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ENTREPRENEURSHIP

EFFECTS OF SOCIAL NETWORKS ON ENTREPRENEURIAL RESILIENCE OF SMES IN NAIROBI, KENYA: AN EMPIRICAL REVIEW

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ABSTRACT

Purpose of the study: This paper reviews the empirical literature on how social networks shape entrepreneurial resilience among Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises (SMEs) in Nairobi, Kenya, drawing on studies published between 2016 and 2026.

Problem statement: SMEs anchor a large share of Kenya's employment and output, yet a substantial proportion collapse within their first five years, worn down by financial instability, regulatory complexity and volatile markets. Entrepreneurs lean on their social ties to absorb these shocks, but the literature explaining how this happens is scattered across disconnected strands.

Method/methodology: The study followed a qualitative systematic literature review design guided by the PRISMA framework (Moher et al., 2009). Fifty-four peer-reviewed studies survived a staged screening process across Scopus, Web of Science, JSTOR, Emerald Insight and Google Scholar, and were synthesized thematically.

Results of the study: Social networks turned out to be multidimensional, spanning professional and business ties, family and close social relationships, institutional and ecosystem links, and digital platforms. These operate through four mechanisms, resource mobilization, knowledge sharing, psychological support and collaborative problem-solving, that reinforce one another rather than working in isolation. Social Capital Theory was the dominant lens (38.9% of studies), ahead of Network Theory (27.8%), Entrepreneurial Ecosystem Theory (20.4%) and the Resource-Based View (13.0%). Four gaps stood out: resilience is rarely treated as its own outcome variable, African settings remain under-studied, network dimensions are examined piecemeal, and digital networking dynamics are poorly integrated into existing theory.

Conclusion and policy recommendation: Social networks function as survival infrastructure for Nairobi's SMEs rather than a peripheral advantage. Deliberate investment in both physical and digital networking ecosystems, by entrepreneurs, institutions and policymakers alike, would materially strengthen the sector's capacity to withstand shocks.

Keywords: *Social networks, entrepreneurial resilience, SMEs, empirical literature review, social capital, Nairobi*

1. INTRODUCTION

Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) sit at the foundation of Kenya's economy, generating employment, income and local production across manufacturing, retail, technology and agro-processing. In Nairobi's dynamic urban economy, SMEs absorb labour across both formal and informal markets, which is exactly why their long-term survival matters so much to policymakers. Yet Kenyan SMEs keep failing at a troubling rate; a considerable share of new ventures do not make it past their first five years (Cheruiyot, 2024). That vulnerability has pushed entrepreneurial resilience, broadly the capacity to anticipate disruption, absorb shocks and adapt, into the centre of scholarly attention (Brear, 2021; Hwang, 2024).

The COVID-19 pandemic sharpened this interest further. It disrupted supply chains, squeezed consumer demand and forced physical operations to a halt across developing economies, and SMEs, with their thin financial buffers and patchy access to institutional support, felt it hardest (Ndiege et al., 2023). Many entrepreneurs responded by leaning on their social and professional networks to mobilize resources, exchange information and improvise adaptive strategies (Ahmed et al., 2023). This renewed scholarly attention to social networks, understood here as the web of relationships entrepreneurs hold with family, friends, professional contacts, institutions and other stakeholders, and how those relationships enable resilience under acute uncertainty (Cho et al., 2022).

Within Nairobi specifically, social networks often function as a stand-in for the institutional infrastructure that is missing or unevenly distributed. Entrepreneurs draw on the social capital embedded in their personal and professional relationships to reach markets, secure informal credit and pick up strategic information (Wanambisi et al., 2023). Digital platforms have reshaped these dynamics too: WhatsApp, Facebook and Twitter have become significant channels for communication, customer engagement and knowledge exchange among SMEs (Ndiege et al., 2023; Kyalo, 2024). Even so, the literature examining these dynamics remains fragmented. Most studies isolate a single dimension of networking rather than situating it within a fuller picture of entrepreneurial resilience.

This review responds to that gap by synthesizing empirical research on the relationship between social networks and entrepreneurial resilience among SMEs. Covering literature published between 2016 and 2026, it captures the digital transformation period and the crises that came with it, with particular attention to Nairobi's SME ecosystem.

2. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Nairobi's SME sector is central to the city's economic life, yet it remains persistently fragile. High failure rates within the first five years of operation point to weaknesses in how these enterprises absorb financial shocks, navigate regulatory demands and respond to volatile markets (Cheruiyot, 2024). Social networks are widely believed to cushion these pressures, but the evidence for exactly how they do so is scattered across studies that each look at only one slice of the problem, professional ties in one paper, family support in another, digital platforms in a third. Few studies treat entrepreneurial resilience itself as the outcome of interest; most fold it into broader measures of firm performance or growth, which makes it difficult to say with any precision which network dimensions matter most, or how they interact. The geographic imbalance compounds this problem: the bulk of the empirical base comes from North American and Western European settings, leaving Nairobi and comparable African contexts underrepresented despite clear evidence that local entrepreneurs rely heavily on networked relationships to survive. Without a synthesis that pulls these fragments together, both researchers and policymakers are left working from an incomplete and disjointed evidence base.

3. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The general objective of this study is to examine the influence of social networks on entrepreneurial resilience among SMEs through an empirical review of existing literature. The specific objectives are to:

i. Identify the key dimensions of social networks discussed in entrepreneurship literature relating to SMEs;

ii. Examine how social networks contribute to entrepreneurial resilience among SMEs;

iii. Analyse the theoretical perspectives that explain the relationship between social networks and entrepreneurial resilience; and

iv. Identify research gaps in existing literature and propose directions for future inquiry.

4. RESEARCH HYPOTHEIS/QUESTIONS

H1: Social networks, across their professional, family, institutional and digital dimensions, positively influence entrepreneurial resilience among SMEs in Nairobi, Kenya.

H2: The mechanisms through which social networks enhance entrepreneurial resilience, resource mobilization, knowledge sharing, psychological support and collaborative problem-solving, operate as mutually reinforcing processes rather than independent ones.

5. THEORITICAL REVIEW/ FRAMEWORK

Four theoretical frameworks dominate the reviewed literature, each contributing a partial but complementary explanation of how networks build resilience.

Social Capital Theory, developed by Bourdieu (1986) and Coleman (1988) and extended through Granovetter's (1973) work on the strength of weak ties, was the most widely applied framework, appearing in 38.9% of the reviewed studies. Its focus on trust, reciprocity and the value locked into relationships lines up closely with empirical findings on how networks help SMEs weather disruption. Nahapiet and Ghoshal's (1998) division of social capital into structural, relational and cognitive dimensions proved especially useful for mapping the layered nature of entrepreneurial networks in developing-economy settings.

Network Theory accounted for 27.8% of studies and added structural insight, particularly through Burt's (1992) concept of structural holes: entrepreneurs who bridge otherwise disconnected parts of a network gain access to more diverse information and can broker resource flows in ways that translate into adaptive advantage during a crisis. Milgram's (1967) small-world research and Borgatti et al.'s (2009) work on network analysis further shaped how scholars understand the effects of network centrality and density on entrepreneurial outcomes.

Entrepreneurial Ecosystem Theory, used in 20.4% of studies, works at a more macro level, emphasizing how the surrounding institutional and relational environment shapes resilience at the level of the individual SME. Building on Stam (2015) and Stam and Van de Ven (2021), studies drawing on this framework consistently found that well-functioning ecosystems, marked by strong institutional networks and collaborative norms, significantly boosted entrepreneurs' capacity to adapt during economic disruption.

The Resource-Based View, present in 13.0% of studies and anchored in Barney (1991), offered a complementary angle: it treats network-based knowledge, relationships and reputation as strategic assets that confer competitive advantage and underpin resilience.

6. EMPIRICAL REVIEW

Key Dimensions of Social Networks

Across the 54 studies, four dimensions of social networks recur consistently: professional and business networks, family and close social networks, institutional and ecosystem networks, and digital and online networks.

Professional networks, ties to suppliers, investors, clients, mentors and industry peers, were the most extensively studied dimension. Building on Hoang and Antoncic's (2003) foundational review, later studies confirmed that professional ties shape venture creation, opportunity recognition and resource acquisition. Wanambisi et al. (2023) found that networking relations with industry peers and suppliers were positively associated with the growth of Kenyan SMEs, while Gregory (2023) showed that structural features of networking, tie strength and network reach among them, were significantly linked to SME growth. Well-connected professional networks also open access to knowledge and financial resources that matter most precisely when the business environment is unpredictable (Stam, 2015).

Family relationships form a second, foundational dimension, especially during early-stage development and periods of crisis. Aldrich and Cliff (2003) established that family structures shape entrepreneurs' access to resources, labour and emotional encouragement, particularly where formal credit is scarce. In Kenya, Ndemo (2018) confirmed that family ties sustain family-owned SMEs through both financial and non-financial support, and Reniati et al. (2024) found that the strength of family-based social capital predicted resilience and performance among MSMEs in comparable developing-economy settings.

Institutional and ecosystem networks, ties to universities, incubators, accelerators, government agencies and financial intermediaries, form a third dimension. Spigel (2017) showed that ecosystems with strong institutional networks give entrepreneurs access to mentorship, technical expertise and risk capital, all of which lift adaptive capacity. In Nairobi, Ndemo and Weiss (2017) documented how technology hubs such as iHub and Nairobi Garage strengthen the ecosystem by connecting startups to investors and global knowledge networks, and Stam and Van de Ven (2021) found institutional network quality to be a strong predictor of ecosystem performance and resilience.

Digital and online networks make up the fourth dimension, and the literature treats it as the fastest-growing one. Autio et al. (2018) showed that digital platforms let entrepreneurs reach global knowledge networks and collaborate across borders. In Kenya, Wanyoike et al. (2019)

linked social media use to SME performance in Nairobi's Kamukunji district, and Kyalo (2024) found that social media marketing predicted performance among youth-owned SMEs. The COVID-19 pandemic made the point starkly: Ndiege et al. (2023) found that Kenyan SMEs using digital platforms were markedly better placed to keep customers engaged and operations running through lockdown disruptions.

How Social Networks Build Resilience

Four mechanisms, reinforcing one another rather than working alone, explain how these network dimensions translate into resilience.

Resource mobilization and access to capital comes first. Social networks act as channels for both formal and informal finance, which matters most where institutional credit is constrained. Kanini et al. (2022) found that social capital within manufacturing MSMEs in Kenya was tied to stronger business performance and financial access, while Wachira et al. (2024) found that networking activity among Kenyan manufacturing SMEs improved access to formal and informal finance, giving entrepreneurs the liquidity to keep operating through disruption. These findings echo Aldrich and Zimmer's (1986) early observation that entrepreneurs lean heavily on personal networks to mobilize resources during vulnerable phases.

Knowledge sharing and innovation capacity follows. Through ongoing contact with clients, suppliers, peers and institutional partners, entrepreneurs pick up information on market trends, emerging technologies and effective practices that feed into adaptive strategy. Stam (2015) showed that strong networks speed up knowledge diffusion and innovation within regional ecosystems, and Wendo et al. (2025) found that effective knowledge exchange among young Kenyan entrepreneurs improved both performance and adaptive capacity. Kraus et al. (2020) documented that SMEs using digital communication networks during COVID-19 adapted their business models and found alternative markets more readily, a pattern especially visible among Nairobi's tech-enabled entrepreneurs.

Psychological and emotional support matters too, given how much stress, uncertainty and personal risk entrepreneurship carries. Baluku et al. (2018) found that network quality among East African micro-enterprise owners shaped psychological capital, optimism, self-efficacy, resilience and hope among its components. Williams and Shepherd (2016) showed that emotionally supportive networks were critical for venture recovery after catastrophic disruption, providing not just strategic advice but the psychological reinforcement entrepreneurs need to keep going.

Collaborative problem-solving during crises rounds out the picture. Entrepreneurs turn to their networks to jointly identify solutions, pool resources and coordinate responses. Doern et al. (2019) showed that collaborative network relationships helped entrepreneurs navigate economic crises through coordinated information sharing and joint survival strategies, and Cho et al. (2022) found that network diversity, combining online and offline ties, strengthened SMEs' dynamic capabilities and crisis response. In Nairobi, business associations and industry groups serve this exact function, providing a platform for joint coping strategies and shared market intelligence.

7. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The reviewed literature points toward a framework in which social networks act as the independent variable and entrepreneurial resilience as the dependent variable, with four mechanisms operating as the connecting, mutually reinforcing pathways between them. Professional, family, institutional and digital network dimensions each feed, to varying degrees, into resource mobilization, knowledge sharing, psychological support and collaborative problem-solving; these four mechanisms in turn shape an SME's capacity to anticipate disruption, absorb shocks and adapt strategically.

Two features of this framework stand out. First, the dimensions are not substitutes for one another; a family tie that provides emotional reassurance does something different from an institutional link that provides technical expertise, and resilient SMEs in the reviewed studies typically drew on several dimensions at once rather than relying on a single type of tie. Second, the four mechanisms interact rather than operate in parallel, consistent with H2: resource mobilization tends to work better when it is backed by the trust that psychological support builds, and knowledge shared through a network is more actionable when collaborative problem-solving structures exist to act on it. Contextual factors specific to Nairobi, notably the gap in formal institutional infrastructure and the rapid uptake of platforms such as WhatsApp and Facebook, shape how strongly each pathway operates, which is why the framework treats context as a moderating layer around the network-mechanism-resilience chain rather than as a separate, disconnected variable.

8. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative systematic literature review (SLR) design guided by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework (Moher et al., 2009). This approach suits the task of synthesising evidence from a scattered body of scholarship, surfacing recurring patterns and identifying underexplored areas in a transparent, replicable way (Petticrew & Roberts, 2006; Tranfield et al., 2003).

The target population comprised peer-reviewed journal articles, conference papers and empirical studies focused on SMEs, entrepreneurial resilience and social networks in Nairobi, Kenya, and comparable African developing economies. Purposive sampling was applied at the article level. Studies qualified for inclusion if they were published between 2016 and 2026, used empirical, systematic or theoretical approaches, and appeared in peer-reviewed or reputable conference outlets. Studies outside this window, those focused solely on large enterprises, and non-peer-reviewed materials were excluded.

Data collection followed a three-stage process. A database search across Scopus, Web of Science, JSTOR, Emerald Insight and Google Scholar, using Boolean combinations of terms including 'entrepreneurial resilience,' 'social networks,' 'SMEs,' 'social capital,' 'Nairobi' and 'Kenya', returned 312 potentially relevant records. After removing 47 duplicates, 265 records were screened by title and abstract; 187 were excluded as insufficiently aligned with the study's objectives. Of the 78 full-text articles assessed for eligibility, 24 were excluded for failing to meet the inclusion criteria, leaving a final corpus of 54 studies, an eligibility rate of roughly 69.2%.

For each retained study, data extracted included author(s) and year, geographic context, theoretical framework, network dimensions examined, and key findings on resilience outcomes. Qualitative content analysis and thematic synthesis were used to identify recurring themes, mechanisms and patterns across the corpus (Braun & Clarke, 2006), with tables and narrative synthesis used to present the findings.

PRISMA Article Screening and Selection Summary

Stage	Number of Records
Records identified through database search	312
Duplicates removed	47
Records screened (titles and abstracts)	265
Records excluded after screening	187
Full-text articles assessed for eligibility	78
Studies excluded (not meeting inclusion criteria)	24
Studies included in final synthesis	54

Source: Researcher (2025)

9. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The 54 reviewed studies were published between 2016 and 2025. Publication volume rose markedly from 2019 onward, with about 61.1% of studies appearing between 2020 and 2025, a pattern that lines up with the surge in scholarly interest in SME resilience triggered by COVID-19 (Kraus et al., 2020). Geographically, most empirical work still comes from North America and Western Europe, though sub-Saharan African studies, Nairobi chief among them, accounted for 24.1% of the reviewed contributions, a growing but still modest share. Quantitative designs dominated the methodological mix (42.6%), followed by qualitative approaches (29.6%), mixed methods (18.5%) and theoretical or systematic reviews (9.3%).

Table 2

Distribution of Reviewed Studies by Year of Publication

Period	Number of Studies	Percentage (%)
2016–2018	12	22.2%
2019–2021	19	35.2%
2022–2025	23	42.6%
Total	54	100%

Source: Researcher (2025)

Table 3

Distribution of Theoretical Frameworks in Reviewed Studies

Theoretical Framework	No. of Studies	Percentage (%)
Social Capital Theory	21	38.9%
Network Theory	15	27.8%
Entrepreneurial Ecosystem Theory	11	20.4%
Resource-Based View	7	13.0%
Total	54	100%

Source: Researcher (2025)

Four significant gaps limit how far the existing evidence can be generalized. First, entrepreneurial resilience is rarely treated as the primary outcome variable; only about 31.5% of the reviewed studies examined resilience as their central dependent construct, with most instead folding it into broader measures of firm performance or growth. Second, the literature skews heavily toward North American and Western European settings; even with African contexts appearing more often since the pandemic, studies focused specifically on Nairobi made up only 14.8% of the reviewed contributions. Third, most studies examine a single network dimension in isolation rather than asking how different network types interact to jointly shape resilience, which limits how far comprehensive theoretical models can develop. Fourth, the rapid growth of digital entrepreneurship has outpaced existing social capital and network theory, leaving a theoretical gap that matters a great deal given how fast digital transformation is moving across African entrepreneurial ecosystems.

10. CONCLUSIONS

This systematic review of 54 peer-reviewed studies confirms that social networks are a foundational strategic asset for entrepreneurial resilience among SMEs in Nairobi, Kenya. Entrepreneurial networks are best understood as multidimensional, spanning professional, family, institutional and digital dimensions that jointly build resilience through resource mobilization, knowledge sharing, psychological support and collaborative problem-solving. These patterns hold across diverse geographic and institutional settings and show up with particular force in Kenya's SME sector, where COVID-19 exposed both how important and how fragile existing network structures really are.

Social Capital Theory and Network Theory were the most widely applied and explanatorily powerful frameworks in the reviewed literature, though the review also surfaces tension in applying frameworks built for face-to-face, geographically bounded relationships to the digitally mediated networks that increasingly define entrepreneurial activity. Entrepreneurial Ecosystem Theory adds a useful corrective by foregrounding the macro-level institutional environment, while the Resource-Based View clarifies how network-based resources function as strategic assets that generate competitive advantage and resilience.

11. RECOMMENDATIONS

For SME owners and entrepreneurs, the evidence supports deliberately building and maintaining diverse networks across professional, institutional, family and digital dimensions. Entrepreneurs who take part in business associations, engage institutional support networks such as incubators and accelerators, and use digital platforms for networking, marketing and information exchange are, on this evidence, considerably better positioned to withstand disruption and keep operating through hard times.

For policymakers and development agencies, the findings point to the value of investing in institutional infrastructure that helps SMEs form networks in the first place. Entrepreneurship development programmes should build in components specifically aimed at strengthening networking capacity, particularly the links between entrepreneurs and institutional knowledge providers. Investment in digital infrastructure and digital literacy stands out as a high-return intervention for the resilience of Kenya's SME sector, and Nairobi's technology hub ecosystem suggests that targeted investment in innovation ecosystems can lift entrepreneurial network quality and resilience more broadly.

For future research, primary empirical studies that treat entrepreneurial resilience as a discrete outcome variable in African contexts, using longitudinal and mixed-method designs capable of tracking how network relationships evolve over time, would fill the clearest gap identified here. Studies that adopt integrative frameworks examining multiple network dimensions and resilience mechanisms together, and that investigate how digital networks interact with, complement or substitute for traditional networking, would make the most useful contribution to both theory and practice going forward.

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