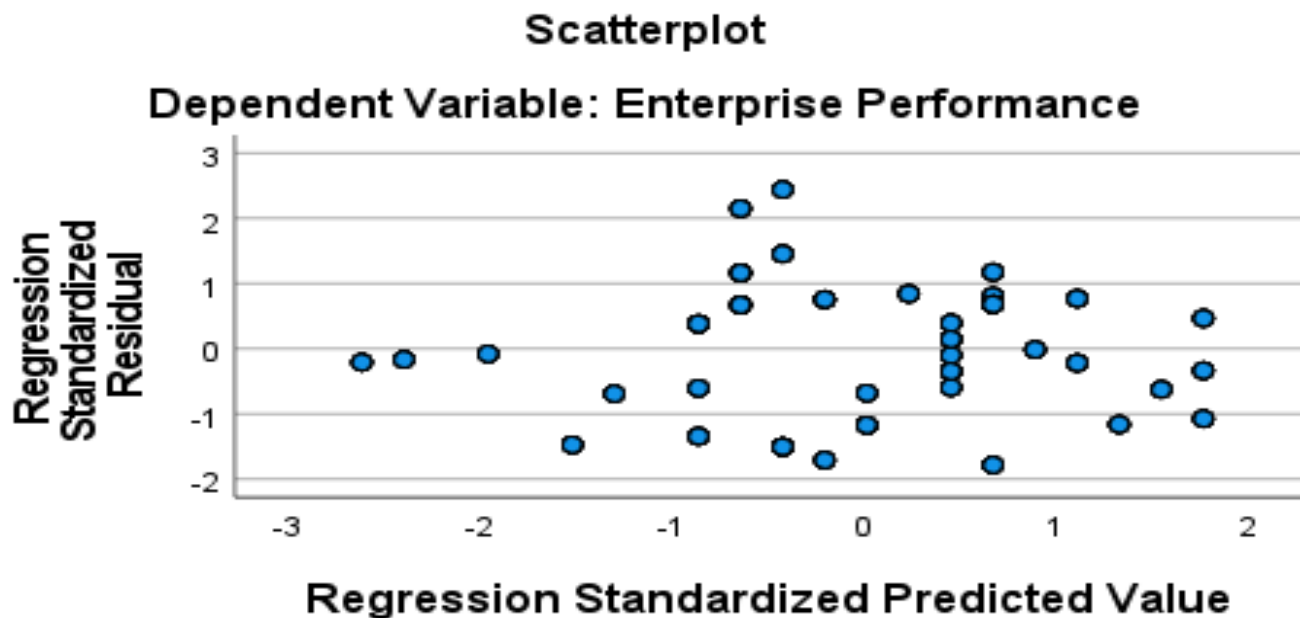
Summary of Multicollinearity Test for Networking Competency

	Coefficients ^a			t	Sig.	Collinearity Statistics	
	Unstandardized Coefficients B	Std. Error	Standardized Coefficients Beta			Tolerance	VIF
(Constant)	.780	.173		4.514	.000		
Networking Competency	.826	.045	.681	18.208	.000	1.000	1.000

a. Dependent Variable: Enterprise Performance

Heteroscedasticity Test

Linear regression and correlation analyses require the assumption that homoscedasticity is realized. The figure below presents a summary of the heteroscedasticity test for networking competency. From the figure, it is evident that the distribution of datapoints in the scatter plot assumes a roughly rectangular shape. Besides, the distribution lacks clustering and systematic patterns. Therefore, it is apparent that the dataset for networking competency satisfies the homoscedasticity assumption. Figure 0.5: Scatter Plot for the Heteroscedasticity for Networking Competency



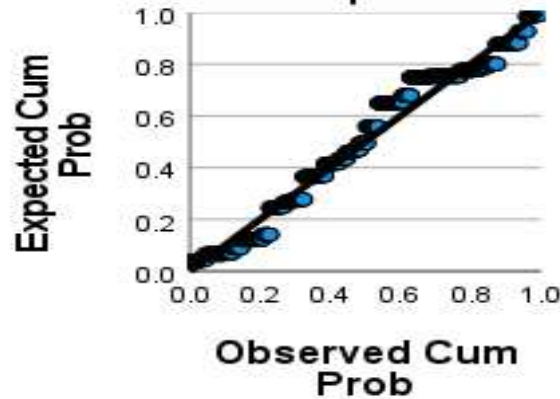
Linearity Test

Linearity tests were conducted to confirm the suitability of linear regression and correlation analyses between networking competency and enterprise performance.

Scatter Plot for Linearity Test for Networking Competency

Normal P-P Plot of Regression Standardized Residual

Dependent Variable: Enterprise Performance



The figure shows that the datapoints along the straight diagonal line running from the bottom left to the top right indicate that the dataset follows a linear distribution.

Correlation Analysis

The Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to assess the strength and direction of the relationship between networking competency and enterprise performance among women-owned enterprises in Kenya.

Correlation Between Networking Competency and Enterprise Performance

Correlations		Enterprise Performance
Networking Competency	Pearson Correlation	.681**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	N	385

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Findings in Table above show a correlation coefficient of 0.681 and a significance or p-value of 0.000. From these statistics, it is conclusive that networking competency has a significantly strong positive correlation with enterprise performance.

Regression Analysis

The study sought to examine whether networking competency influences enterprise performance among women-owned enterprises in Kenya. To achieve this, a regression analysis to establish whether networking competency significantly influences and predicts the performance of women's enterprises in Kenya was conducted. The results of the regression analysis are presented in Tables below

Model Summary

Model Summary ^b			
R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
.681 ^a	.464	.463	.27046

a. Predictors: (Constant), Networking Competency

b. Dependent Variable: Enterprise Performance

Table below includes an R Square of 0.464 and an Adjusted R Square of 0.463. The adjusted R-squared is the most prominent, indicating the model's accuracy. The adjusted R-squared value of 0.463 ascertains the model's goodness-of-fit, indicating that the regression model has a 46.3% predictive accuracy, with the predictor variable, networking competency, explaining 46.3% of the variations in the dependent variable, enterprise performance.

ANOVA ^a						
Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	24.251	1	24.251	331.541	.001 ^b
	Residual	28.015	383	.073		
	Total	52.266	384			

a. Dependent Variable: Enterprise Performance

a. Predictors: (Constant), Networking Competency

The table above presents the regression model's ANOVA results. The most significant statistics are the F-statistic value (331.541) and the significance value (0.001). The F-statistic value of 331.541 is not only more than the critical F-value of 0.05 but also greater. This implies greater evidence that there is a difference between the variable means. The p-value of 0.001 is less than the critical p-value of 0.05, demonstrating sufficient evidence that there is a significant difference in the variances of the variables.

The table below includes a summary of the regression analysis, indicating that networking competency has a p-value of 0.000, which is less than the recommended critical value of 0.05. This implies rejecting the null hypothesis and supporting the alternative hypothesis. Thus, it is conclusive that networking competency significantly influences and predicts enterprise performance. The table also shows that networking competency had a positive standardised beta coefficient value of 0.681, indicating that a unit improvement in innovative competency is likely to enhance performance among women-managed enterprises in Kenya by 68.1%. Thus, to envisage performance among women-managed enterprises in Kenya, the findings establish that the following regression model can be used:

$$Y = 0.780 + 0.826X_2$$

Where Y is enterprise performance, and X_2 is networking competency.

The model illustrates that when all activities of networking competency are held constant, enterprise performance would be at 0.780. However, holding other factors constant, a unit improved in innovation competency would lead to a 0.826 increase in enterprise performance.

Coefficients

	Coefficients ^a		Standardized Coefficients Beta	t	Sig.
	Unstandardized Coefficients B	Std. Error			
(Constant)	.780	.173		4.514	.000
Networking Competency	.826	.045	.681	18.208	.000

a. Dependent Variable: Enterprise Performance

The findings show that networking competency significantly influences enterprise performance among women entrepreneurs in Kenya by fostering partnerships, diverse networks, and new business opportunities. The results align with existing studies (e.g., Wanambisi et al., 2023; Kariuki, 2015; Gathungu et al., 2014) and support Ronald Burt's network theory, which underscores the value of social connections in accessing resources and driving growth. Networking enables entrepreneurs to build social capital, access funding, gather industry insights, and form strategic alliances, ultimately enhancing business sustainability, competitiveness, and performance (Jones & Li, 2022; Wang et al., 2023; Kimani & Mwangi, 2024).

CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In examining the impact of networking on women-led enterprises, both qualitative and quantitative findings consistently demonstrate its substantial influence on business performance. Thematic analysis revealed that Kenyan women entrepreneurs actively pursue strategic partnerships and cultivate diverse networks to unlock new opportunities and enhance business outcomes. Engagements with suppliers and investors contribute not only to increased sales but also to improved product quality, cost efficiency through bulk purchasing and preferential sourcing, as well as heightened brand visibility and customer retention. Furthermore, network diversity exposes entrepreneurs to innovative ideas, broadens market reach, and facilitates access to expert consultation and support.

These qualitative insights are strongly supported by empirical data from recent regional studies. For instance, a study in Tharaka-Nithi County involving 279 women-owned enterprises reported a strong positive correlation between networking competency and enterprise growth ($r = 0.711$, $p < .001$), affirming the critical role of networking in business expansion (Karimi & Nyang'au, 2023). Similarly, among 633 manufacturing SMEs recovering from the COVID-19 pandemic, regression analysis indicated that a one-unit increase in networking led to a 0.409-unit rise in performance ($\beta = .373$, $p < .001$; $F(1,632) = 102.384$), underscoring a significant association between networking engagement and improved business outcomes (Njoora et al., 2024). Another study on 271 small event management firms in Eldoret found that network capability accounted for 86% of the variance in enterprise performance ($\beta = .86$, $p < .001$), highlighting the critical importance of networking aptitude (Cheptepkeny Korir, 2022). In addition, research focusing on members of the Kenya Association of Women Business Owners reported strong correlations between enterprise performance and both network structure ($r = .748$, $p < .001$) and relationship quality ($r = .821$, $p < .001$), further emphasizing the importance of well-organized and relationally deep networks (Kariuki, 2022).

Collectively, these findings reject the null hypothesis and confirm that active, strategic networking significantly enhances business performance indicators such as sales growth, operational efficiency, and market presence. However, it is important to note that some studies, such as those based in Kiambu County, observed limited impacts from isolated networking approaches like reliance solely on social media or informal referrals. This suggests that the effectiveness of networking strategies depends on their structure, diversity, and intentional relationship-building efforts.

In conclusion, networking emerges as a vital enabler of enterprise performance for women entrepreneurs.

Strategic engagement in multifaceted and well-structured networking initiatives facilitates access to markets, high-quality inputs, financial resources, mentorship, and industry insights. To maximize these benefits, it is recommended that policymakers and development stakeholders invest in strengthening networking infrastructure—such as peer groups, trade expos, business forums, and mentorship platforms—while equipping women entrepreneurs with the necessary skills and support to build and sustain effective business networks.

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