

Success Factors of Women Entrepreneurs in Chettinad Snack Businesses: A Qualitative Study in Karaikudi

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Abstract

The Chettinad region in Tamil Nadu, India, is renowned for its rich cultural heritage and bold flavours, and its meticulously prepared cuisine has been established as a prominent destination for culinary tourism. This has established the region as a prominent destination for culinary tourism. In this sector, female business owners have significantly contributed to economic growth. Women entrepreneurs successfully operate snack businesses that symbolize Tamil Nadu's cultural identity, combining their unique attributes to preserve traditions while simultaneously uplifting their families and communities. The process of gathering data involved conducting detailed and semi-structured interviews with a group of ten individuals, using a convenience sampling method. The interviews were conducted both in person and via telephone in Tamil and English. Before conducting the interviews, the study's objectives were thoroughly communicated to the participants. With their consent, each session, lasting between 30 to 60 minutes, was recorded and subsequently transcribed in English. NVivo software was utilized to examine the data and identify common themes. The research indicated that the family support is essential for women entrepreneurs to thrive. In addition, participants with higher education and experience were more willing to take the propensity and were better engaged in digital marketing.

Keyword: Women Entrepreneurs, Chettinad, Traditional, Tourism, Digital marketing

INTRODUCTION

Chettinad, a culturally vibrant region of Tamil Nadu, is celebrated for its rich culinary traditions, artistic architecture, and warm hospitality. Its cuisine, characterized by bold flavors and aromatic spices, reflects a deep heritage where food is both an art and a legacy. Among its distinctive specialties, Chettinad snacks stand out for their unique preparation methods using pure oils and quality ingredients, enabling them to stay fresh for extended periods. Karaikudi, the cultural heart of Chettinad, has become synonymous with innovative and authentic food offerings that attract both domestic and international tourists. Promoting Chettinad cuisine as a gastronomic experience has the potential to elevate Tamil Nadu's position as a leading culinary tourism destination (J. Suresh Kumar & D. Shobana, 2023).

Tamil Nadu leads India in women-led entrepreneurship, contributing 13.5% of the country's 80.5 lakh women-owned enterprises (The Hindu, 2022). Women play a crucial role in micro,

small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs), collectively employing over four million workers (Kumar & Shobana, 2024). The state's entrepreneurial ecosystem is strengthened by self-help groups (SHGs), training programs, and policy initiatives, encouraging women to explore non-traditional sectors such as food and hospitality (Divya, n.d.; Nkwabi et al., n.d.). Within this context, Chettinad women have transformed traditional home-based snack preparation into profitable ventures, blending cultural preservation with modern business innovation. Women entrepreneurs contribute significantly to economic growth, poverty reduction, and gender equality (Arafat et al., 2020). Their success is often shaped by family support, cultural norms, access to finance, and entrepreneurial education (Cardella et al., 2020). Women in the food industry exhibit resilience, creativity, and adaptability, often balancing domestic responsibilities with entrepreneurial ambitions (Abd Wahid et al., 2021a). In Chettinad, women have historically managed finances, preserved culinary traditions, and played key roles in sustaining family enterprises (Arasti et al., 2012). Their entrepreneurial identity evolves through different life stages childhood, marriage, and motherhood reflecting their ability to adapt and lead (Khattar & Agarwal, 2023). Globally, food entrepreneurship has emerged as a dynamic avenue for women's empowerment, especially in developing economies (Akter et al., 2024). The growing demand for authentic, shelf-stable traditional foods aligns with women's expertise in maintaining local flavor authenticity (Sugasini et al., 2018). Digital tools such as social media and e-commerce now serve as cost-effective platforms to enhance visibility and reach (Pai, 2025). However, women continue to face barriers such as limited credit access, gender bias, and digital illiteracy (Fathimath & Abdulla, 2023; Rudhumbu et al., 2020a). Despite these challenges, women-led food businesses promote sustainability, creativity, and cultural continuity (Franzke et al., 2022; Yiğit, 2025). Studies affirm that rural women entrepreneurs in regions like Tamil Nadu play a vital role in achieving Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) through inclusive entrepreneurship (Goncalves & Ahumada, 2025). Yet, rural women remain disadvantaged due to socio-cultural barriers, lack of training, and poor access to markets (Baral et al., 2023; Rani, 2021). In culinary heritage zones such as Chettinad, women serve as both culinary custodians and entrepreneurs, integrating traditional recipes into viable business models (D'Silva & S., 2022). While previous studies have examined women's entrepreneurship in food industries across Turkey, Northern India, and Tamil Nadu (Muthulingam & Madhuwanthi, 2020; Paul, 2024a), limited attention has been given to Chettinad's traditional snack enterprises, especially those led by women in Karaikudi. Existing literature often emphasizes financial or policy barriers but overlooks the cultural, familial, and heritage-specific dynamics unique to these women entrepreneurs (Hyder Kamran et al., 2025). There is thus a critical research gap in understanding the success factors, growth strategies, and resilience mechanisms of women operating in Chettinad's snack sector.

This qualitative study aims to explore the lived experiences, motivations, and business strategies of successful women entrepreneurs in Chettinad's snack industry, highlighting how tradition, innovation, and empowerment intersect to sustain heritage-based enterprises and promote inclusive rural development.

AIM AND OBJECTIVES

The main objective of this study is to conduct a qualitative analysis to explore the key factors contributing to the success of women entrepreneurs running Chettinad traditional snacks businesses in the Karaikudi region of Tamil Nadu.

1. To study the background and business experiences of women entrepreneurs in Chettinad a traditional snack preparation.
2. To identify the key entrepreneurial traits that contribute to their business success.
3. To assess the marketing and financial strategies used to expand their businesses.
4. To understand how cultural identity and family support influence their entrepreneurial journey.
5. To examine how women entrepreneurs, manage work-life balance and effectively lead their teams.

The research questions were formulated to address specific aspects within each theme:

- What entrepreneurial characteristics, such as adaptability, communication skills, honesty, and risk-taking, enhance the success of women entrepreneurs in Chettinad snacks businesses?
- How do entrepreneurs apply marketing strategies, including customer relationship management, digital marketing, and public relations, to drive business growth?
- What financial resources, such as access to capital, family support, and jewellery loans, contribute to the sustainability and expansion of enterprises?
- How are worker and team management practices, such as collaborative leadership, mentorship, motivation, and decision-making, integrated into business operations?
- How does the preservation of cultural identity through authenticity and traditional ingredients influence entrepreneurial success?
- How do women entrepreneurs balance work-life responsibilities, including family duties, personal well-being, and time management?
- What role do family networks, mentorship, and broader social support systems play in supporting the growth and longevity of women entrepreneurs?

This qualitative research methodology allowed for an in-depth exploration of the experiences, challenges, and success factors of women entrepreneurs in the Chettinad snack preparation business. By focusing on these specific themes and research questions, this study aim to provide valuable insights into the unique aspects of female entrepreneurship (Deng et al., 2025) in this cultural and culinary context, potentially informing future policy and support initiatives for women entrepreneurs in similar sectors.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research methodology to investigate the factors influencing the success of women entrepreneurs in the Chettinad traditional snack Preparation business. The research design was centered on in-depth, semi-structured interviews with ten women entrepreneurs who met specific criteria: expertise in Chettinad cuisine, classification as high-growth female entrepreneurs, and active roles as decision-makers in their businesses. Data collection involved face-to-face interviews conducted in Tamil, lasting between 30 to 60

minutes each. The participants provided informed consent for audio recording before the sessions. Demographic information, including age, education level, annual income, product variety, and years of business experience, was collected to provide a context for the participants' backgrounds and experiences. The interview process was designed to explore various aspects of participants' entrepreneurial journeys, business strategies, and challenges. Questions were formulated to address the study's primary objectives and research questions, focusing on entrepreneurial characteristics, marketing strategies, financial resources, team management, cultural identity preservation, work-life balance, and support systems. Following the data collection, the recorded interviews were transcribed and verified for accuracy. The transcripts were then analyzed using NVivo software, a qualitative data analysis tool that facilitates the identification and organization of themes and patterns within the data. This process led to the identification of seven major themes aligned with the objectives of the study: 1. Entrepreneurial Characteristics 2. Marketing Strategies 3. Financial Resources 4. Team and Workforce Management 5. Cultural Identity 6. Work-Life Balance 7. Support Systems. These themes directly informed the development of the research questions, ensuring a focused exploration of the critical factors influencing female entrepreneurs in the Chettinad snacks business.

RESULTS

The demographic profile of the ten women entrepreneurs of Chettinad Snacks preparation from the Karaikudi region. Table 1 shows that the following participants, aged between 42 and 75, are involved in the preparation and sale of Chettinad snacks, with business experience ranging from 3 to 30 years. The study reveals that, within the Chettinad snacks business, women without formal education are more likely to become entrepreneurs compared to their educated counterparts. This demographic distribution facilitates a comprehensive, multidimensional analysis of entrepreneurial or professional development across various age, education, and experience spectrums.

Table 1: Demographic profile of the participants

Person	Age	Level of Education	Experience
P1	75	Graduate	52
P2	75	12 th (high school)	53
P3	69	11 th (high school)	35
P4	57	7 th (middle school)	22
P5	56	Illiterate	40
P6	65	5 th (middle school)	34
P7	45	10 th (high school)	8
P8	42	Post Graduate	2

P9	58	Graduate	7
P10	55	10 th (high school)	33

Source: The Authors

Several critical factors contributing to the success of women entrepreneurs in the traditional chettinad snacks preparation business. Table 2 were used to determine under the Entrepreneurial Characteristics, all ten participants demonstrated traits such as adaptability, flexibility, communication skills, honesty, and risk-taking, emerging as the most frequently coded traits. Nine participants actively engaged in approaches such as customer relationship management, digital marketing, and public relations, with digital marketing strategies being the most prominent. Regarding Financial Resources, access to capital and family support were essential for nine participants, with jewellery loans serving as an alternative funding method for a few. Worker and Team Management practices were widely adopted, with collaborative leadership, empowerment, motivation, and decision-making featuring strongly among all ten participants. Cultural Identity also played a significant role, with an emphasis on authenticity and the use of traditional ingredients by all participants, reflecting a strong commitment to preserving Chettinad culinary heritage. In terms of Balancing Work-Life Responsibilities, participants demonstrated the ability to manage family responsibilities, maintain personal well-being, and practice effective time management. Finally, the Support System was found to be a crucial enabler, with all participants acknowledging the vital role of family and mentorship in sustaining and growing their business. Women receive strong social support, and pursue entrepreneurship more confidently while maintaining their roles as mothers and wives (Prabawanti & Rusli, 2022). Overall, the findings indicate that success among women entrepreneurs in this business is multifaceted and, driven by personal traits, strategic business practices, cultural commitment, financial resilience, and strong social support networks.

Table 2: Themes and their factors under ‘Women entrepreneurs Key Success Factors of Chettinad Snacks Business (RQ1 to RQ7)

Name	Case (No. of Participants)	Code (No. of Empirical Indicators)
(RQ1) Entrepreneurial Characteristics	10	18
Adaptability and Flexibility	2	2
Communication	4	4
Honest	5	6
Risk-Taking	6	6
(RQ2) Marketing Strategies	9	19
Customer Relationship Management	5	6
Digital Marketing Strategies	7	8

Public Relations	5	5
(RQ3) Financial Resources	9	10
Access to Capital and Funding	5	5
Family support	3	3
Jewellery Loan	2	2
(RQ4) Worker and Team Management	10	19
Collaborative Leadership	5	5
Empowerment and Mentorship	4	5
Motivation	4	5
Problem-Solving and Decision-Making	3	4
(RQ5) Cultural Identity	10	16
Authenticity	8	8
Traditional Ingredients	8	8
(RQ6) Balancing Work-Life Responsibilities	10	14
Family and Personal Responsibilities	8	8
Personal Well-Being and Self-Care	3	3
Time Management	3	3
(RQ7) Support System	10	16
Family and Personal Support	10	10
Mentorship and Guidance	6	6

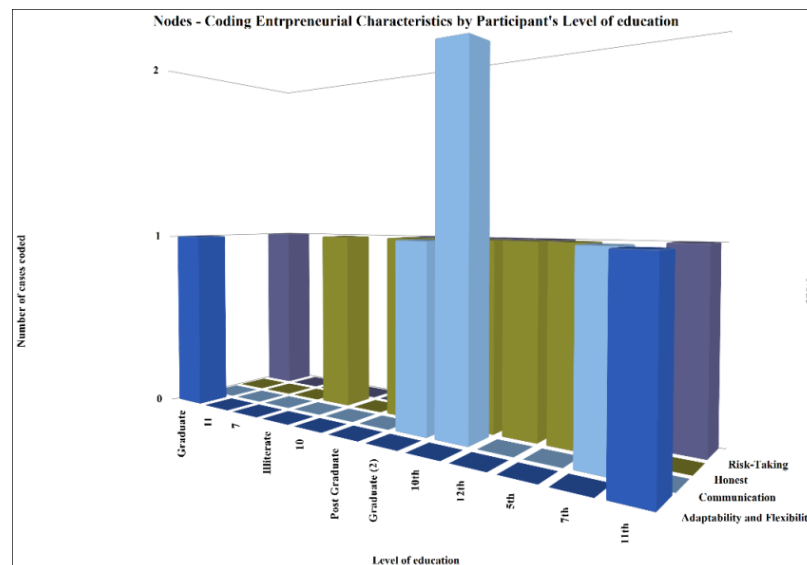
Source: The Authors

Entrepreneurial Characteristics

Key entrepreneurial traits analysed include Risk-Taking, Honesty, Communication, and Adaptability and Flexibility. Figure 1 presents a significant observation is that participants with a 12th-grade education exhibit the highest frequency of coded entrepreneurial characteristics, suggesting that this education level may provide an optimal balance between theoretical knowledge and practical entrepreneurial engagement. Other education levels, including Graduates, Post-Graduates, and even Illiterate participants, show a relatively distributed coding pattern, implying that entrepreneurial qualities are not strictly tied to higher education. Notably, some lower-education participants (7th, 10th, and 11th grade) demonstrate entrepreneurial traits at similar levels to those with formal degrees, reinforcing the idea that entrepreneurial

ability may be influenced by factors beyond formal education, such as experience, mentorship, and environmental factors. This analysis suggests that while education plays a role in shaping entrepreneurial characteristics, real-world experience, personal motivation, and exposure to business practices may be equally, if not more, significant contributors to entrepreneurial success.

Figure 1: Interpretation of NVivo Analysis: Entrepreneurial Characteristics by Level of Education

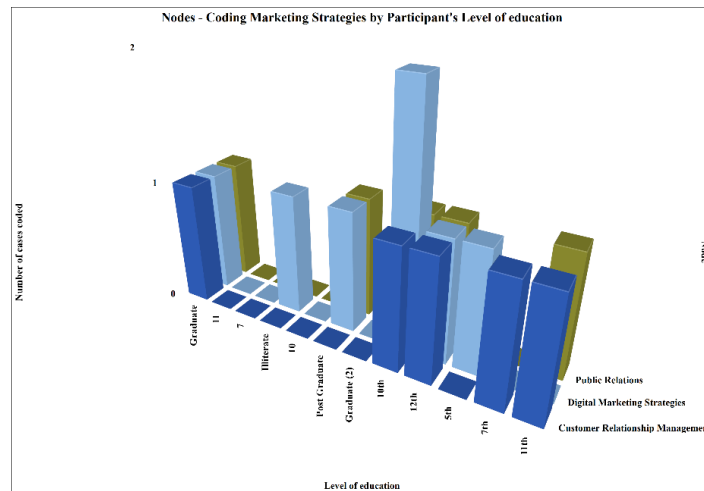


Source: The Authors

Marketing Strategies

Individuals with higher educational qualifications, such as those who have completed graduate or postgraduate studies or finished 12th grade, Figure 2 reveals that tend to be more actively involved in the development of marketing strategies. This trend reflects a correlation between higher levels of education (Joshi et al., 2024) and greater participation in strategic business activities, as seen in various entrepreneurial sectors. Conversely, those with lower educational levels, such as only completing 5th or 7th grade, are less likely to engage in these activities. The emphasis on Digital Marketing Strategies (Suseno & Abbott, 2021a), as highlighted by the prominence of light blue bars in the visual data, underscores the increasing importance of digital marketing within marketing strategies, particularly compared to traditional approaches like Public Relations and Customer Relationship Management. Although individual, social, and structural factors frequently impede women's entrepreneurial activities, digital technology facilitates the surmounting of these obstacles and the creation of new opportunities (Suseno & Abbott, 2021b). This shift is evident across multiple studies on business development, with research indicating that better-educated individuals often exhibit more proactive engagement in the dynamic fields of marketing and technology (Abd Wahid et al., 2021b; Arasti et al., 2012; Ayachit, 2024).

Figure 2: Chart of NVivo Analysis: Marketing Strategies by Level of Education

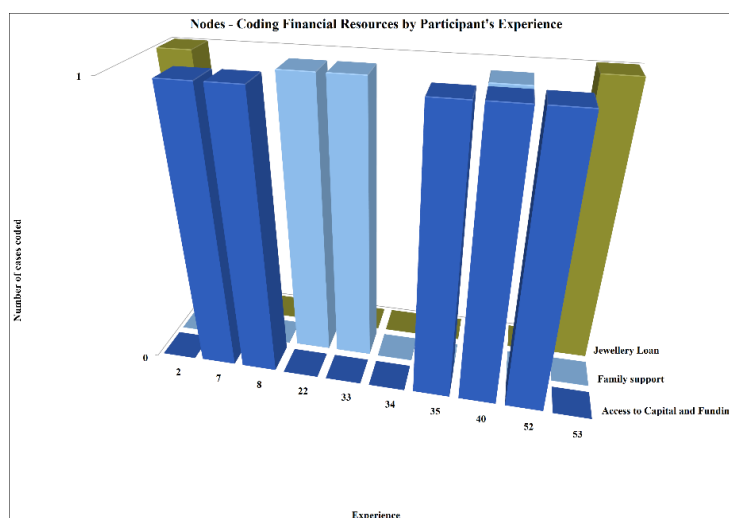


Source: The Authors

Financial Resources

The financial resources employed by women entrepreneurs vary considerably across the different phases of their entrepreneurial endeavours. Significant financial sources, such as jewellery loans, family support, and access to capital and funding, have been identified as pivotal in providing financial support for women in this business. This study underscores the frequent citation of Family Support and Access to Capital and Funding across nearly all levels of experience, highlighting their critical role in the sustainability and expansion of women-led enterprises (Rudhumbu et al., 2020b; Vuciterna et al., 2024). Although jewellery loans are mentioned less frequently, they are still recognized as an occasional yet important resource by both novice and experienced entrepreneurs, illustrating their diverse role. Figure 3 findings reflect the dynamic nature of financial support systems, with informal resources, such as family backing, playing an essential role at various stages of business development, complemented by formal avenues such as access to capital and funding. These diverse financial resources are indispensable to the success and longevity of women-led enterprises (Kappal & Rastogi, 2020).

Figure 3: Chart of NVivo Analysis: Financial Resources by Experience

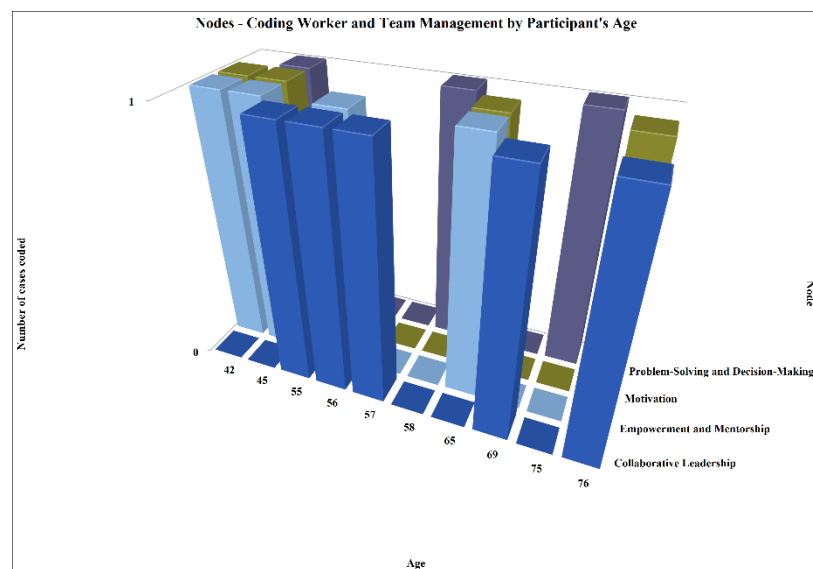


Source: The Authors

Workers and Team Management

Research on leadership dynamics among entrepreneurs indicates distinct age-related variations in leadership roles. Figure 4 highlights within the younger demographic (42 to 56 years), there is a pronounced focus on problem-solving and decision-making. This aligns with the findings of (Kapinga & Montero, 2017) which suggest that individuals in this age group are primarily engaged in actively navigating decisions to foster business growth. Conversely, as individuals advance in age, particularly within the 65 to 76-year range, the emphasis shifts towards Motivation and Empowerment and Mentorship. This transition is corroborated by studies conducted by (Hassan et al., 2022; Hayati & Arini, 2023), which demonstrate that older entrepreneurs prioritize motivating and mentoring their teams, utilizing their extensive experience to guide others. Additionally, Collaborative Leadership emerges sporadically across various age groups, indicating that while teamwork and shared leadership are valued, they do not consistently predominate. This is reflected in the work of (Jha et al., 2018) where the significance of collaboration is acknowledged but not universally emphasized across all ages.

Figure 4: Chart of NVivo Analysis: Worker and Team Management by Age



Source: The Authors

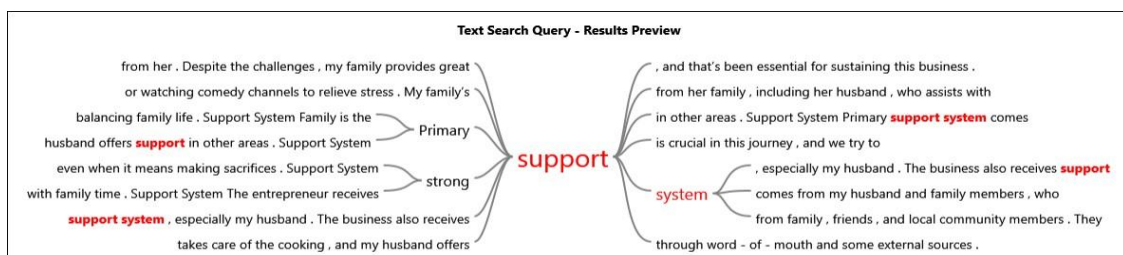
Cultural Identity

The Word cloud analysis depicted in Figure 5 prominence of terms like "cultural," "maintaining," "traditional," and "practices" underscores the centrality of preserving cultural identity within women-led entrepreneurial ventures. This is particularly evident in the food industry, where items such as "Thenkuzhal," "ragi," "rice," and "flour" are not just ingredients but carriers of heritage and identity, as emphasized by. These businesses often reflect a deliberate effort to balance cultural authenticity with market demands, illustrating how traditional knowledge and practices are being monetized without compromising their integrity. The vocabulary of "authenticity," "identity," and "local" within this context further signals a resistance to homogenization in the face of modernity and globalization. Moreover, the

Support system

Figure 7 indicates the involvement of family members, particularly husbands, is pivotal in supporting women entrepreneurs by assisting with both domestic responsibilities and business operations, thereby facilitating a more sustainable entrepreneurial journey. This family support often necessitates considerable personal sacrifices, underscoring a collective commitment to achieving work-life balance. Beyond the family, networks comprising friends, local community members, and external resources such as word-of-mouth marketing are essential in promoting business growth and resilience (Muthulingam & Madhuwanthi, 2020). Social capital affects women entrepreneurs differently based on the type of business, race, and past experience, (Neumeyer et al., 2019) women do better than men in building social connections in lifestyle and survival businesses. However, men have stronger positions in businesses focused on growth. These social connections not only alleviate operational burdens but also serve as strategic tools for sustaining enterprises in challenging environments. While these personal networks are valuable, women in the food business also require stronger financial, digital, and mentorship support; equally, robust family and community backing plays a crucial role in helping them navigate business challenges and achieve sustainable growth in the food industry (McDonagh et al., 2024).

Figure 7: Text search query analysis centered on the term support system

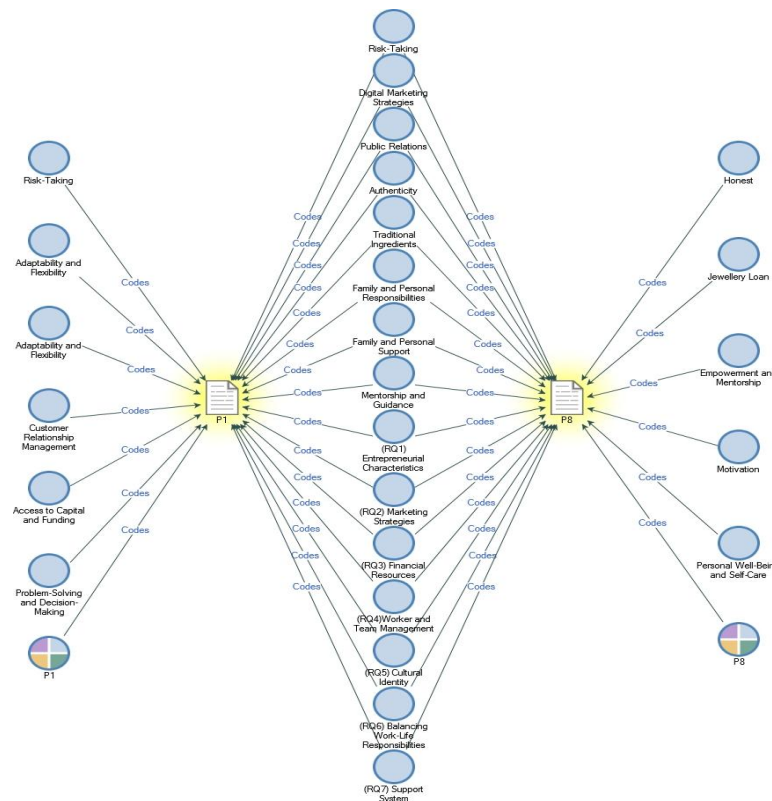


Source: The Authors

The role of family and social support systems is paramount in facilitating the sustainability and growth of women-led enterprises as shown in Figure 8. Participants consistently emphasized the assistance received from close family members, especially spouses in managing both household and business responsibilities. This form of shared labour not only alleviates the burden on women entrepreneurs but also fosters a sense of collective commitment towards work-life balance (Baba et al., 2025). Beyond the immediate family, networks including friends, community members, and external factors such as mentors and funding agencies were reported as instrumental. These social networks frequently operate through mechanisms like word-of-mouth marketing, emotional backing, and advisory roles, all of which bolster entrepreneurial resilience. The sacrifices and active participation of family members, particularly evident among older entrepreneurs like Participant P1, illustrate how intergenerational values of duty and adaptability intertwine with modern entrepreneurial traits such as digital marketing and authenticity. Younger participants like P8, meanwhile, reflect a more holistic approach that integrates empowerment, well-being, and socio-emotional support, highlighting evolving paradigms in women's entrepreneurship (Ambiga & Ramasamy, 2013).

Even with strong support, women entrepreneurs still face problems. They have trouble getting money, finding skilled workers, balancing work and home duties, and making good profits (Hasan & Almubarak, 2016). Together, these dynamics showcase how the entrepreneurial ecosystem thrives on a foundation of interlinked support structures, cultural values, and personal agency.

Figure 8: Comparison diagrams coding results for Participant P1 (75 Age) and P8 (42 age) by the nodes indicate major themes, sub- themes, and their relationships



Source: The Authors

Discussion

This present study elucidates the significant role of women entrepreneurs in Karaikudi in fostering both regional and national economic development through the production and distribution of traditional Chettinad snacks. The increasing domestic and international demand for these authentic products are attributed to their cultural significance, shelf-stability, and health conscious ingredients. Despite limited formal training, these entrepreneurs leverage digital sales platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, and Instagram to engage with urban and international consumers. The expansion of online retail and distribution channels presents a substantial growth opportunity, particularly for reaching non-resident Indians and culinary tourists abroad. Its export potential is considerable, as evidenced by the global recognition of individuals like (P3), whose products are internationally acclaimed. Nevertheless, the factors propelling this growth, such as cultural authenticity, familial support, low overhead costs, and informal marketing, require reinforcement through structured policies in financial literacy,

logistics, branding, and trade facilitation. Such measures are essential for fully harnessing the economic contributions of these women-led microenterprises in both local and global markets.

Limitations of the Study

While this study offers valuable insights into the experiences of women entrepreneurs in the chettinad snacks business, it is constrained by the small sample size of ten participants from a single geographical location, Karaikudi. The use of convenience sampling introduced selection bias. Furthermore, the findings may not fully represent the diversity of women entrepreneurs in the Chettinad snacks business from areas surrounding Karaikudi, such as Devakottai, Kanadukathan, Athangudi, and Pillayarpatti, or from nearby districts like Ramanathapuram, Madurai, Pudukkottai, and Tiruchirappalli. As this study was qualitative, the findings cannot be broadly generalized using statistical methods. Additionally, the focus remained largely on local narratives without a comprehensive integration of macroeconomic factors or global trade policy implications affecting traditional snack exports. The lack of a comparative analysis with male entrepreneurs or women-led ventures in other culinary traditions also narrows the scope of this investigation.

Future Research Directions

Future research should encompass a larger and more diverse cohort of entrepreneurs from Tamil Nadu and South India to ascertain whether the entrepreneurial traits identified are consistent across different regions and product categories. Studies may employ a mixed-methods approach, integrating qualitative insights with quantitative measures such as export volume, online sales data, and customer demographics from digital platforms. Additionally, longitudinal studies could evaluate the impact of digital transformation such as e-commerce platforms and food delivery applications, on the evolution of traditional snack businesses over time. A detailed analysis of the integration of Chettinad snack brands into international markets, focusing on trade compliance, packaging standards, and diaspora demand, could elucidate export potential and policy requirements. Finally, comparative studies across cultures or cuisines could investigate how traditional food entrepreneurs adapt to global market demands and digital ecosystems in diverse ways.

CONCLUSION

This qualitative study identified integrity and versatility as pivotal factors contributing to the success of women entrepreneurs in the preparation of Chettinad snacks. Through an in-depth qualitative analysis of ten diverse participants, it was discerned that personal attributes such as honesty, resilience, and propensity for risk-taking are fundamental traits driving their entrepreneurial endeavors. These women not only adhere to traditional culinary practices but also embody a profound sense of responsibility toward preserving cultural heritage while making significant contributions to both local and international economies. A notable characteristic of participants was their ability to perceive challenges as opportunities for success. Despite lacking formal training in business, marketing, or finance, these women demonstrated exceptional resourcefulness and dedication. Their approach to setbacks viewing failures not as endpoints but as opportunities for learning, exemplifies a growth mindset cultivated through lived experiences and community interactions. Importantly, this mindset is

not solely individualistic but is shaped and sustained by familial and societal networks that encourage perseverance. Although these entrepreneurs encounter numerous challenges, they leverage these as opportunities for growth and advancement. Their professional dedication is regarded as a primary driver of their success, emphasizing an approach devoid of shortcuts and envy. Experience instilled in them the courage to embrace failure. While age does not preclude the use of social media, word-of-mouth marketing is considered the most effective means of reaching overseas customers rather than social media, advertising, or other marketing strategies. Other methods, such as WhatsApp groups, local channels, and Instagram, have also been employed to maintain customer relationships. The study also revealed a low level of financial literacy and skills among these women entrepreneurs, with limited interest in seeking external financial resources. A lack of awareness regarding available loan schemes, such as Annapurna Yojana, Mudra, and Stand-up India, leads them to rely on jewellery loans during financial crises. Equal treatment and encouragement of workers, predominantly women, are prioritized to, foster flexibility in the workplace. Focus on team management is believed to enhance career advancement. Cultural identity is a source of pride, reflected in the consistent use of traditional, high-quality ingredients and products. Effective time management strategies balance work-life responsibilities, with family support playing a crucial role. Despite facing pressure and mental distress, these women entrepreneurs persevere, driving their businesses forward towards the economic well-being of their families. Ultimately, the study confirms that women entrepreneurs in the Chettinad snacks business are not merely business owners they are cultural custodians, economic contributors, and community leaders. Their success lies in their ability to blend traditional wisdom with modern resilience, supported by the family, shaped by culture, and sustained through integrity. With greater access to financial literacy, institutional support, and mentorship, their enterprises have a strong potential for further growth and international recognition.

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