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SOCIAL NETWORKING AND BUSINESS GROWTH AMONG SMALL-SCALE ENTREPRENEURS IN MALAWI: EVIDENCE FROM CHINSAPO, LILONGWE

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ABSTRACT

Small-scale enterprises play a significant role in Malawi's economic development by creating employment opportunities, generating household income, and promoting local economic activity. (World Bank, 2022; OECD, 2023). However, many entrepreneurs continue to face challenges related to limited access to business information, financial resources, markets, and strategic partnerships. Social networking has emerged as an important mechanism (Aldrich & Zimmer, 1986; Sendawula et al., 2023) through which entrepreneurs can access these resources and improve business performance.

This study examined the effect of social networking on the growth and sustainability of small-scale enterprises in Chinsapo, Lilongwe. A descriptive quantitative research design was employed using structured questionnaires administered to 60 randomly selected small-scale entrepreneurs. Data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), employing descriptive statistics and correlation analysis. The findings revealed that entrepreneurs actively engage in networking activities, particularly through collaboration with suppliers, customers, fellow entrepreneurs, and digital platforms such as WhatsApp and Facebook.

The study further found that networking positively contributes to business growth by increasing sales, improving market visibility, expanding customer bases, and strengthening business sustainability. The results also demonstrated a strong positive relationship between networking activities and business growth, indicating that entrepreneurs who actively build and maintain business networks are more likely to experience improved business performance. The study concludes that social networking is a valuable strategic resource for enhancing the competitiveness and sustainability of small-scale enterprises in Malawi. It recommends strengthening entrepreneurship support programmes, promoting digital networking platforms, and encouraging participation in business associations to improve business growth and long-term sustainability.

KEYWORDS: Social networking; business growth; business sustainability; small-scale entrepreneurs; Malawi; entrepreneurship.

INTRODUCTION

Small-scale enterprises (SSEs) are widely recognized as important contributors to economic growth, employment creation, poverty reduction, and innovation, particularly in developing countries. (OECD, 2023; World Bank, 2022). In Malawi, small-scale entrepreneurs play a vital role in supporting household incomes and stimulating local economic activity despite operating in an environment characterized by limited financial resources, inadequate infrastructure, and intense market competition. As traditional sources of business support remain constrained, entrepreneurs increasingly depend on social networks to access information, financial assistance, markets, suppliers, and business opportunities.

Social networking has become an important strategic resource for entrepreneurs because it facilitates the exchange of knowledge, strengthens business relationships, and improves access to resources that may otherwise be unavailable. (Aldrich & Zimmer, 1986; Burt, 1992). Entrepreneurial networks may include relationships with customers, suppliers, fellow business owners, financial institutions, business associations, mentors, and digital communities. These networks enable entrepreneurs to identify new opportunities, obtain market information, reduce business uncertainty, and improve decision-making. Consequently, networking is increasingly viewed as a source of competitive advantage for small enterprises operating in resource-constrained environments. (Granovetter, 1973).

Globally, previous studies have consistently demonstrated that networking contributes positively to entrepreneurial performance. (Hoang & Antoncic, 2003; Sendawula et al., 2023). Entrepreneurs who actively participate in professional and social networks often experience higher levels of innovation, improved access to finance, greater customer acquisition, and stronger business resilience. Digital networking platforms, including social media, have further expanded opportunities for entrepreneurs by enabling rapid communication, marketing, and collaboration beyond traditional geographical boundaries. (Fakhreldin et al., 2024).

Nevertheless, the extent to which networking contributes to business growth differs across countries because of variations in institutional support, economic conditions, and entrepreneurial ecosystems.

Within the African context, networking remains particularly important because many small businesses operate within informal economies where formal financial systems and institutional support are limited. (Sendawula et al., 2023). Entrepreneurs frequently rely on trust-based relationships, family members, friends, suppliers, and community groups to obtain credit, exchange market information, and sustain their businesses. Although these informal networks provide essential support, they may also limit business expansion when entrepreneurs fail to establish broader professional and market-oriented connections.

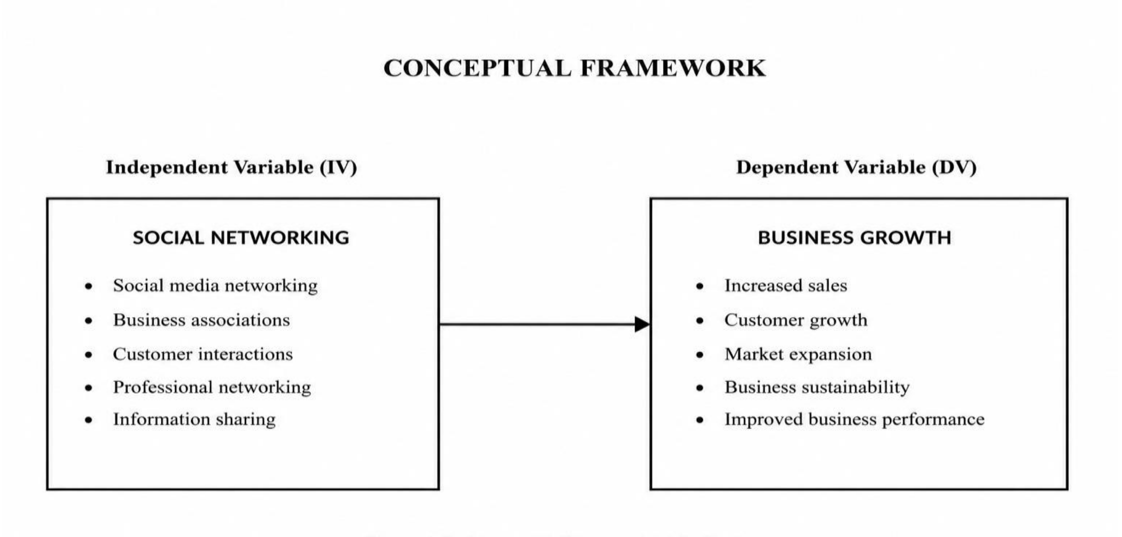
In Malawi, small-scale enterprises constitute a significant component of the national economy. (National Statistical Office, 2019; Ministry of Trade and Industry, 2022).

However, many entrepreneurs continue to experience slow business growth, limited market access, inadequate financial support, and insufficient business development services. While government and development partners have introduced initiatives to promote entrepreneurship, limited evidence exists regarding the specific contribution of social networking to business growth and sustainability among small-scale entrepreneurs. Existing studies have largely focused on entrepreneurship, access to finance, or enterprise development, with relatively little empirical attention given to networking as a strategic driver of business performance within the Malawian context. This knowledge gap limits the development of evidence-based interventions aimed at strengthening entrepreneurial networks.

This study addresses this gap by examining the relationship between social networking and business growth among small-scale entrepreneurs in Chinsapo, Lilongwe. Although data were collected from entrepreneurs operating within Chinsapo, the findings contribute to a broader understanding of networking practices among small-scale enterprises in Malawi. The study is guided by Social Network Theory, which argues that relationships provide access to valuable information, resources, and opportunities that influence entrepreneurial outcomes. (Granovetter, 1973; Burt, 1992). By examining how networking influences business growth and sustainability, this study contributes to entrepreneurship literature while providing practical insights for policymakers, business support organizations, financial institutions, and entrepreneurs seeking to strengthen the performance and resilience of small-scale enterprises.

Literature Review

Conceptual Review



Social networking refers to the deliberate establishment and maintenance of relationships that enable entrepreneurs to access valuable information, resources, business opportunities, and social support. (Aldrich & Zimmer, 1986). Within entrepreneurship research, networking extends beyond personal relationships to include interactions with customers, suppliers, financial institutions, business associations, mentors, and digital platforms. Such relationships provide entrepreneurs with knowledge, credibility, market intelligence, and resource-sharing opportunities that strengthen business performance.

Business growth is commonly defined as the improvement in an enterprise's operational and financial performance over time. (Penrose, 1959; Storey, 1994). Growth may be reflected through increased sales, higher profits, expansion of customer markets, product diversification, increased employment, and improved competitiveness. For small-scale enterprises operating in developing economies, growth also includes the ability to survive economic uncertainty while maintaining consistent business operations.

Business sustainability refers to the capacity of an enterprise to continue operating successfully over the long term despite changing economic, social, and competitive conditions. (Elkington, 1997). Sustainable businesses demonstrate resilience, adaptability, efficient resource utilization, and the ability to maintain profitable operations over time. For small-scale entrepreneurs, sustainability often depends on continuous access to information, markets, financial resources, and strategic partnerships, all of which may be facilitated through effective networking.

Theoretical Review

This study is anchored in Social Network Theory, which explains how relationships influence individuals' access to information, resources, and opportunities. The theory proposes that entrepreneurs do not operate in isolation but are embedded within networks of social and business relationships that shape their entrepreneurial outcomes. Strong relationships provide trust, cooperation, and reliable support, whereas weak relationships often introduce entrepreneurs to new information, customers, suppliers, and business opportunities that would otherwise remain inaccessible. (Granovetter, 1973).

Within the entrepreneurial context, Social Network Theory suggests that businesses with broader and more diverse networks are more likely to acquire external knowledge, identify emerging market opportunities, access financial resources, and respond effectively to environmental changes. Consequently, networking becomes an intangible strategic asset capable of improving innovation, business growth, competitiveness, and long-term sustainability. (Burt, 1992).

The theory is particularly relevant to small-scale enterprises in Malawi because entrepreneurs frequently operate under conditions of limited capital, restricted institutional support, and information asymmetry. Under such circumstances, personal and professional networks often substitute for formal business support systems by facilitating access to credit, suppliers, customers, and business advice. Therefore, Social Network Theory provides an appropriate framework for explaining how networking contributes to business growth among small-scale entrepreneurs. (Granovetter, 1973).

Empirical Review

Previous empirical studies consistently demonstrate that networking positively influences entrepreneurial performance across different economic contexts. (Hoang & Antoncic, 2003; Sendawula et al., 2023). Research has shown that entrepreneurs who actively develop professional and business relationships are more likely to access valuable market information, improve innovation capacity, attract new customers, and strengthen overall business competitiveness.

Studies conducted in Tanzania found that networking significantly enhances small and medium enterprise performance by improving productivity, market accessibility, and profitability through increased use of information and communication technologies. Similarly, research conducted in Taiwan reported that both the quality and diversity of entrepreneurial networks significantly influence enterprise performance by improving knowledge sharing, innovation, and business collaboration. (nyangarika, 2016)

Evidence from South Africa by Semukele h. Mlotshwa and jabulile msimango-galawe indicates that merely recognizing the importance of networking is insufficient to improve business performance. Instead, entrepreneurs who actively participate in networking activities and maintain strong business relationships experience better business outcomes than those whose networking remains passive or limited.

Within Malawi, available evidence suggests that entrepreneurs rely heavily on informal social networks because access to formal financial institutions and structured business support remains limited. Community relationships, church groups, savings groups, family members, and fellow entrepreneurs frequently provide information, business advice, informal credit, and emotional support that facilitate enterprise survival. Although these informal networks play a significant role, they may not always provide sufficient opportunities for market expansion or innovation, highlighting the need for stronger formal networking mechanisms. (kumdana, 2020)

Despite the growing body of international evidence, relatively few empirical studies have specifically examined the relationship between social networking and business growth among small-scale entrepreneurs in Malawi. Existing studies have largely concentrated on entrepreneurship development, access to finance, or enterprise performance without directly investigating networking as a strategic factor influencing business growth and sustainability. Furthermore, limited quantitative evidence exists regarding how networking activities translate into measurable business outcomes among entrepreneurs operating within Malawi's informal business sector.

This study addresses this knowledge gap by providing empirical evidence on the relationship between social networking and business growth among small-scale entrepreneurs in Chinsapo, Lilongwe. In doing so, it contributes to entrepreneurship literature by demonstrating how networking activities influence business performance within a developing-country context while providing practical insights for policymakers, business development organizations, and entrepreneurs.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopted a quantitative research approach using a descriptive research design to examine the relationship between social networking and business growth among small-scale entrepreneurs. (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The design was considered appropriate because it enabled the collection and analysis of numerical data describing networking practices and their influence on business performance. Furthermore, the quantitative approach facilitated objective measurement of respondents' perceptions and allowed statistical examination of the relationship between networking activities and business growth.

Study Area

The research was conducted in Chinsapo, Lilongwe, one of Malawi's rapidly growing urban trading areas characterized by a high concentration of small-scale enterprises. The area accommodates businesses operating in retail, trading, manufacturing, food vending, tailoring, and various service industries, making it an appropriate setting for investigating entrepreneurial networking practices.

Target Population and Sampling

The target population consisted of 150 registered and non-registered small-scale entrepreneurs operating within Chinsapo. Using Yamane's (1967) sample size determination formula with a 10% margin of error, a sample of 60 respondents was obtained. A simple random sampling technique was employed to ensure that every entrepreneur within the target population had an equal probability of participating in the study, thereby minimizing selection bias and improving the representativeness of the sample.

Data Collection

Primary data were collected using a structured questionnaire consisting mainly of closed-ended questions measured on a five-point Likert scale ranging from Strongly Agree (5) to Strongly Disagree (1). The questionnaire gathered information on networking activities, business growth indicators, and factors associated with business sustainability. Prior to the main survey, the instrument was pilot-tested to assess clarity, relevance, and reliability, and necessary revisions were made before full-scale data collection commenced.

Reliability and Validity

The internal consistency of the measurement scales was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha coefficient. (Cronbach, 1951). All study constructs achieved reliability coefficients above the recommended threshold of 0.70, indicating acceptable to very strong internal consistency. These results confirmed that the questionnaire was sufficiently reliable for statistical analysis and interpretation.

Data Analysis

Completed questionnaires were coded and entered into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) for analysis. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations, were used to summarize respondents' networking practices and perceptions of business growth. Pearson's correlation analysis was subsequently performed to examine the relationship between networking activities and business growth. Statistical findings were presented using tables accompanied by narrative interpretations to facilitate meaningful discussion of the results.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles were observed throughout the research process. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all respondents before data collection. Respondents were assured that their identities would remain anonymous and that the information collected would be used exclusively for academic purposes. Confidentiality was maintained during data collection, analysis, and reporting to protect participants' privacy and encourage honest responses.

RESULTS & FINDINGS

response rate

Questionnaires	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Distributed	60	100
Returned	60	100

The study achieved a 100% response rate, with all 60 distributed questionnaires successfully completed and returned. This high response rate enhanced the reliability of the findings and minimized the possibility of non-response bias. The respondents represented a diverse range of business sectors, including service enterprises, trading, retail, manufacturing, and wholesale businesses. Most businesses had operated between one and six years, indicating that the majority were either emerging or moderately established enterprises. Furthermore, most respondents employed fewer than five workers, confirming the dominance of micro and small enterprises within the study area.

Networking Practices among Small-Scale Entrepreneurs

descriptive statistics on business growth

Variable	Mean	Standard deviation	Interpretation
Growth	3.75	0.99	High

The findings revealed that respondents actively engaged in various networking activities, with an overall mean score of 3.71 (SD = 0.97), indicating a high level of networking participation.

Entrepreneurs reported frequent interaction with fellow business owners to exchange market information and business experiences. Digital networking through WhatsApp and Facebook also emerged as a widely adopted practice, reflecting the increasing importance of online platforms for communication, product promotion, and customer engagement.

Collaboration with suppliers, customers, and business partners recorded the strongest level of agreement among respondents, demonstrating that business relationships extend beyond information sharing to include strategic cooperation that facilitates business operations. Although participation in formal business associations was relatively lower than informal networking activities, the findings suggest that entrepreneurs continue to recognize the value of organized business groups for knowledge sharing and business development.
Overall, these findings indicate that networking has become an important component of daily business operations among small-scale entrepreneurs in Chinsapo.

Effect of Networking on Business Growth

Business growth recorded an overall mean score of 3.75 (SD = 0.99), suggesting that respondents generally perceived networking as making a positive contribution to enterprise growth.

Most respondents agreed that networking had increased business sales, expanded customer bases, improved market visibility, and enhanced business performance. Entrepreneurs also reported that networking enabled them to identify new market opportunities and strengthen relationships with suppliers and customers, thereby improving operational efficiency and business competitiveness.

Although a small proportion of respondents expressed uncertainty regarding the contribution of networking, relatively few believed that networking had little or no effect on business growth. This pattern indicates broad agreement among entrepreneurs that networking plays an important role in supporting enterprise development.

Relationship Between Networking and Business Growth

Correlation analysis demonstrated a strong positive relationship between networking activities and business growth. The results indicate that entrepreneurs who actively establish and maintain business relationships are more likely to experience improvements in sales performance, customer acquisition, market expansion, and long-term business sustainability.

The positive relationship suggests that networking functions as a strategic business resource rather than simply a social activity. Entrepreneurs who invest time in developing relationships with customers, suppliers, fellow entrepreneurs, and professional groups appear to gain access to valuable information, business opportunities, and support systems that contribute directly to enterprise growth.

Overall, the statistical findings provide empirical evidence that networking is positively associated with business growth among small-scale entrepreneurs operating in Chinsapo, Lilongwe.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that social networking plays a significant role in promoting business growth among small-scale entrepreneurs in Chinsapo, Lilongwe. Entrepreneurs who actively participated in networking activities reported improvements in sales performance, customer acquisition, market visibility, and business sustainability. These findings suggest that networking extends beyond social interaction and functions as a strategic resource that enables entrepreneurs to access valuable information, opportunities, resources, and relationships that support business development. Therefore, social networking should be understood as an entrepreneurial capability that contributes to improved business performance, particularly among small enterprises operating within resource-constrained environments.

One of the most notable findings was the high level of collaboration between entrepreneurs, suppliers, customers, and business partners. This indicates that business relationships have become an essential mechanism through which entrepreneurs obtain market information, negotiate favourable business terms, identify new commercial opportunities, and strengthen their competitive position. Such collaboration may also reduce business uncertainty by allowing entrepreneurs to exchange experiences, share knowledge, and respond more effectively to changing market conditions. In environments where access to formal business support systems may be limited, these relationships become valuable sources of guidance, trust, and practical assistance.

The importance of entrepreneurial networks in overcoming resource limitations is supported by recent evidence from developing-country contexts. Mitrašević (2023) argues that entrepreneurial networks assist small and medium enterprises in overcoming structural barriers by improving access to information, partnerships, and external resources. This supports the current study's findings that relationships with customers, suppliers, and fellow business owners contribute to improved business outcomes. In the Malawian context, where many small-scale entrepreneurs experience challenges related to finance, market access, and business information, networking could provide alternative pathways through which entrepreneurs obtain resources necessary for survival and growth.

The widespread use of digital networking platforms, particularly WhatsApp and Facebook, further demonstrates the growing importance of technology in supporting entrepreneurial activities. Digital platforms provide affordable channels for communication, marketing, customer engagement, and information sharing, making them especially valuable for resource-constrained small enterprises. These platforms allow entrepreneurs to reach customers beyond their immediate physical locations, promote products and services, maintain customer relationships, and interact with other business actors. As internet and smartphone access continue to expand in Malawi, digital networking is likely to become an increasingly important driver of business competitiveness and sustainability.

The findings regarding digital networking are consistent with recent research on digital entrepreneurship. Fakhreldin et al. (2024) found that social media adoption positively contributes to micro and small enterprise performance by improving customer interaction and market reach. Similarly, studies on digital platforms and SME performance indicate that digital technologies strengthen business capabilities through improved communication, information sharing, and operational efficiency. These findings reinforce the argument that digital networking has become an important strategic tool for small enterprises seeking growth opportunities, particularly in developing economies where traditional marketing and communication channels may be costly or limited.

The positive relationship identified between networking activities and business growth is consistent with previous entrepreneurship research. The correlation between networking activities and improved business outcomes suggests that entrepreneurs who actively build and maintain professional relationships are more likely to benefit from increased access to information, financial resources, innovation opportunities, and customer networks. Similar findings have been reported in studies conducted in Tanzania and Taiwan, which concluded that networking enhances productivity, profitability, knowledge sharing, and market expansion among small and medium-sized enterprises. The present study extends this evidence by demonstrating that similar relationships exist among small-scale entrepreneurs operating within the Malawian context.

Furthermore, Sendawula et al. (2023) found that entrepreneurial networking significantly predicts small business performance among enterprises in Uganda. Their study demonstrated that relationships with other business actors provide important channels for accessing knowledge, opportunities, and resources. Similar to the findings of the present study, their research suggests that networking is not merely a social activity but an entrepreneurial capability that enhances competitiveness and performance. This similarity highlights the broader relevance of networking as a growth strategy among small businesses operating in African economies.

The findings also support research conducted in South Africa, which emphasized that meaningful participation in networking activities is more beneficial than simply recognizing the importance of networking. Entrepreneurs who consistently interact with business partners, customers, suppliers, and fellow entrepreneurs appear better positioned to identify opportunities, respond to market challenges, and strengthen business resilience compared to those who remain isolated. This suggests that the value of networking depends not only on the existence of relationships but also on the quality, diversity, and frequency of interactions maintained by entrepreneurs.

Recent evidence further supports this argument by demonstrating that the benefits of networking depend on how entrepreneurs utilize their relationships. Gunarathne et al. (2024) found that social networking could influence firm performance by improving access to resources and enabling entrepreneurs to develop strategies for business survival and expansion. Therefore, entrepreneurs should focus on building active, diverse, and productive networks rather than maintaining relationships that provide limited business value. Effective networking requires continuous engagement, trust-building, knowledge exchange, and collaboration with individuals and organizations that contribute positively to business development.

From a theoretical perspective, the findings provide empirical support for Social Network Theory. The theory proposes that individuals embedded within strong and diverse social networks have greater access to information, resources, and opportunities than those with limited networks. The current findings confirm this proposition by demonstrating that entrepreneurs who actively develop business relationships experience improved business outcomes. Networking therefore functions as a form of social capital that enhances entrepreneurial capability, competitiveness, innovation, and long-term sustainability. (Burt, 1992).

The findings also carry important practical implications for policymakers, government institutions, business development service providers, financial institutions, and entrepreneurship support organizations. These stakeholders should recognize networking as a critical component of enterprise development rather than treating it as an optional business activity. Programmes that encourage mentorship, business associations, networking events, digital entrepreneurship training, and collaborative learning could strengthen entrepreneurs' ability to access markets, finance, information, and business knowledge.

Although networking was found to contribute positively to business growth, the findings also suggest that opportunities remain to strengthen formal networking structures among small-scale entrepreneurs. Many entrepreneurs continue to depend primarily on informal relationships with family members, friends, and existing customers. While these networks provide valuable support, they may not always provide sufficient opportunities for innovation, market expansion, and strategic partnerships. Expanding participation in business associations, professional organizations, and structured entrepreneurship support programmes could further enhance enterprise resilience and competitiveness.

Overall, the findings indicate that networking should be viewed as a strategic capability that contributes to enterprise growth and sustainability. Strengthening entrepreneurs' networking capacity has the potential not only to improve individual business performance but also to contribute to broader economic development, employment creation, and the resilience of Malawi's small enterprise sector. By promoting stronger entrepreneurial networks and supporting digital networking opportunities, stakeholders could create an environment where small-scale enterprises are better equipped to overcome challenges and achieve sustainable growth.

CONCLUSION, PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS, LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study examined the contribution of social networking to business growth among small-scale entrepreneurs in Chinsapo, Lilongwe, Malawi. The findings demonstrate that networking is a strategic resource that improves enterprise performance by facilitating access to business information, customers, suppliers, market opportunities, and collaborative partnerships. Entrepreneurs who actively engaged in networking activities reported increased sales, improved market visibility, stronger customer relationships, and enhanced business sustainability. The study also established a positive relationship between networking activities and business growth, indicating that entrepreneurs who invest in building and maintaining business networks are more likely to achieve sustainable business performance. These findings contribute to entrepreneurship literature by providing empirical evidence from the Malawian context and supporting the application of Social Network Theory to small-scale enterprises.

The findings have important practical implications. Policymakers and entrepreneurship support institutions should promote business forums, mentorship programmes, trade fairs, and digital entrepreneurship training to strengthen entrepreneurial networks. Financial institutions should collaborate with entrepreneur associations to improve access to financial information and services, while entrepreneurs should actively participate in formal business associations and digital networking platforms to expand market opportunities and strategic partnerships.

The study was limited to entrepreneurs in Chinsapo, Lilongwe, and employed a cross-sectional design based on self-reported data, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Future research should examine networking practices across different regions of Malawi using larger samples and longitudinal designs. Further studies should also explore the role of digital networking platforms, artificial intelligence, and e-commerce technologies in enhancing the performance and sustainability of small and medium-sized enterprises.

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