Uncovering the Motives and Essentials of Nascent Women Entrepreneurs

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The aim of this article is to delve into women entrepreneurs' motivations and perceptions of what is needed to achieve entrepreneurial success. Through semi-structured interviews, we found that most participants reported multiple reasons for wanting to be an entrepreneur; these motives were categorized as external and internal. Results also show what attributes and actions these women believe are critical to success. Our study contributes to the field by employing a qualitative design that uncovered the richness and diversity of women's experiences in becoming business owners. The findings have implications for policymakers and organizations seeking to advance women entrepreneurship.

Keywords: Women Entrepreneur Motivations, Nascent Women Entrepreneurs

INTRODUCTION

Entrepreneurial activity has rebounded since Covid-19 has diminished, with the rate of nascent entrepreneurs at 36% in 2021, an increase of five percent over 2019 (Fairlie, 2022). Further, early data suggests a surge of women-owned businesses emerging from the pandemic (Fairlie, 2022). This is similar to what occurred after the 2008 recession, when female entrepreneurship exploded in record numbers, helping to fuel economic recovery (Carter, 2021; Zalis, 2021). A rise in female entrepreneurship does more than drive economic expansion, as women-created businesses can also fuel social change (Zalis, 2021).

Understanding what sparks the pursuit of entrepreneurship offers information to organizations and policymakers that provide support, training, and services to help business owners succeed (Ademokun & Ajayi, 2012; Bryant et al., 2012; Donnellon et al., 2014). However, motivation, defined as "the underlying attitudes and goals that give rise to action" (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 54), is a complex phenomenon. Researchers agree that understanding entrepreneurial motivation is critically important for explaining entrepreneurial behavior and suggest more research is needed (Carsrud & Brännback, 2011; Shane et al.,

2003). Given that entrepreneurship can be an equalizer across demographic groups, scholars have repeatedly called for future studies on the specificities of entrepreneurship led by women (Dempsey & Jennings, 2014; Nassif et al., 2016).

Entrepreneurship studies of women point to factors such as work-family balance (Adkins et al., 2013; Harvey, 2005; McGowan et al., 2012), flexibility (Ahmad, 2011; DeMartino & Barbato, 2003; Hughes, 2006), and autonomy (Ahmad, 2011; Hughes, 2006; Kirkwood, 2009) as motivators for pursuing their business ventures. Recent research is illuminating new information about women's entrepreneurial motivations, mainly those driven "to make a profound contribution to society" (Rey-Martí et al., 2016, p. 1651). These studies show that women business owners are more likely to pursue social missions than their male counterparts (Darnihamedani & Terjesen, 2020). For instance, women have created businesses to address unmet societal needs and make a difference in their local communities (Solesvik et al., 2019). In a study of satisfaction among women social entrepreneurs, Humbert and Roomi (2018) discovered that entrepreneurs with prosocial motives felt successful in achieving their business' mission, even when they did not realize economic success (p. 321). Other scholars have sought to understand the role of compassion (Miller et al., 2012) and the power of adverse childhood experiences (Cohen & Katz, 2016) in new venture creation by socially conscious women.

This qualitative phenomenological study aims to describe the motivations, perceptions, and beliefs of women entrepreneurs. Our study answers the call by Solesvik, Iakovleva, and Trifilova (2019) to investigate the motivations of women entrepreneurs operating in more developed economies. Furthermore, qualitative research has become more prevalent in the study of women's entrepreneurship due to its ability to illuminate unique and subtle elements that could remain undetected in a quantitative study (Brush & Cooper, 2012). We use qualitative methods to learn valuable contextual details about women entrepreneurs' reasons for starting or joining a new venture. This study's central phenomenon was investigated through the following research questions:

1. How do women describe what led them toward entrepreneurship?
2. What are women entrepreneurs' perceptions of what is needed to achieve entrepreneurial success?

The article that follows has been organized into five sections. We begin with a brief review of the literature on women's motivations for pursuing entrepreneurship. Next, we discuss the research methods and study design employed. This is followed by our findings, discussion, and conclusion.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholars agree that studying entrepreneurial motivation is vital to understanding entrepreneurial behavior because motivational factors are a precursor to action (Carsrud & Brännback, 2011; Shane et al., 2003). In other words, entrepreneurs' motivations drive them to progress in their effort to establish a new business (Haynie et al., 2010). Shane et al. (2003) make the case that motivations influence one's decision to become an entrepreneur, pursue opportunities, and navigate the complex entrepreneurial process. Karp (2006) even suggests that further inquiry into the "interior condition" from which entrepreneurial actions originate (e.g., motivation, commitment, emotions) is paramount to advancing the field of entrepreneurship (p. 294).

Carsrud and Brännback (2011) presented a broad overview of motivation research and various models used to explain reasons for new business creation, which are rooted in psychology and economics. Labeling motives as either "pull" or "push" is a standard classification system. Commonly reported reasons that pull individuals toward entrepreneurship include the desire for independence, money, and the ability to recognize a good business opportunity (Hughes, 2006; Kirkwood, 2009). Alternatively, push factors are personal or external reasons often perceived as negative (Kirkwood, 2009). Job-related push factors include job loss, dissatisfaction with employment, and inability to find suitable employment (Hughes, 2006). Some researchers recommend categorizing motivational factors as intrinsic, extrinsic, or both. Whereas intrinsic motivation comes from within the individual and their personal interest, extrinsic motivation looks externally for incentive or reward (Belchior & Lyons, 2022; Carsrud & Brännback, 2011).

In the late 1970s, researchers started investigating the phenomenon of women's entrepreneurship as distinct from the dominant male experience. However, for numerous years an assumption persisted that male and female entrepreneurs were so similar that separate studies were not warranted (Bruni et al., 2004; Brush, 1992). This assumption was challenged in the 1990s when conferences dedicated to women entrepreneurs emerged, and scholarly journals began to call for research in this area (Yadav & Unni, 2016).

As the new century dawned, scholars began to parse data by male and female sub-domains to examine whether motivations for launching a new business differed; findings have been mixed. In their study of U.S. entrepreneurs, Carter et al. (2003) hypothesized that women and men respond differently when asked to score their reasons for starting a business, which their findings supported. Results showed small but statistically significant differences between these gender groups, with men rating financial success and innovation higher than women. Using average (weighted) scores, women nascent entrepreneurs indicated that innovation, financial success, and self-realization were the most important reasons for starting a business. Both groups placed independence as the primary motivator, followed by financial success.

Hughes (2006), on the other hand, found differences among a nationally representative sample of nearly 4,000 Canadian women and men business owners. Data showed that desires for independence, control, and money were significantly higher among men (42%) than women (24%). The author, who analyzed respondents' main reason they became self-employed, also reported a statistically significant difference in the number of "work-family" factors identified by women (31.9%) compared to their male counterparts. This category includes work-family balance, flexible hours, and work-from-home. Seeking challenge, creativity, success, and money, along with joining a family business and the fit/nature of the job, were also selected as primary reasons for self-employment (Hughes, 2006).

While positivist approaches in motivational research by gender dominate, some scholars have investigated entrepreneurial motivation using qualitative methods. Kirkwood (2009), for example, used a gender comparative method to study the push and pull motives that men and women gave for starting a business in New Zealand. Kirkwood conducted semi-structured interviews with 75 entrepreneurs, 28 of whom were women. Independence emerged as the top motivator for entrepreneurship across all participants, adding support to Carter et al.'s (2003) findings. Money, challenge/achievement, opportunity, and lifestyle were the other pull motivators that Kirkwood (2009) found. Push reasons were job dissatisfaction, assistance from an employer to start a business, workplace changes, and child-focused reasons. Both men and women left their jobs to become entrepreneurs due to dissatisfaction; however, aligning with prior research (Kirkwood, 2009), the proportion of men who were disgruntled was higher than women. In contrast, female study participants were more likely to discuss how children impacted their entrepreneurial activities, such as having flexibility and being more present as a caregiver. Men who said children were a factor in choosing entrepreneurship focused on being a financial provider and creating a stable home (Kirkwood, 2009).

A Finnish study collected narratives from women business owners that described their experiences and perceptions of entrepreneurship (Kyrö, 2009). Autonomy surfaced as the primary driver, and self-fulfillment was sought over financial gain. This supports prior research (Carter et al., 2003; Kirkwood, 2009) on why women pursue entrepreneurship. Likewise, the need for flexibility, primarily due to family commitment, confirmed findings from prior studies (Hughes, 2006; Kirkwood, 2009). Women in the study also articulated their motivations to "create something of their own" and fulfill a core need to "create one's own reality" (Kyrö, 2009 p. 408).Another unique finding from these narratives was participants' thoughts about societal impact.

Over the last several decades, researchers have published hundreds of scholarly books and articles that examine gender and entrepreneurship (Link & Strong, 2016). However, there is a lack of consensus around motivational factors and a call for a continued effort to produce rich and robust women entrepreneurship studies that are highly contextualized, uncover the diversity of women's experiences, and adopt innovative methodologies (Hughes et al., 2012; Henry et al., 2016). Murnieks et al. (2020) reviewed articles with motivation as the central phenomenon published over three decades. The authors explained that while the corpus has improved our knowledge of the reasons individuals start and operate businesses, they called for "further elaboration" to address "uneven" and "fragmented" scholarship (Murnieks et al., 2020, p. 139).

Using a constructivist approach, this study will explore what propelled women to pursue entrepreneurship through their own descriptions of the incidents that led them there. We subscribe to Karp's (2006) view that entrepreneurial opportunities are 'created' in the minds and hearts of individuals. Hence, this study focuses on external and internal drivers and what these entrepreneurs believe are needed to succeed.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The current study was designed to capture nascent women entrepreneurs' rich, diverse experiences. We used qualitative methods, specifically phenomenology, because it aligned with our goal to describe what women experienced and how they experienced entrepreneurship (Tomaszewski et al., 2020). Phenomenological researchers seek to identify commonalities among participants' lived experiences to get to the core or universal essence of the central phenomena being studied (Creswell, 2013). While our interviews enabled us to discover what drew them toward the path of entrepreneurship, we also explored how their lived experiences have shaped their perceptions of what is required to be an entrepreneur.

Phenomenological researchers are called on to suspend their "past knowledge and experience to understand a phenomenon at a deeper level" (Creswell, 2013, p. 331). The research team embraced this technique, known as "bracketing," and took steps to identify and set aside ideas so we could focus on our participants' experiences (Tomaszewski et al., 2020). The research team included two academic researchers studying entrepreneurship for over a decade, a scholar-practitioner invested in studying underrepresented groups, and a doctoral student.

Study Participants

Our phenomenon of interest, women entrepreneurs' experiences, fits with Moustakas' (1994) direction for selecting a research problem that can be more deeply understood by studying the shared experiences of multiple people. For the current study, participants are women who completed a 10-week university-based entrepreneurial training program and are at various stages of business development. These commonalities provide additional dimensions of the entrepreneur experience central to this inquiry.

Using purposive sampling, the research team contacted alumni who completed a training program for entrepreneurs between Spring 2019 and Spring 2021. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 13 women entrepreneurs, which were analyzed for the current investigation. The sample size follows expert recommendations of obtaining a heterogeneous group of 10 to 15 individuals who have all experienced the same phenomenon (Creswell, 2013, p. 78). Information about study participants and their businesses is presented in Table 1.

TABLE 1
STUDY PARTICIPANTS

Pseudonym	Case	Course	Description of Business/Venture	Web Presence	Business/Venture Type
Alice	1	Fall 2019	Asymmetric bra for use with a prosthetic breast	No	Invention
Belinda	2	Fall 2020	Technology solution for identifying social services	Yes	Technology Startup
Carla	3	Spring 2021	Catering and packaged Indian spices and ingredients	Yes	Small Business
Dory	4	Fall 2020	Technology oriented toward women's health	Yes	Technology Startup
Edith	5	Spring 2019	Educational products that use music and movement	Yes	Small Business
Fern	6	Spring 2021	Residential and commercial cleaning	No	Small Business
Gilda	7	Fall 2020	Small mediation firm that settles disputes between parties	No	Small Business
Henny	8	Spring 2021	Public relations, communications, and strategy firm	No	Small Business
Iris	9	Spring 2019	New trading platform for commercial agriculture	Yes	Technology Startup
Jean	10	Fall 2019	Clothing boutique in local mall and online	Yes	Small Business
Kay	11	Spring 2020	Creating community-based solutions to climate change	Yes	Social Entrepreneur
Laticia	12	Spring 2021	Mobile hair salon business	Yes	Small Business
Vanessa	13	Spring 2020	Sells tea blends/varieties online	Yes	Small Business

Data Analysis

We followed Creswell's (2013) recommendations for data analysis in phenomenology, which are broad and drawn from Moustakas (1994). First, we reviewed interview transcripts/summaries and noted participants' statements that described how they experienced entrepreneurship (Creswell, 2013). We used descriptive coding to complete the first round of transcript reviews. This strategy involves applying labels and phrases to sections of text, which becomes an "inventory of topics" (Saldaña, 2021). At times, we generated labels using respondents' words, a technique called InVivo coding. For the subsequent review, we used attribute coding to organize the individual cases (e.g., background, prior experiences) and their businesses (e.g., phase of business, plans). During this second round, we also used value coding to identify when participants discussed their beliefs, values, or attitudes (Saldaña, 2021).

We used themes and clusters to explore key aspects of the central phenomenon. Steps were taken to summarize (1) participants' experiences, considered "textual description," and (2) contextual and environmental influences, known as "structural description" (Creswell, 2013). We also used these elements to create several cross-case data displays, which were used to identify patterns and relationships between variables (Miles et al., 2014). Additional coding occurred once connections and themes were identified, such as the relationship between motivations and seminal experiences.

RESULTS

The Motives: Incidents Sparking Entrepreneurship

Our first question explored why study participants decided to become entrepreneurs. We asked: "What incident sparked your thinking about pursuing entrepreneurship?" For this study, we are using the definition of incident presented by Nassif et al. (2016): "an incident is an observable human activity that is sufficiently complex to enable inferences regarding the person involved in the activity" (p. 216). This definition was not shared with participants.

Interview data revealed that most of the women interviewed had multiple motivations for wanting to be an entrepreneur. Participants' reasons were categorized as either *external* (from an outside force) or *internal* (coming from within the person).

External Motivations

The most noted external drivers included having a formative experience and meeting community or societal needs. To a lesser degree, receiving encouragement and seeking financial rewards emerged (see Table 2).

Formative Incidents. Nearly half of the women interviewed described specific experiences and interactions that propelled them toward entrepreneurship. Whether it was a meaningful encounter or an unanticipated change in employment, these pivotal events were motivating factors in starting their new venture.

Critical Encounters. Alice was the caregiver for her sister, who had breast cancer when she came up with her big idea and began her entrepreneurial journey. Her sister had difficulty finding a bra that fit and didn't hurt. Alice wanted to improve the lives of others, like her sister, with an improved product—an asymmetric bra for use with a prosthetic breast. Alice explained:

> Seeing [my sister's] experience, I decided women needed more updated prosthetic wear.
> [I] invented this prosthetic wear to get blueprinted and patented. My family and friends
> said don't just sell it but start a business. I thought about it and said I would give it a try.

Dory worked full-time for a university-based entrepreneurship center when she was invited to join a technology startup producing unique feminine hygiene products. Her pivotal experience was having the chance to meet and work with the product inventor and eventually join the business. Iris also had a positive encounter that sparked her entrepreneurial ambitions. She was working as a chief operating officer of a data science firm when she received a call from a trusted peer who discussed the formation of a technology startup and decided to "take the plunge."

A negative employment experience was important for Gilda's decision to start a small mediation firm that settles disputes between parties. A coworker falsely accused her, and although she met with human resources, she was "misrepresented and then reprimanded without any consideration of the facts." One week after she was disciplined, she had a "chance meeting" with a friend who was a trained mediator. Her friend explained how mediation was an alternative to going to court. Gilda described how this critical encounter was motivational, especially since she had no prior desire to become an entrepreneur:

> From that point forward, I studied all I could about mediation. I became certified to be
> placed in the local administration offices of the courts to mediate cases. I never before
> wanted to be an entrepreneur. Once I saw my friend, it clicked.

Unexpected Change With Employment. Belinda was working for a Fortune 500 company as an executive assistant before she decided to start her own business. She loved her career and was doing well when she received notice that the company was moving her division out of the U.S. Belinda had two small children at the time and was recently divorced. Hence, she declined the company's offer to relocate.

Reflecting on that time, she said "if I can make this company millions of dollars, I'm sure I can make myself a million."

Fern was an instructor for over four years at a university in Angola and wanted to succeed "even though Angola was against women being professionals." Despite being popular with students, she found her job eliminated because she was outspoken and there was "lots of corruption." At that point, Fern promised herself that she would never be in that position again. She always dreamed of being an entrepreneur and wanted to build her project to help women and develop her financial freedom. Today, Fern lives in the U.S. and operates a residential and commercial cleaning business.

Addressing Community Needs. Nearly half of the respondents discussed how they were inspired to start a business in response to social needs. These individuals seek opportunities to make money while providing useful products and services. Although their core push was to help the community, several women also explained how their personal experiences influenced their business decisions. Laticia and Kay shared the experience of operating nonprofit organizations connected to their entrepreneurial opportunities.

Creating Safe Spaces. Vanessa explained that she opened a physical tea cafe to provide a "sober, social space" for customers. She also explained that her experience as a Black LGBTQ+ woman influenced her decision to pursue and establish a business that could meet the needs of other people who identify as LGBTQ+ and sober.

Laticia, who is creating a mobile hair salon business, explained that using a recreational vehicle (RV) makes it easier for individuals to access hair services. The mobile RV set-up will enable her to help people in recovery prepare for jobs, as well as individuals who are blind and disabled. Laticia has prior experience working with the community through a nonprofit that serves women and teens in recovery from substance abuse.

Helping Women and Families. Belinda describes herself as "a serial entrepreneur with a deep social mission." Her newest venture was a technology startup that would make it easier for individuals to access social services via a phone app. She explained that her business ideas were born out of a need she had as a young woman and mother: "If I've dealt with this issue, if I needed assistance in this area, I know there's somebody else who needs it." Similarly, Dory's excitement about her company, which sells a unique feminine hygiene product, stems from a belief that it will benefit women's health.

Supporting Children. Before Edith started selling educational materials for kids, she was a substitute teacher who discovered she could "use music and movement to help learning." When asked to explain why she chose to develop these products, she explained: "I knew first-hand the pain, and I saw the behavior issues and kids needed more than teachers standing and lecturing … You need to cater to their learning style. Kids do not like to sit still."

Having Broad Impact. Iris explained the technology she is helping to bring to fruition "has the opportunity to change the way the world works." Meanwhile, Kay's nonprofit organization helps youth find ways to be more successful in school and nurture their creativity and analytics. Kay established a corporation so she could apply for a small business grant in support of her goal to bring products to market that "have a social cause and purpose."

Encouragement. Three study participants described the positive impact others had on their decision. Carla and Fern described their friends' encouragement to move their business venture forward. Meanwhile, Alice was propelled forward to pursue her dream by an audience member's positive response when she pitched her invention.

Financial Gain. Financial gain was a driver for three participants. Jean was seeking "financial freedom" when she opened a clothing boutique in a local mall, and Edith was equally straightforward: "I have always had a spirit about me where I wanted to make money." Vanessa's market research, particularly "projected growth in the tea industry," was another motivating factor in her decision to open a tea store.

TABLE 2
EXTERNAL MOTIVATIONAL FACTORS

Case #		Formative Incident	Community Need	Encouraged	Financial
1	Alice	X		X	
2	Belinda	X	X		
3	Carla			X	
4	Dory	X	X		
5	Edith		X		X
6	Fern	X		X	
7	Gilda	X			
8	Henny				
9	Iris	X			
10	Jean				X
11	Kay		X		
12	Laticia		X		
13	Vanessa		X		X

Internal Motivations

Four themes emerged in women's responses to what sparked their interest in entrepreneurship and their businesses: passion, talents, desire to lead, and family influence. Each theme was mentioned by three participants; however, six of the 13 interviewees did not describe an internal motivational factor. Again, some interviewees noted more than one internal driver (see Table 3).

Passion. Carla was passionate about cooking, Jean "always loved fashion," and Kay explained that her "passion for climate change" was a driver for her business ventures. Kay's statement underscores her belief that passion is essential for starting a business: "Find something you have a passion for and make a business out of that."

Talents. When someone was confident in their abilities and recognized their talents, they were motivated to pursue a business in that sector. For instance, Laticia was confident in her abilities as a hairdresser, Carla knew she was a talented cook, and Fern knew how to clean properly with environmentally friendly products. Henny, an Air Force veteran, had 30 years of experience in public relations and marketing. She resigned from a full-time job to start a PR and strategy firm because she wanted to achieve her "potential." Interestingly, she first thought about starting a public relations firm in college and recognized communication as her "natural talent."

Desire to Lead. Several study participants were drawn toward being leaders. Carla wanted to own a business because she could not "work under anyone." Kay's spark to be an entrepreneur came from a desire to be in charge. She explained, "You have to have the authority and empowerment to do it. You can't be asking persons all along the way for permission." Iris was motivated to join a company as CEO because it would put her in an influential position. She said, "I want to get to the heart of changing things, and the closer you are to the origin, the more influence you have making that change without the bureaucracy."

Family Background. Carla, who sells packaged Indian spice blends and ingredients, said being an entrepreneur was in her "genes" and connected to her father's influence as a lifelong entrepreneur. Laticia learned how to do hair at a young age from her great aunt, who was a hairdresser, and her mom. Now, she was turning that skill into a business. Even though her business interests were different, Fern explained that her drive to be an entrepreneur was ignited as a child helping her mom sell food at a public market and her aunt who sold clothes.

Job Dissatisfaction. Henny decided to quit her job at a nonprofit organization because she felt "trapped writing grants." She recognized that to achieve her dreams, she needed to resign and start her own business.

TABLE 3
INTERNAL MOTIVATIONAL FACTORS

Case #		Passion	Talent	Desire to Lead	Family Background	Job Dissatisfaction
1	Alice					
2	Belinda					
3	Carla	X	X	X	X	
4	Dory					
5	Edith					
6	Fern		X		X	
7	Gilda					
8	Henny		X			X
9	Iris			X		
10	Jean	X				
11	Kay	X		X		
12	Laticia		X		X	
13	Vanessa					

The Essentials: Elements Critical to Entrepreneurial Success

Our second question allowed us to explore the characteristics, skills, strategies, and knowledge participants perceived as important based on their experiences. Participants provided feedback across each of the dimensions; however, they seemed most comfortable discussing key qualities and strategies. That is, we found a greater number and depth within these two categories compared to responses about essential skills or knowledge.

Characteristics

Participants described dozens of characteristics that were critical to their entrepreneurial journey, which were compiled and then grouped into categories. Eight of 13 respondents named attributes related to *effort/commitment*, making it the most salient among interviewees. This category included the following: discipline, sacrifice, consistency, drive, effort, perseverance, and determination. When someone exhibits these traits and behaviors, it shows their commitment to their new venture. A sample of characteristics and quotes that comprise the effort/commitment category follows.

- *Consistency*: "I would say consistency. You have to show up every single day. Like I don't work a nine to five . . . And if I want to see a measure of success, I'm going to have to give that time to it." (Belinda)
- *Sacrifice*: "I would say how do you define entrepreneur and the role you are willing to play and what you are willing to sacrifice. There is a sacrifice. There is a lot of time involved. Can you give up this time? Is it worth it to you?" (Alice)
- *Drive*: "I would say that you have to have a lot of drive and the ability to be constantly working on something so you can push it forward and so that it doesn't become stagnant. . . It's kind of constant work. That's probably the number one thing is just constantly being able to work on something in the face of setbacks." (Dory)

- *Perseverance*: "One of the traits is not being willing to quit. Perseverance is important because you will have adversity. There are endpoints or walk away points, but you still have to preserve to get to a successful outcome." (Iris)

The importance of having *passion* also came up in this section of the interview. Five respondents agreed that having passion was important to entrepreneurial success. Other attributes mentioned by at least two people discussed were *self-sufficiency*, *resilience*, *openness/flexibility*, *authenticity*, and *positivity*. Illustrative quotes are presented below.

- *Passion:* "I believe you have to have great passion. That is the only thing that is going to keep you when things are cracking. You can learn what you don't know. What makes the difference is the passion. Even if you are lacking some knowledge or skill over here, you can learn those things, but you can't pay for passion. . . I am fueled by passion for what I am trying to do." (Gilda)
- *Self-sufficiency:* "It is all going to be new ground, it's all novel. If you are starting a business that has never really been done before, then you have to figure it all out for yourself." (Dory)
- *Resilience*: "Being resilient, I feel like, has been the thing that's served me the best. I've taken a licking [and] I keep on ticking." (Belinda)
- *Openness/Flexibility*: "Definitely being open to criticism and feedback and being open to pivoting. Being very flexible, being accommodating." (Vanessa)
- *Authenticity*: "Stay true to who you are." (Jenn)
- *Positivity*: "Positivity is important and being, having a 'we can' attitude." (Iris)

Skills

Eight respondents outlined specific skills they see as critical for entrepreneurs, which are presented in four categories. *Communication* and *interpersonal skills* were mentioned most by study participants. *Communication* was broadly defined by one participant as the ability to explain things "at the right level for the right audience," which is essential when presenting to customers, investors, or other stakeholders. Respondents also valued *interpersonal skills* such as "having people skills" and "being very personable." Iris' definition of being good with people included the ability to "navigate different personalities" and "being less emotional about disagreements so that you can critically evaluate things."

Team building ability was cited by three women. Kay described this as having "the ability to inspire others on the team and to value others and make them feel empowered and appreciated." *Organizational skills,* identified by two people, included the ability to set priorities and time management. One person mentioned project management, which is an asset in most business sectors. Iris talked about the importance of product development, navigating uncertainty, and managing risk, which are higher-level skills.

Strategies

Throughout their interviews, respondents discussed strategies and best practices they viewed as valuable to success. These were classified thematically as activities related to *business leadership*, *connecting with others*, and *continuous learning*. Several women discussed strategies that were unique or their particular venture.

Business Leadership. Eight women described essential strategies for someone involved in getting a new venture established, which were: have a vision, know your why, and focus on customers.

- *Having a vision* helps an entrepreneur maintain focus and engage supporters: "Having a vision of what change you are trying to create and where you want to get is important," according to Kay.
- *Focusing on customers* includes knowing "who you are serving" and "how to get them, attract them, and keep them." Jenn and Kay agreed that understanding customer needs and satisfaction was crucial.

- *Knowing your why* is vital, according to Belinda: "I know my why. I know why I do what I do. I know who I'm doing it for. So if you keep that in the forefront of your mind, you'll have success and continuity in your business."

Connecting with Others. Eight women stated that connecting with other entrepreneurs and experts was a strategy critical to entrepreneurial success. Participants talked about formal and informal networking, mentoring, and coaching. Laticia explained that this means "being unafraid to approach people." One benefit, according to Edith, is "getting advice on what to do and not do." Belinda, who has experience working with business mentors, suggested: "Make sure that you have someone in your life that mirrors a journey that you would like to either see, mimic, or align yourself with." Vanessa, who identified as a Black, LGBTQ+ business owner, said her goal was to find entrepreneurs "who share the same identities." She sought these connections with others to "talk about all the different gatekeeping measures that are in like obtaining funding and looking for real estate, things like that."

Continuous Learning. Another best practice integral to six entrepreneurs in this study was seeking out opportunities to continue learning. Some women were more general and mentioned doing research or "homework," while others gave examples the types of workshops they attended. Belinda called herself a "forever learner" to guard against getting "stagnant" as a business owner. Fern pointed out the need to have the right mindset to learn ("an open mind") and ask questions.

Unique Strategies. Some strategies were more particular because of the phase or focus of an individual's business. These strategies offered insight into what makes each entrepreneur unique. For example, two women suggested that "working a little each day" was necessary to get a new venture up and running even while working full-time. Henny described professional activities that would help grow a business. Her suggestions were to seize opportunities to tell what you are doing, always be selling, and make videos to improve professionalism. Kay's strategy focused on leveraging resources, especially technology, to improve operational effectiveness. Iris introduced several advanced strategies that she used to manage a team responsible for product development. These included having regular and purposeful meetings with subgroups, clarifying expectations for team members, using an "agile process" to track progress, and having systems that support accountability.

Knowledge

Approximately half of the women interviewed said that a foundation of general business knowledge was essential, primarily related to financial matters. Respondents named fiscal management, accounting, projections, costs, and banking. Other areas that participants wanted to understand were legal matters, paying taxes, and marketing. Kay explained how her lack of understanding in these areas was detrimental: "Those are huge roadblocks to me. They keep me from having the confidence to move forward. They make me hesitant." From a different perspective, a few women focused on the importance of discipline-specific knowledge or "having a strong knowledge of the field you are going into."

DISCUSSION

Our study contributes to the scholarly discussion by employing a qualitative design to uncover the richness and diversity of women's experiences as business owners, which has been missing from the literature (Henry et al., 2016; Hughes et al., 2012). How women entrepreneurs in this study described what propelled them towards entrepreneurship and what was essential to success gave us the chance to construct new ways of thinking about women's entrepreneurial journeys.

Although each story was unique, we identified commonalities in the *external* and *internal* drivers of our participants. This delineation relates to whether the motivation was situated within the person or external to the person. To illustrate, if someone wants to start a business that addresses a particular community need is considered external because the need itself is external. In contrast, if someone begins a catering business because they are a talented cook, that is an internal motivation because the talent exists within the entrepreneur. From extant literature, the terms that relate most closely to our categories are extrinsic and intrinsic motivation. Extrinsic means seeking a reward or incentive that is external, and

intrinsic means finding reward internally (Murnieks et al., 2020). However, being driven to start a business because of enticements did not fit our data analysis.

Using a qualitative approach enabled us to portray the complexity of women's entrepreneurial motivations. Women in this study gave multiple reasons for starting a business, as shown in Tables 2 and 3. Our participants reported a mix of external and internal factors. However, some only reported external motivations. The two most noted external drivers were connected to formative incidents and addressing community needs. Many of the women interviewed described specific events that were pivotal in their experience of becoming an entrepreneur, which we labeled as *formative incidents* and presented as either *critical encounters* or *unexpected changes with employment*. Individuals who had critical encounters were moved to pursue new opportunities after an interaction, confirming Bauer's (2011) finding that formative personal experiences inspire business ventures. Our research also confirms Hughes (2006) finding that external incidents (i.e., job loss) can 'force' women into entrepreneurship. Our next major external driver was a desire to *address community needs*, from helping marginalized citizens to providing products and services for women and children. This findings supports Jean and Forbes (2012) finding in a study about 'mompreneurs' who were motivated by the desire to help others. These results illustrate how several influences come together to inspire someone to serve their community through entrepreneurship and build on recent qualitative studies that found women entrepreneurs are driven to make meaningful social contributions (Au et al., 2021; Humbert & Roomi, 2018; Solesvik et al., 2019). Similar to extant literature, *internal motivations* such as passion, talents, desire to lead, family background, and job dissatisfaction surfaced amongst this group of entrepreneurs.

Participants also provided perspectives of what it takes to be an entrepreneur, our study's second aim. They were asked to reflect on what personal and professional characteristics were essential to their business development process. Effort, determination, and commitment were named most frequently. This finding lends additional support to other studies that identified effort and persistence as important for entrepreneurship (Gielnik et al., 2015; Karp, 2006). Other core traits cited – resilience, openness/flexibility, positivity, and authenticity – are characteristics associated with effective leadership (Arda et al., 2016; Zehir & Narcikara, 2016).

While study participants were adept at describing attributes, they were less inclined to discuss skills critical for entrepreneurial success. There were four categories of skill that emerged from the data. Communication and interpersonal skills were named most frequently, but team building, and organizational skills were also identified. How our participants talked about skills also varied. Although some respondents spoke in more general terms about the importance of "communication" and "organization," others provided more detail about why a skill was vital—for instance, being able to create an effective team.

In general, entrepreneurs in this study were more comfortable discussing strategies, which are action- and results-oriented, compared with knowledge, which is more conceptual and abstract. When asked what knowledge base is needed to be successful, most responses were broad and related to financial matters. Some remarked on deficits in their understanding, and others concentrated on the knowledge base needed to run a business in a particular sector. In contrast, these entrepreneurs offered many strategies and best practices that clustered under three main topics: business leadership, connecting with others, and continuous learning. Study participants provided valuable insight into what it takes to navigate new business creation and showed their commitment to growing as entrepreneurs, seeking opportunities to learn, and building their professional networks.

CONCLUSION

This study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of what leads women toward the entrepreneurship journey. It also provides the perspectives from these women on 'what it takes to be a business owner.' The findings have implications for policymakers and organizations seeking to advance women entrepreneurship. By understanding that there are external and internal reasons driving women toward this pursuit, these organizations can improve how they position their educational programs to attract

this audience. Furthermore, we have identified what women believe are essential to successfully pursuing entrepreneurship, suggesting the types of training content that must be included in these offerings.

Future research could extend the understanding of women entrepreneurs by delving deeper into the emotions surrounding the internal and external motivational drivers. These types of rich qualitative studies are needed to advance the theoretical discussion around entrepreneurship that women lead. Furthermore, our work encourages a greater understanding of how women's entrepreneurial identity is formed. Donnellon and colleagues (2014) argue that entrepreneurial training must go further than teaching technical skills and encourage women to reflect on and share their experiences as business owners. Gordon et al. (2012) concurs as well, suggesting that there is a link between entrepreneurial reflection and learning.

There are several limitations to this research. It is important to acknowledge that the novice women entrepreneurs in our sample had completed an entrepreneurial training program. Hence, this sample is not representative of all women entrepreneurs. Future research on women entrepreneurs may consider a broader audience to reduce educational bias. Another limitation is the small sample, a recognizable downside to qualitative studies. We would argue the rich findings provided by in-depth interviews offset this limitation.

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