

Soft Skills and Entrepreneurship: A Gender-Neutral Perspective from an Italian Narrative Study

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[Abstract] This study explores the critical soft skills pertinent to entrepreneurial success among women, emphasizing the influence of gendered perception and barriers in the entrepreneurial landscape. This research argues for the emergent recognition of soft skills with such as limited access to resources, networks, and funding opportunities.

Based on a narrative research methodology, specifically the Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique (ZMET), the study engages with a diverse sample of male and female entrepreneurs to explore the nature and development of soft skills within a gendered context. Preliminary findings reveal collaboration, communication, adaptability, responsibility, and empathy as pivotal soft skills identified across genders, challenging traditional gender stereotypes in entrepreneurship. Moreover, the research elucidates three triggering paths by which these skills dynamically evolve, such as: organizational challenges, observational learning, and fostering individual skills. By framing soft skills as gender-neutral dynamic capabilities, the study contributes to advancing the discourse on gender in entrepreneurship, aiming to empower entrepreneurs through enhanced neutral-gendered skill dynamics.

[Keywords] Soft skills; entrepreneurship; gender; ZMET

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Introduction

The primary objective of this study is to identify the critical soft skills that contribute to entrepreneurial success among females. This focus is motivated by the persistent challenges women face in entrepreneurship. Context-related factors could generate gender-specific barriers (Thapa and Sarmah, 2024), i.e. greater difficulties in accessing credit (Talukdar, 2024), limited access to networks (Saluja, 2024), unfavorable social perceptions (Cardella et al., 2020) and other gender stereotypes (Heilman et al., 2024). Additional personal factors can influence females' perseverance in pursuing their professional goals, i.e. lower levels of self-esteem (Kirkwood, 2009) and higher fear of failure (Cardella et al., 2020), which can hinder their ability to pursue entrepreneurial ventures. The growing recognition of these problems is reflected in increased funding available for studies in this theme, as the one financing this current research (see our acknowledgements).

Literature Background and Research Questions

This research explores the role of soft skills among female entrepreneurs, shedding light on the gendered dimensions of entrepreneurial success. Entrepreneurship is often associated with technical competence and industry knowledge; however, the role of soft skills is increasingly recognized as vital to success (Almeida and Devedzic, 2022; Tem et al., 2023). Marin-Zapata et al. (2022) clarify the main competences and soft skills concepts and related theories, still recognizing though a lack of general consensus and stimulating further investigations. This study draws upon the dynamic capabilities theory to understand the role of soft skills in female entrepreneurship. Dynamic capabilities refer to a firm's ability to integrate, build, and reconfigure internal and external competencies to address rapidly changing environments (Teece et al, 1997; Ambrosini and Bowman, 2009; Leemann and Kanbach, 2022; Zhang et al., 2023). Recently, Pennetta et al. (2024) provide a unique semantic investigation on entrepreneurial abilities, arguing that dynamic entrepreneurial skills are those that can be acquired through experience and/or combined with genetic traits and capabilities are used or leverage skills within a specific context. The notion that soft skills can be cultivated actively through learning, observation, and practical experience underscores the importance of viewing entrepreneurial success as a dynamic process rather than a static trait.

By identifying the key genderless soft skills that can help to move beyond the limit of entrepreneurship stereotypes, this research aims to contribute to enhance those dynamic abilities needed for a more equitable and inclusive business landscape. While previous studies have explored gender differences in entrepreneurship (Čuić Tanković et al., 2023; Díaz-García and Jiménez-Moreno, 2009), there remains a gap in understanding how dynamic abilities and related skills could be enhanced to contribute to the success of female entrepreneurs.

By embracing a mixed-gender analysis, this research extends the dialogue about gender in entrepreneurship, pushing against the conventional narratives that often isolate women's issues. This perspective is to advance the gender debate, because “it is time to broaden the scope of gender capture, [...] which distorts the debate into the woman's problem” (Marlow and Martinez, 2018, p. 16). It poses a relevant doubt, sometimes linked to stereotypes, whether the entrepreneurs' soft skills have a gender. This open debate requires the analysis of soft skills as potential dynamic capabilities that may exhibit variability across gender, influenced by broader social contexts and individual experiences (Marlow and Martinez Dy, 2018). As such, our “gender free” research questions are the following:

RQ1. What are the relevant soft skills needed to overcome barriers in entrepreneurship?

RQ2. How can these soft skills be dynamically developed to support entrepreneurship?

Research Methodology

The study is part of a larger research design that included three research phases: (1) a structured literature review to identify research gaps and future directions; (2) a qualitative exploration of the problem with a sample of entrepreneurs; and (3) a dissemination phase to empower potential entrepreneurs' capabilities, irrespective of gender, for their intensive dynamic development. Ultimately, this work aims to provide actionable strategies for aspiring entrepreneurs, facilitating their empowerment and success in an increasingly competitive environment. This paper is reporting in particular the qualitative phase results of this research project, for which we adopted a narrative research approach, based on the Zaltman Metaphor Elicitation Technique (ZMET). The ZMET was chosen for this research due to its unique ability to delve into subconscious thoughts and emotions of the participants, according to the author, metaphors are essential units of thought (Zaltman and Coulter, 1995). Unlike traditional survey methods, the use of metaphoric images and visual storytelling allows to uncover deeper aspects of human behavior, such as underlying motivations and perceptions that drive entrepreneurial decisions. In particular, this technique allows evidence of personal evolution and change to be shown at different stages of the narrative.

Sample Selection

In order to facilitate a mixed-gender analysis, we included a sample with an equal representation of both genders. This decision was also made to address a literature gap, as previous research on female entrepreneurship often focused solely on female samples (Čuić Tanković et al., 2023). By including both male and female participants, this research provides a more comprehensive understanding any gender-specific characteristic in soft skill development and utilization. To mitigate potential geographical biases of soft skill perception (Almeida et al., 2022), the study focused on a limited geographical area: the province of Vicenza in northeastern Italy. Vicenza is a prominent industrial province known for its active entrepreneurial landscape, making it a suitable context for examining entrepreneurial dynamics. Participants were selected in collaboration with experts of Confartigianato Vicenza, the artisans' association of the area, based on their experience and willingness to share their insights. From an initial dataset comprising over 2,000 small businesses, the selection was refined to include only active members of Confartigianato Vicenza who occupy specific roles, such as sole administrators, legal representatives, chairpersons of the board of directors, and owners. To maintain a focused scope and depth of analysis, firms with fewer than 10 employees were excluded from the dataset. Based on the experts' advice, those entrepreneurs who have best demonstrated their entrepreneurial skills in the last three years (post covid) were selected; as such, 42 individuals from each gender, yielding a total of 84 participants (42 men and 42 women) has been invited to participate to our research. For the selected sample, we collected primary information such as: entrepreneur's name, gender, date of birth, company name, sector, demographic type, union group, geographic area, number of employees (at the end of 2023), and contact details (email and phone number). Ultimately, 13 entrepreneurs (equally divided between male and female participants) agreed to participate in in-depth interviews (sample description in Table 1).

Table 1. Sample Description

#	Participant's pseudonym	Gender	Age	No. of Employees (12/2023)	Industry
1	Ignazio	M	59	19	Electromechanical production
2	Francesca	F	57	14	Healthcare
3	Federico	M	84	13	Chemical and tanning
4	Leonardo Marco	F	51	18	Fashion

5	Michele	M	56	11	Food manufacturing
6	Luisa	F	58	17	Chemical and plastics
7	Mario	M	51	13	Construction supply
8	Meggie	F	54	12	Machinery
9	Valentino	M	54	11	Mechanical
10	Sara	F	52	23	Wellbeing & Beauty
11	Sonia	F	52	15	Chemical and plastics
12	Antonia	F	56	10	Wood and furniture

Data Collection and Analyses

Participants were contacted via email and subsequently by phone to schedule a voluntary, in-person interview. The email explained the research project, the purpose of the interview, and the methodology employed (ZMET). Participants were asked to select eight symbolic images representing the soft skills they believed they had developed most during their career and to print them, bringing them to the interview. Related questions and interview protocol is summarized in Table 2. Interviews are taken in Italian language (selected phrases have been translated for this contribution). Participants were highly encouraged to select images representing their core soft skills and to narrate significant experiences associated with these skills during in-depth, semi-structured interviews. The resulting visual collages, created using the ZMET methodology (Zaltman and Coulter, 1995), captured participants' thoughts, feelings, and motivations. Interviews were audio-recorded, and non-verbal cues were noted. Transcripts were supplemented with photographs of the final collages.

Table 2. Interview Protocol based on ZMET

0	Presentations
Warm up	Privacy authorization request Personal background
1	Can you tell me about a specific situation where you had to use one of these soft skills?
1	Storytelling
2	Is there a soft skill for which you were unable to find an image? Can you describe the image you had in mind?
2	Missing Images
3	If you were to rank the soft skills you have developed throughout your career, which ones would you put at the top of the list and why?
3	Ranking Activities
4	What are the similarities and differences between two soft skills that you consider fundamental compared to a third soft skill? How do these soft skills connect with each other and how do they differ? <i>(Participants are asked to select three images, two of which are similar to each other and different from the third)</i>
4	Elicitation Construction
5	Which image would you choose to represent the soft skills you have developed throughout your entrepreneurial career?
5	Most Representative Image
6	What image could represent the opposite of the soft skills you have developed?
6	Opposite Image

7 Sensory Images	How would you describe your soft skills in terms of other senses, such as taste or touch?
8 The Mental Map	Do you think the constructs you have created accurately represent your soft skills? If any important concepts are missing, what would they be and how would you connect them to the existing constructs?
9 The Summary Image	Can you create a summary image of your soft skills using the images you have selected? What does this summary image represent to you, and what does it reflect about your entrepreneurial abilities?
10 Closing Remarks	Future collaboration openings Thanks

Data analysis focused on identifying recurrent themes and metaphors, allowing in-depth qualitative coding and it involved a rigorous coding process, including open, axial, and selective coding. Two researchers independently coded the data using traditional hand-coding and NVivo software. This iterative process led to the development of a comprehensive semantic investigation (Pennetta et al, 2024) on entrepreneurial abilities and their dynamics. The analysis of metaphors and non-verbal cues provided insights into participants' personalities.

For instance, Sara (participant 10) visualized relationships as concentric circles, indicating a strong focus on interpersonal connections, strategic thinking, and a long-term perspective. By explaining her metaphorical choices, Sara was able to recount with some anecdotes her evolutionary path, the difficulties and successes she encountered in her time as an artisan entrepreneur. Figure 1 presents Sara's final collage. For each participant, metaphors were categorized into themes such as personal learning, professional responsibility, and interpersonal relationships. A more detailed analysis of these themes will be presented at the conference.

Figure 1. Illustrative collage with metaphoric images selected by participant #10 (Sara)



Results

The findings address the two primary research questions: “What are the relevant soft skills needed to overcome barriers in entrepreneurship”, and “How can these soft skills be dynamically developed to support entrepreneurship”.

Among the most recurring soft skills selected by the participants, collaboration, communication, adaptability, responsibility and empathy were mentioned in particular. These soft skills were not only mentioned several times by the different participants, but were also recounted in more detail and examples. Table 3 shows the number of respondents (females and males) that have cited these soft skills as critical to face entrepreneurship barriers. These results have been interpreted within a broader context that extended beyond gender differences, encompassing a more comprehensive discourse on the critical competencies for entrepreneurial success. Some participants in our sample seem to be more convinced on collaboration and communication skills, based on a relationship orientation to enhance with empathy (in general, emotional intelligence). On the same skills, some participants expressed collaboration and communication in association with competitiveness and responsibility.

Table 3. Soft skills recalled by participants

Soft skills	Number of participants (out of 12)
Collaboration and teamwork	9
Communication	8
Adaptability	6
Responsibility	6
Empathy	5

Data analysis and coding are still in progress, but our initial results confirm that the selected soft skills that are considered crucial for successful entrepreneurship are common to all participants. As such, no peculiar difference is emerged between genders: it is the way in which these soft skills are implemented that may vary according to the different personalities of the individuals. Interpreting the different stories, it became clear that there are some gender differences in the more feminine or more masculine personality traits of individuals but that this is not directly related to sexual gender.

In addressing the second research question, three primary pathways emerged from the interview data regarding the development and enhancement of soft skills. The first is the role of crisis or problems, which seems to have had a role in the stories of soft skills development. The second way is observational learning. The third way is about individual motivations to self-improvement and continuous learning. Below are some illustrative passages for each pathway:

- Soft skill development following a period of organizational difficulty.

"I presented this idea at the company (...) I was laughed at for a long time (...) But, in reality, with perseverance, strategic thinking, and by listening to the people who actually work in the warehouse—because you can't just impose something from above, you have to involve them—I tried to make it as smooth and as feasible as possible. And here's the thing: communication is key. Contrary to what people thought, they felt valued and were given a greater sense of trust." (Luisa, female, participant #6)

"Faced with the prices imposed by various clients, I had to figure out a way to make those things work. (...) I had to expand a time management system within my company. (...) Working with a local company, (...) I was able to put together this time management system. And that's where my company really stood out 15 years ago, in a sector like fashion where it seemed taboo. Many people said it was impossible. But I developed this software, and it really revolutionized my company." (Leonardo Marco, male, participant #4)

- Soft skill development by observational learning.

"Our production manager was trying to explain to a colleague how to assemble a sample. He started demonstrating, but instead of actually assembling the sample, he just kind of mimed the process. (...) Well, the next day he came back and found that the colleague had glued the fabric directly to the workbench. (...) We often take things for granted, assuming the other person will just figure it out. So, if we want to avoid making the same mistakes over and over, we need to improve our communication skills. It's not just about the listener being attentive; it's about creating an environment where people feel encouraged to ask questions and where we take the time to explain things clearly." (Mario, male, participant #7)

- Soft skill development by fostering the existing skill.

"You can't rely solely on numbers. (...) If you focus exclusively on numbers, you might make decisions like cutting resources or withholding rewards from employees. (...) Instead, if your intuition tells you to reward employees, invest in their growth, and provide opportunities for development, it might take longer to see a direct impact on the numbers, but in the long run, this proactive approach will pay off. Therefore, I would argue that while proactivity, energy, and a forward-thinking perspective are essential, they must be balanced with a strong sense of intuition and a long-term vision." (Sara, female, participant #10)

Conclusions

Our findings confirm the critical role of soft skills in dynamic capabilities evolution for entrepreneurial success. The identification of core soft skills, including communication, collaboration, and adaptability, provides valuable insights into the multifaceted nature of entrepreneurial competence and can be useful for effective entrepreneurial marketing strategies (Guerola-Navarro et al., 2022). Following an interpretation influenced by gender differences, we could have generally concluded that women seek to entertain relationships based on emotional intelligence while men are more oriented towards productivity and achievement. However, these skills were noted to be significant among both male and female entrepreneurs, suggesting a broader importance of soft skills in entrepreneurial success. While the interviews revealed some common patterns among both male and female entrepreneurs, the research did not identify significant gender-based differences in soft skill expression and development, suggesting a wider range of individual variability and a more complex interplay of personal traits. Specifically, the feminine side of personalities frequently emphasized collaboration and emotional intelligence, whereas the masculine traits highlighted competitiveness and assertiveness. Feminine and masculine traits are not strictly gender related. We suggest that future research to improve women's entrepreneurial skills should maintain a gender-neutral perspective to begin to remove implicit gender stereotypes in the scientific debate. Furthermore, from this gender-free view in which no specific weaknesses or peculiar notes in the soft skills of female entrepreneurs as compared to men emerge, we should start by understanding how to eliminate external context-related factors that generate gender-specific barriers for women, which should not exist.

Furthermore, Furthermore, according to the lens of dynamic capabilities, our research shows that there are different paths to enhance soft skills dynamics, that might be provoked by the following triggering paths:

- Organizational challenges - periods of difficulty, scandals, or change within the organization can serve as catalysts for the development of soft skills. Critical events should be seen as a trigger for a positive evolution, forcing entrepreneurs to look for new skills and innovative ways to react;
- Observational learning - observation of mistakes or successes of others can provide valuable insights and opportunities for learning and skill development;
- Fostering skills - building upon existing soft skills can create a virtuous cycle, fostering the emergence and growth of new competencies.

In order to best deal with such challenges, dynamic capabilities theory suggests investing in anticipation capabilities, such as “the ability to observe and identify internal and external critical developments and potential threats for the organization, and the ability to be ready to face the unexpected at the working group level” (Buzzao and Rizzi, 2023, p. 11). Furthermore, the collected narratives describing the observational learning process show that this evolutionary process could be rapid and simply initiated by a workshop with colleagues or a case study, whereas Teece et al. (1997, p. 523) stated that this process is longer, where ‘learning is often a process of rehearsal, feedback and evaluation’. However, whatever the route, the learning process is essential to the model for dynamic capabilities formation (Zhara et al., 2006, p. 926). Finally, our results also show that dynamic capabilities emerge from the co-evolution of tacit experience accumulation processes, together with explicit knowledge articulation and codification (Zollo and Winter, 2022), and it is important to focus on their creation (as also suggested by Buzzao and Rizzi, 2023).

In conclusion, this study provides empirical evidence that supports the conceptualization of dynamic soft skills as visualized by participants' metaphors. Their narratives offer unique insights into the competencies required to navigate complex environments, seize opportunities, and overcome challenges. While aligning with existing research on the importance of soft skills for female entrepreneurs, this study extends these findings to a dynamic gender-neutral perspective, addressing limitations in previous research. This research contributes to the ongoing discourse on soft skills and entrepreneurship by highlighting the gender-neutral nature of these competencies. By recognizing the interplay between masculine and feminine personality traits, we can better understand the potential challenges and opportunities faced by entrepreneurs. This insight has significant implications for managerial practices and future research endeavors.

Future research could address these limitations through comparative international studies across different regions or countries, providing a more comprehensive understanding of female entrepreneurship. The study's limitations include a relatively small sample size and a focus on a context specific environment. To address these limitations, future research should explore diverse contexts with varying levels of entrepreneurial opportunities and external barriers. We remark it is crucial to challenge traditional gender stereotypes and emphasize the importance of individual differences in entrepreneurial success.

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