Identity Work, Belonging, and Legitimacy among Second-Generation South Asian Women

Three Essays on Intersectional Entrepreneurship

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Abstract

This thesis examines how intersectional inequalities shape the career trajectories, identity work, and entrepreneurial legitimacy of second-generation South Asian women in the United Kingdom. Although women have increasing access to professional employment and entrepreneurial opportunities, access alone does not deliver recognition, belonging, or legitimacy. Instead, formal inclusion masks a deeper problem: women must continuously negotiate their identities within contexts shaped by intersecting gendered, racialised, and cultural power relations. This thesis conceptualises these women as intersectional ethnic entrepreneurs, individuals whose entrepreneurial experiences, identities, and negotiations are shaped by the simultaneous operation of gender, race, ethnicity, and culture across multiple life domains.

Drawing on qualitative, interpretive research with seventeen second-generation South Asian women in the UK, the thesis develops a process-based intersectional account of how inequality unfolds across three interconnected domains. The three empirical essays summarised below develop an argument about how identity work, legitimacy, and belonging are continuously negotiated across organisational, entrepreneurial, and social contexts.

Essay 1 examines how intersectional workplace experiences shape career trajectories and transitions into entrepreneurship. Using an interpretive, inductive approach with seventeen participants, it shows that despite formal inclusion, second-generation South Asian women experience conditional recognition, limited progression, and ongoing identity regulation within organisations. Accumulating over time, these experiences generate *accumulated identity strain*, which gradually weakens attachment to organisational careers and shapes decisions to move into entrepreneurship. The essay contributes by theorising entrepreneurial transition not as individual choice or opportunity pursuit alone, but also as a relational response to sustained structural conditions that made organisational careers difficult to continue.

Essay 2 explores how belonging is experienced and constructed within entrepreneurial support spaces and networking environments. Drawing on fifteen qualitative interviews, it finds that access to mainstream entrepreneurial support hubs does not guarantee meaningful participation or recognition for intersectional entrepreneurs. Instead, women construct belonging actively within identity-based networks, where shared cultural, religious, and gendered experience enables trust, mutual recognition, and learning. The essay introduces the concept of *constructed belonging*, showing that belonging is a relational achievement produced through everyday interactions. In addition, identity-aligned support hubs helped women rebuild their sense of belonging and entrepreneurial confidence.

Essay 3 investigates how women negotiate entrepreneurial legitimacy after establishing their businesses. It demonstrates that entrepreneurship does not dissolve inequality but reconfigures it. Women must continuously adapt how they present themselves across market, family, and community

contexts, each of which evaluates them according to different and often conflicting expectations. The essay theorises this process as *bounded legitimacy negotiation*: legitimacy is context-dependent, audience-specific, and never fully secured. Moreover, identity work remains structural labour rather than individual strategy under persistent intersectional constraints.

Together, these three essays build a connected argument. Intersectional inequalities define the structural conditions within which identity work occurs. Identity work is the mechanism through which intersectional entrepreneurs attempt to secure legitimacy and belonging across contexts. And legitimacy is the outcome that is always being sought, always contested, and never finally achieved. This thesis does not focus on individual struggle or resilience. Instead, it shows how systems of power such as gendered, racialised, and cultural norms shape careers and entrepreneurial experiences. For these participants, formal inclusion did not address the inequalities they faced as intersectional entrepreneurs.

The thesis makes two conceptual contributions, each with two parts. The first is conditional inclusion, theorised as a dynamic cross-context mechanism, showing that inclusion itself reproduces inequality across professional and entrepreneurial domains simultaneously, producing identity regulation and accumulated strain rather than stable belonging. Its second part is accumulated identity strain, which theorises how the sustained identity work demanded by conditional inclusion gradually weakens belonging, legitimacy, and confidence in organisational careers.

The second contribution is bounded legitimacy negotiation, theorised as the central experience of intersectional entrepreneurs. Its first part is constructed belonging, which shows that belonging functions as a mechanism through which participation and legitimacy are produced, rather than as an affective outcome of inclusion, and the thesis specifies the relational mechanisms through which it is constructed. Its second part is the bounded negotiation of legitimacy itself, which shows that entrepreneurship delivers partial and context-dependent empowerment rather than an escape from intersectional constraint, and operates as a relational response to sustained structural conditions. This account also extends bounded agency across time, as expectations surrounding women's work, visibility, and ambition are inherited from the first generation and encountered before entering the workplace. As a result, the limits on agency are partly inherited rather than imposed solely in the present. The thesis offers a novel intersectional framework for understanding careers, belonging, and legitimacy that moves beyond static, single-context analyses. It positions second-generation South Asian women as intersectional entrepreneurs navigating unequal systems of recognition across their working lives.

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List of Conference Proceedings Associated with the Thesis

Career Transitions of Ethnic Minority Women Entrepreneurs

Presented at the RENT Annual Conference, November 2024

Ethnic Minority Women's Preferences for Entrepreneurship Education and Training (EET): A Social Identity Theory Perspective

Presented at the ISBE Conference, November 2024

Ethnic Minority Women's entrepreneurial identity negotiation

Presented at NCSB Conference, May 2026

Where do I Fit In? Why Belonging Shapes Participation in Business Networking

Published Blog, Enterprise Research UK

Chapter 1: Introduction and Research Context

1.1 Background and Context

Despite significant progress in equality, diversity, and inclusion initiatives, ethnic minority women continue to experience unequal recognition, belonging, and progression within existing work environments (Mirza, 2013; Bhopal, 2018; Arifeen and Syed, 2020). Although organisations increasingly emphasise diversity and representation, formal inclusion does not necessarily translate into meaningful participation or equal access to opportunities. Research demonstrates that organisational practices often continue to reflect dominant assumptions about professionalism, leadership, and competence, which can privilege white, masculine, and culturally dominant forms of behaviour and interaction (Ahmed, 2012; Ray, 2019; Adamson et al., 2021). Thus, individuals from racialised and gendered minority groups may enter professional spaces while still experiencing challenges in being recognised as legitimate members of those environments.

These challenges are particularly relevant for second-generation South Asian women in the UK. In contrast to first-generation migrants, they were educated and professionally trained within British institutions. Yet they continue to encounter challenges related to recognition and career progression, often entering organisational life with expectations shaped by meritocratic narratives that emphasise education, skill, and effort as a pathway to career success (Arifeen and Syed, 2020; Ullah, 2025). In practice, however, they encounter subtle forms of misrecognition, where their competence is acknowledged while their suitability, leadership potential, or cultural fit remains questioned within professional settings (Bhopal, 2020; Mirza, 2013).

These experiences highlight an important tension between access and recognition. While diversity initiatives may increase representation, they do not automatically challenge the underlying processes through which legitimacy is constructed (Dover, Major and Kaiser, 2014; Glass and Cook, 2020; Dobusch, 2021). Women may therefore experience inclusion as conditional, requiring continuous efforts to demonstrate competence, manage visibility, and adapt their identities in response to dominant expectations of professionalism. Such experiences are not limited to explicit discrimination but are reproduced through everyday organisational practices. This includes informal networking expectations, unequal access to influential relationships, differential evaluations of performance, and assumptions about appropriate leadership behaviours (Purdie-Vaughns and Eibach, 2008; Adamson et al., 2021).

For second-generation South Asian women, these experiences are further shaped by the interaction between organisational expectations and broader social contexts. Gendered cultural expectations, family responsibilities, and community-based understandings of respectability influence how women negotiate decisions around work, visibility, and career progression. Research consistently shows that

caregiving continues to influence women's labour market outcomes, affecting progression, security, and long-term work commitment (Bhopal, 2010; Mirza, 2013). Rather than experiencing identity as a fixed characteristic, women continuously navigate competing expectations across professional, family, and community settings. These negotiations become particularly significant when professional identities are challenged or when existing career pathways no longer provide sufficient recognition, belonging, or progression opportunities.

This suggests that inequality should not only be understood as a barrier within specific organisational settings, but as an ongoing process that shapes how women understand themselves, their possibilities, and their future career directions (Acker, 2006; Ahmed, 2012). For some women, repeated experiences of conditional recognition may gradually influence how they relate to organisational careers and encourage consideration of alternative pathways, including entrepreneurship. However, moving into self-employment and entrepreneurship does not mean a departure from inequality. Rather, it involves the reconstruction of identity and legitimacy within new environments where expectations around credibility, belonging, and success continue to operate through different criteria and different audiences.

1.2 Identity Transition, Identity Work, and Entrepreneurial Pathways

While existing research has provided important insights into the structural inequalities experienced by ethnic minority women (Bhopal, 2020; Mirza, 2013; Arifeen and Syed, 2020; Tatli and Özbilgin, 2012), less attention has been given to how these experiences shape identity transitions across different contexts of working life. In the literature, career exit is often discussed as an individual choice or lifestyle decision rather than as a response to prolonged organisational conditions (Meléndez and Özkazanç-Pan, 2021; Raimi et al., 2023). However, such approaches provide limited understanding of how individuals respond when their professional identities become difficult to sustain within existing organisational environments. For second-generation South Asian women, experiences of conditional inclusion may shape not only career decisions but also how they understand their own competence, belonging, and future career directions.

Identity is not a fixed or individual possession but is continuously constructed and negotiated through social interaction and contextual expectations (Down and Reveley, 2009; Shepherd and Haynie, 2009). From an interpretivist perspective, identity work refers to the ongoing processes through which individuals construct, maintain, and revise understandings of themselves in relation to others and the environments in which they participate (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Watson, 2008). This perspective highlights that identities are shaped through ongoing encounters with social expectations, evaluations, and systems of recognition (Hytti et al., 2017). Therefore, when individuals move between organisational and entrepreneurial settings, they do not simply change occupations. They engage in processes of identity reconstruction as they negotiate new expectations of credibility and legitimacy.

This identity perspective is particularly important for understanding entrepreneurial transitions. Entrepreneurship is often presented as an individual choice driven by opportunity, autonomy, or personal ambition. However, such perspectives overlook the identity processes involved when individuals move away from established organisational roles and attempt to become recognised as entrepreneurs. Unlike organisational employment, where professional identity may be supported by formal positions, qualifications, and institutional structures, entrepreneurship requires individuals to actively establish credibility among multiple audiences, including customers, investors, networks, and support organisations (Down and Reveley, 2009; Shepherd and Haynie, 2009). Entrepreneurial identity therefore develops through ongoing interaction rather than existing before entrepreneurial activity.

For racialised women, these identity transitions are shaped by intersecting expectations around gender, ethnicity, and cultural legitimacy (Essers and Benschop, 2007; Swail and Marlow, 2018). Existing research shows that entrepreneurial recognition is not equally available to all individuals, as dominant assumptions about entrepreneurship continue to privilege white and masculine-coded forms of behaviour, self-presentation, and credibility (Marlow and Dy, 2018). As a result, women from marginalised groups may need to undertake greater identity work to establish themselves as legitimate entrepreneurs while simultaneously navigating expectations from entrepreneurial audiences, family networks, and wider communities.

This suggests that transitions into entrepreneurship should not be understood simply as movement from one occupational category to another. Instead, they may represent processes of identity negotiation in which individuals reconstruct who they are, how they are recognised (within markets and communities), and where they belong. For second-generation South Asian women, entrepreneurial transition may involve both opportunities for greater control and continued negotiation of gendered, racialised, and cultural expectations. Understanding these transitions therefore requires examining how identity work develops across connected contexts, rather than treating organisational employment and entrepreneurship as separate and unrelated stages.

Building on this perspective, identity transition is treated throughout this thesis as a process rather than an event, one that spans organisational, entrepreneurial, and community settings rather than beginning and ending within a single career decision. Section 1.5 sets out how intersectionality and identity work are brought together as the analytical framework through which this process is examined.

1.3 Research Gaps

This thesis addresses a gap that is both conceptual and contextual. Existing research has demonstrated that organisational inclusion remains conditional and shaped by gendered and racialised norms (Acker, 2006; Ahmed, 2012), and that entrepreneurship is similarly structured by unequal systems of legitimacy and opportunity (Knight, 2016; Marlow and Dy, 2018). The contextual gap concerns who has been studied. Second-generation South Asian women remain under-represented in this literature. They are

educated and professionally socialised within British institutions, yet they continue to encounter racialisation, and existing frameworks were not built to explain this combination. The more significant gap, and the one this thesis foregrounds, is conceptual: what this research has not explained is how identity transition itself operates when intersectional constraints are structural and recurring rather than incidental to a single setting. Existing accounts tend to treat identity work as context-bound, examined within organisations, within networks, or within entrepreneurship, but rarely as a process that a woman carries with her as she moves between these contexts. This thesis moves beyond explanations based on group categories or disadvantage alone to examine how second-generation South Asian women navigate identity transitions despite formal integration and access, and how the identity work this requires accumulates and changes shape across a career.

This conceptual gap is compounded by three related limitations in the literature. First, existing studies often examine organisational employment, professional networks, learning environments, and entrepreneurship as separate areas of study, even though career experiences frequently move across these interconnected spaces (Ram, Jones and Villares-Varela, 2017; Marlow and Dy, 2018). As a result, existing research provides limited insight into how inequality accumulates across career trajectories and shapes movement between organisational and entrepreneurial contexts.

Second, there is a lack of a process-based understanding of career transitions. Organisational research has largely focused on how inequality operates within employment settings, while entrepreneurship research often presents business entry as a new beginning or individual career choice (Knight, 2016; Martinez Dy, 2020). This separation overlooks how prolonged workplace experiences, including misrecognition, limited progression, and restricted belonging, may shape later decisions to leave organisational careers and pursue entrepreneurship.

Third, research on ethnic minority women's entrepreneurship has frequently focused on first-generation migrants and necessity-driven forms of business activity (Ram, Jones and Villares-Varela, 2017; Poggesi and Mari, 2025), and research on identity work in this population remains typically context-bound, most often limited to organisational settings (Smith et al., 2019; Hytti et al., 2017). While this literature has been valuable in demonstrating structural barriers, it provides less insight into the experiences of second-generation South Asian women who are often educated, professionally integrated, and socialised within UK institutions. For these women, career challenges are not primarily explained through migration experiences, but through ongoing processes of recognition, legitimacy, and belonging across organisational, entrepreneurial, and social contexts (Bhopal, 2010; Arifeen and Syed, 2020).

This thesis addresses these gaps by developing a process-based intersectional account of identity work across connected career contexts. It conceptualises organisational employment, entrepreneurial ecosystems, and entrepreneursh

ip as interconnected spaces where legitimacy and belonging are continuously negotiated. By examining how second-generation South Asian women navigate intersecting gendered, racialised, and cultural expectations, the thesis explains how entrepreneurial identities emerge through processes of disruption, reconstruction, and ongoing negotiation rather than through linear career choices or individual preference alone. The contributions this analysis produces are set out in Section 1.7.

1.4 Research Aim and Research Questions

This thesis examines how intersectional inequalities shape the career trajectories, entrepreneurial experiences, and legitimacy of second-generation South Asian women in the United Kingdom. It seeks to trace how identity work accumulates, is disrupted by recurring episodes of misrecognition, and is reconstructed as women move between these contexts. This research develops a relational understanding of how women navigate organisational employment, transition into entrepreneurship, and construct belonging and legitimacy across multiple contexts, including entrepreneurial ecosystems, family, and community settings.

The thesis is organised around three empirical essays, each examining a different yet connected site where legitimacy and belonging are negotiated. Together, these essays enable the study to examine how identity work becomes difficult to sustain within organisations, how belonging is shaped and maintained through identity-based networking and learning environments, and how legitimacy is negotiated within entrepreneurial contexts. To address this aim, the thesis is guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: How do intersectional workplace experiences shape the career trajectories and transitions of second-generation South Asian women from organisational employment into entrepreneurship?

RQ2: How is belonging constructed within entrepreneurial support hubs, and how do identity-based spaces shape the entrepreneurial experiences of second-generation South Asian women?

RQ3: How do second-generation South Asian women entrepreneurs negotiate entrepreneurial legitimacy across intersecting market, family, and community contexts?

1.5 Theoretical Positioning

This thesis brings together intersectionality and identity work as the central analytical framework for examining how legitimacy and belonging are negotiated across different domains of working life. These concepts provide a shared foundation for analysing organisational employment, entrepreneurial ecosystems, and networking and learning environments as connected sites in which recognition is uneven and often conditional. A full theoretical review and positioning within existing scholarship is provided in Chapter 2; the present section outlines their core logic and explains why bringing them together is necessary for this study.

Intersectionality provides the foundation for understanding how multiple systems of power operate together to shape experiences of inequality (Holvino, 2010). Developed from Black feminist legal scholarship, it moves beyond approaches that treat gender, race, and class as separate and additive categories of disadvantage. Instead, it examines how these dimensions are co-constituted and produce qualitatively distinct forms of social experience (Crenshaw, 1997; Collins, 2000; Holvino, 2010).

This perspective is particularly relevant for examining the experiences of second-generation South Asian women, whose career trajectories are shaped through the simultaneous interaction of gendered, racialised, and culturally embedded expectations (Tariq and Syed, 2017; Arifeen and Syed, 2020). Within organisational and entrepreneurial settings, intersectionality draws attention to how power relations influence whose knowledge, behaviour, and contributions are recognised as valuable and legitimate (Tatli and Özbilgin, 2012; Bauer et al., 2021). In this thesis, intersectionality is therefore used as an analytical lens to examine how structural conditions shape access to recognition, opportunity, and belonging across connected career contexts.

While intersectionality explains the broader structures within which inequality operates, identity work provides insight into how individuals actively navigate and respond to these conditions. Rooted in symbolic interactionism and social constructionism, identity work refers to the ongoing processes through which individuals construct, maintain, and revise understandings of themselves in relation to social expectations, interactions, and evaluative environments (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Watson, 2008; Brown, 2015). In organisational and entrepreneurial contexts, identity work involves managing self-presentation, behaviour, and positioning in relation to dominant expectations of professionalism, credibility, and success (Leitch and Harrison, 2016). However, in this thesis, identity work is not understood as an expression of unrestricted individual agency. Instead, it is conceptualised as a relational and context-dependent process shaped by unequal conditions, where individuals negotiate recognition within environments structured by existing power relations (Radu-Lefebvre et al., 2021).

The connection between intersectionality and identity work is particularly important for understanding legitimacy. Legitimacy refers to the process through which individuals, identities, and activities become recognised as appropriate, credible, and acceptable within particular social contexts (Suchman, 1995). In entrepreneurship, legitimacy is not automatically achieved through competence or effort alone but is socially constructed through interactions with multiple audiences, including customers, networks, investors, and support organisations (Radu-Lefebvre et al., 2021). Similarly, within organisational environments, recognition of competence, leadership potential, and professional fit is influenced by dominant assumptions about appropriate behaviour and identity (Acker, 2006; Ahmed, 2012). Therefore, adopting Suchman's (1995) understanding of legitimacy as a socially constructed and audience-dependent process, and extends this through intersectional scholarship (Crenshaw, 1991; Holvino, 2010). This thesis conceptualises legitimacy as a negotiated and uneven process, where

second-generation South Asian women may experience recognition as conditional and dependent on ongoing identity work (Radu-Lefebvre et al., 2021; Essers, McAdam and Ossenkop, 2025).

A related concept underpinning this thesis is belonging. While legitimacy concerns whether individuals are recognised as credible and appropriate within a particular setting, belonging concerns whether they experience themselves as accepted, valued, and able to participate without continual negotiation of their position. Belonging is not assumed to naturally follow from formal inclusion or access. Instead, it develops through everyday interactions and is shaped by the norms, relationships, and expectations that define organisational and entrepreneurial environments (May, 2011; Stead, 2017; Stoker, Cruz-Garcia and Wakkee, 2025b). For second-generation South Asian women, belonging may therefore remain uncertain even when professional and entrepreneurial spaces formally include them, if those spaces continue to privilege dominant understandings of competence, professionalism, and legitimacy.

This thesis treats legitimacy and belonging as distinct but closely related dimensions of women's experiences. Legitimacy refers to external recognition and is granted or withheld by others, including employers, customers, support organisations, family members, and wider communities, who assess whether a woman and her entrepreneurial activities are credible and appropriate. Belonging, in contrast, refers to an individual's own sense of being accepted, valued, and comfortable within a particular setting. Although legitimacy and belonging may be closely connected, they do not necessarily occur together. A woman may be recognised as legitimate by others while still experiencing a limited sense of belonging. Similarly, she may feel a strong sense of belonging within a particular space without this influencing how she is perceived by external audiences. To maintain this conceptual distinction, this thesis uses legitimacy to refer to recognition and acceptance by others, while belonging refers to participants' own sense of acceptance and fit. Essay 1 examines both legitimacy and belonging, Essay 2 focuses specifically on belonging, and Essay 3 examines legitimacy.

Together, these four concepts: intersectionality, identity work, legitimacy, and belonging form the analytical framework of this thesis. By using this framework consistently across the three empirical essays, the thesis examines how identity work is recalibrated as women move between contexts rather than resolved within any single domain.

1.6 Summary of Essays

This section provides an overview of the three empirical essays, outlining how each contributes to addressing different aspects of the overall research aim and demonstrating how they connect to build a cumulative argument.

Essay 1: Organisational Experiences and Transition to Entrepreneurship

This essay examines how second-generation South Asian women experience inequality in organisational workplaces, particularly in relation to recognition, progression, and belonging. It shows

that although organisations increasingly promote diversity, everyday workplace practices continue to reproduce exclusion through informal hierarchies, differential evaluations, and assumptions about cultural fit and professional suitability. The essay theorises this pattern as conditional inclusion: access is granted, but recognition is never securely held and can be withdrawn on the same grounds it was given. Over time, sustaining this position produces accumulated identity strain, gradually weakening attachment to organisational careers. Entrepreneurship then emerges as a relational response to this prolonged inequality. Through it, intersectional entrepreneurs begin to reconstruct identity and legitimacy on their own terms.

Essay 2: Belonging in Entrepreneurial Spaces

This essay examines how second-generation South Asian women experience and construct belonging within entrepreneurial networks and support hubs. It finds that access to mainstream entrepreneurial environments does not automatically produce inclusion or meaningful participation. In these spaces, women frequently encounter the same dynamics of conditional recognition they met in organisations. Belonging is instead constructed within identity-based networks, where shared cultural, religious, and gendered experiences enable trust, open learning, and mutual recognition. The essay contributes the concept of constructed belonging, showing that belonging is produced through repeated relational work rather than conferred by access, and that identity-aligned support hubs are vital sites for intersectional entrepreneurs rebuilding their sense of belonging and entrepreneurial confidence.

Essay 3: Legitimacy and Identity Work in Entrepreneurship

This essay explores how intersectional entrepreneurs negotiate legitimacy after establishing their businesses. It shows that inequality does not disappear through entrepreneurial entry but is reshaped across market, family, and community contexts, where women face overlapping and often conflicting expectations about credibility, respectability, and appropriate behaviour. To navigate these demands, women engage in continuous identity work, adjusting how they present themselves depending on the audience, balancing authenticity with recognition, and managing legitimacy across multiple arenas simultaneously. Many of these constraints are not created when women enter employment or entrepreneurship. Instead, they are shaped earlier through family and socialisation, which transmit expectations about acceptable work, visibility, and ambition from a young age. The essay advances the concept of bounded legitimacy negotiation by demonstrating that entrepreneurial agency does not fully overcome constraints. Instead, it produces partial empowerment, while legitimacy remains fragile and subject to ongoing negotiation. The boundaries of agency are therefore social and generational as well as structural.

1.7 Thesis Contributions

This thesis introduces two conceptual contributions, each with two parts. The first is conditional inclusion, which explains how formal access itself operates as a mechanism of inequality across organisational and entrepreneurial contexts. Its second part, accumulated identity strain, explains how organisational experiences shape entrepreneurial transitions over time. The second contribution, bounded legitimacy negotiation, shows that entrepreneurial agency operates within persistent structural constraints. Its first part, constructed belonging, shows how entrepreneurial spaces build recognition rather than assume it. Its second part extends bounded agency in time, showing that expectations inherited from the first generation are met before entry into employment or business ownership. Together, these contributions advance a relational and process-oriented intersectional framework for understanding second-generation South Asian women as intersectional entrepreneurs.

This thesis makes a distinct and original contribution by developing an integrated account of how intersectional inequalities shape the career trajectories and entrepreneurial experiences of second-generation South Asian women in the UK, conceptualising these women as intersectional entrepreneurs, whose agency is exercised across multiple life domains under gendered, racialised, and cultural evaluation simultaneously.

The first contribution advances the concept of conditional inclusion, and it has two parts. The first is conditional inclusion itself. The thesis demonstrates that access to organisations and entrepreneurial ecosystems does not translate into stable belonging or legitimacy. Instead, formal inclusion produces ongoing identity regulation and uneven recognition across contexts, requiring women to continuously demonstrate competence, manage visibility, and adapt their self-presentation to dominant norms without ever fully securing the recognition that inclusion appears to promise.

The second part of this contribution is accumulated identity strain. It shows that organisational inequality shapes longer-term career trajectories, not only immediate workplace experiences. This finding emerges from tracing how everyday experiences of misrecognition, restricted progression, and identity regulation build over time. It shows how inequality unfolds cumulatively across organisational and domestic spheres, gradually weakening professional identification and shaping decisions to move into entrepreneurship.

The second contribution develops bounded legitimacy negotiation, and it also has two parts. Its first part is constructed belonging. Belonging is shown to function as a mechanism through which legitimacy is produced: rather than emerging as an emotional outcome of inclusion, belonging enables participation, help-seeking, and self-presentation, thereby helping women build legitimacy within entrepreneurial networks. The contribution also specifies the relational mechanisms through which belonging is produced, including cultural alignment, identity-aligned mentoring, relational identification, peer exchange, and the identity-based social capital these relationships generate.

Belonging is therefore an achievement rather than a condition of entry, and formal access alone does not supply it.

The second part is bounded legitimacy negotiation itself. It shows that entrepreneurship does not resolve structural inequality but reconfigures it, requiring intersectional entrepreneurs to manage legitimacy continuously across market, family, and community contexts within persistent structural constraints. Recognition earned in one arena does not transfer to another, so legitimacy must be sought repeatedly and from audiences that apply different standards. This part of the contribution also extends bounded agency in a temporal dimension to bounded agency by showing how constraints experienced by women entrepreneurs are rooted in earlier life experiences and continue to shape entrepreneurial participation over time. Expectations concerning appropriate work, acceptable visibility, and permissible ambition are transmitted from the first generation through upbringing and family life and are therefore encountered before entry into employment or business ownership. The bounds of agency are partly inherited rather than solely imposed by present conditions, a dimension that existing accounts of constraint do not capture, and that is specific to a generation shaped by a migration it did not undertake.

Taken together, these two contributions from the intersectional framework that the three empirical essays develop across connected settings rather than within a single context. The thesis reframes entrepreneurship not as a straightforward pathway to empowerment, but as a context-specific and relational response to sustained structural constraint. Second-generation South Asian women are thereby positioned as intersectional entrepreneurs whose recognition is negotiated at every stage of their working lives rather than secured by entry alone.

1.8 Chapter Summary and Roadmap

This chapter has outlined the focus, purpose, and overall structure of the thesis. It has introduced the central argument, identified the empirical gaps addressed by the study, and situated the research within existing debates on work, entrepreneurship, and inequality. It has also set out the research aim and questions, clarified the key concepts used, and explained how the thesis is structured as a connected, process-based three-essay study examining how intersectional inequalities shape the careers and entrepreneurial experiences of second-generation South Asian women as intersectional entrepreneurs.

The thesis is structured as follows. Chapter 2 develops the theoretical framework, drawing on intersectionality, identity work, legitimacy, and belonging. Chapter 3 outlines the methodological approach and research design. Chapters 4, 5, and 6 present the three empirical essays, examining organisational employment, entrepreneurial networking and learning environments, and entrepreneurial legitimacy, respectively. Chapter 7 synthesises the findings across all three essays, develops the thesis's conceptual contributions, considers implications for policy and practice, and identifies directions for future research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review and Key Theoretical Framework

2.1 Introduction

This chapter develops the theoretical framework that guides the thesis. It examines key literature on how inequality, identity, legitimacy, and belonging are experienced and negotiated across organisational and entrepreneurial contexts. The chapter is organised around four main areas of scholarship: intersectionality, identity work, legitimacy and belonging, and the positioning of second-generation South Asian women. By bringing these perspectives together, the chapter establishes the foundation for the thesis's central argument that identity, legitimacy, and belonging are not formed within isolated spaces but are continuously negotiated across interconnected contexts.

2.2 Intersectionality as a Power-Centred Framework

This thesis adopts intersectionality as a core analytical framework for understanding how inequality operates across work and entrepreneurial contexts. Intersectionality is used to analyse how intersecting systems of power shape access to recognition, legitimacy, and opportunity (Crenshaw, 1997; Collins, 2000; Holvino, 2010). This approach is particularly relevant to understanding the experiences of second-generation South Asian women, whose working lives are shaped by the intersecting effects of gendered, racialised, and cultural expectations (Naseem, 2019; Arifeen and Syed, 2020).

2.2.1 Foundational Intersectional Theory

Intersectionality is not a framework that accumulates multiple disadvantages, but an analytic approach that examines how interlocking systems of power operate together to produce qualitatively distinct forms of inequality. This framework draws on the foundational work of Black feminist theorist Crenshaw (1991; 1997), who showed how legal and organisational systems often overlooked Black women's experiences of employment discrimination by addressing race and gender as distinct forms of inequality. At its core, intersectionality argues that social categories such as gender, race, and class cannot be understood in isolation because they are shaped through the same systems of power (Collins, 2000).

Extending earlier intersectional scholarship, Collins (2000) established that intersecting inequalities are not confined to individual experiences but are institutionally organised and reproduced across social structures. Collins conceptualises power as operating across interconnected structural, cultural, and interpersonal domains, shaping who is recognised as legitimate and whose actions are marginalised within social institutions. In organisation and entrepreneurship research, this perspective has encouraged scholars to move beyond individualised explanations of disadvantage and focus instead on the institutional and social processes through which inequality is generated (Ray, 2019; Ahl and Marlow, 2021). From this perspective, inequality is relational, institutional, and historically embedded, rather than simply a consequence of individual attributes (Choo and Ferree, 2010).

More recent work has emphasised that intersectionality should be understood as an analytical approach concerned with power and inequality, rather than as a framework for simply describing social identities (Choo and Ferree, 2010; Anthias, 2013). On this view, intersectionality reframes how inequality is theorised rather than adding nuance to existing frameworks (Holvino, 2010; Martinez Dy and MacNeil, 2025). It is this analytical, power-focused reading that the thesis follows throughout, rather than a descriptive one built around categorising identity.

2.2.2 Intersectionality in Organisational and Workplace Research

Within organisation and management studies, intersectionality has been used to challenge assumptions of organisational neutrality and meritocracy (Acker, 2006; Nkomo and Rodriguez, 2019). A key contribution of this scholarship is that inequality is reproduced through institutional arrangements, not merely experienced by individuals. From this perspective, organisations are not neutral spaces, but sites in which gendered and racialised hierarchies are embedded, reproduced, and sustained through everyday practices (Acker, 2006; Ray, 2019).

Research shows that dominant norms of professionalism, leadership, and competence are often aligned with white, masculine, and culturally dominant standards, producing uneven conditions of inclusion for ethnic minority women (Glass and Cook, 2020; Opara, Sealy and Ryan, 2020). Formal equality and diversity initiatives may signal commitments to inclusion, but they often coexist with informal organisational practices that shape who is recognised, promoted, and trusted at work (Ahmed, 2012; Tariq and Syed, 2017; Opara, Sealy and Ryan, 2020). These practices include recruitment criteria, performance evaluation processes, leadership norms, and informal networking, which operate as mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion within organisations (Rodriguez and Freeman, 2016; Tomaskovic-Devey and Avent-Holt, 2019; Luiz and Terziev, 2024; Peticca-Harris et al., 2025).

Puwar (2001) highlights that professional spaces are often presented as neutral and meritocratic, yet they are organised around implicit assumptions about who naturally belongs within them (racialised somatic norm). Individuals who do not fit these expectations may be perceived as outsiders (space invaders) and can experience heightened visibility, pressure to conform, and the need to learn unwritten rules of behaviour and communication. As a result, they may be treated as being out of place (matter out of place) and face additional challenges in gaining recognition and legitimacy within professional environments (Puwar, 2001).

From an intersectional perspective, these organisational processes operate across multiple intersecting axes of power, often requiring ethnic minority women to engage in additional emotional and identity labour to sustain credibility and achieve recognition (Atewologun, Sealy and Vinnicombe, 2016; Bhopal, 2020). Although this literature provides important insights into how inequality is produced and sustained within organisations, it has largely focused on experiences within employment, offering less

understanding of how sustained conditional inclusion influences longer-term career trajectories and decisions to move away from organisational work.

2.2.3 Intersectionality in Entrepreneurship Research

Intersectionality has been increasingly used in entrepreneurship research over the past decade, shifting attention from individual-level explanations of disadvantage towards structural analyses of how gender, race, ethnicity, and culture interact to shape entrepreneurial pathways, legitimacy, and recognition (Essers and Benschop, 2007; Holvino, 2010; Ahl and Marlow, 2021; Ojediran, Discua Cruz and Anderson, 2022; Giazitzoglu and Korede, 2023; Onoshakpor, Cunningham and Gammie, 2025). It shows that social position shapes entrepreneurial opportunities and actions (Dy, Marlow and Martin, 2017; Martinez Dy and MacNeil, 2025). For example, Lassalle and Shaw (2021) show that women entering entrepreneurship from marginalised positions face constrained choices shaped by gendered, racialised, and regulatory inequalities. Taken together, this body of work establishes that entrepreneurial opportunity is structurally distributed rather than individually determined, which displaces the assumption that entry into entrepreneurship reflects personal ambition alone.

Empirical studies show that gender (Ahl and Marlow, 2021), ethnicity (Carrim and Nkomo, 2016), class (Martinez Dy, 2020), religion (Essers and Benschop, 2007), and migration status (Cederberg and Villares-Varela, 2019) intersect to shape entrepreneurial pathways in different contexts. From an intersectional perspective, these dimensions interact to structure barriers, strategies, and outcomes across entrepreneurial settings (Valdez, 2016; Martinez Dy, 2020; Martinez Dy and Agwunobi, 2019; Maharjan, Nazir and Roomi, 2025). Research shows that racialised women's entrepreneurship takes place within contexts shaped by overlapping structural constraints, rather than within neutral markets (Omran and Yousafzai, 2024).

Recent work argues that inequality not only shapes entrepreneurship from the outside but is also reproduced through entrepreneurial activity itself. From this perspective, agency is exercised within structural limits and is often expressed through small, relational, and low-visibility practices rather than through visible structural transformation (Knight, 2016; Martinez Dy et al., 2024; Martinez Dy and MacNeil, 2025). Entrepreneurship therefore becomes a site where power, legitimacy, and agency are continually negotiated. This has important implications for how entrepreneurial concepts are understood. For example, resilience is often treated as an individual trait, even though it is better understood as a response to persistent structural inequality (Shamieh and Bastian, 2025). Relational and institutional approaches support this view by treating entrepreneurship as embedded within social and organisational structures rather than separate from them, where entrepreneurial action is shaped through ongoing engagement with unequal access to capital, networks, and legitimacy (Sarason, Dean and Dillard, 2006; Battilana, Leca and Boxenbaum, 2009).

Within entrepreneurship research, intersectionality is often applied descriptively rather than as an analysis of power (Kaufmann and Derry, 2024). Studies frequently map intersecting disadvantages but pay less attention to the mechanisms through which inequality is lived and reproduced across contexts (Choo and Ferree, 2010). Existing research often examines organisations, networks, and entrepreneurship as separate domains. This limits understanding of how intersectional constraints shape careers over time and how experiences of misrecognition in one context influence engagement in others. While intersectionality offers a strong framework for identifying structural inequality, further conceptual development is needed to explain how individuals navigate these conditions across different contexts and areas of working life. This limitation provides a key rationale for combining intersectionality with identity work in this thesis. While intersectionality explains how power structures shape conditions of inclusion and exclusion, identity work offers a way of analysing how these conditions are managed, negotiated, and recalibrated in practice.

2.3 Identity Work and the Negotiation of Legitimacy

This thesis draws on identity work to explore how individuals negotiate legitimacy and belonging within intersecting conditions of constraint. Identity work provides a process-oriented lens that shifts attention from position to practice, making it particularly useful for understanding how inequality is experienced over time.

2.3.1 Identity Work: Key Concepts and Development

Identity work describes the continuous process through which people make sense of who they are, adjust how they present themselves, and maintain a coherent sense of self in relation to others and their social context (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Watson, 2008; Brown, 2015). This idea draws on symbolic interactionism and sociological traditions that understand identity not as fixed or given, but as something actively constructed and revised through everyday social interaction (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003; Huot and Rudman, 2010; Beech et al., 2016).

This perspective has been used in entrepreneurship research to explain how individuals come to see themselves, and be recognised by others, as legitimate entrepreneurs. Leitch and Harrison (2016) distinguish between identity content, what an identity means, and identity structure, how multiple identities are organised. They show that entrepreneurial identity develops through interaction with audiences, norms, and expectations, rather than through individual self-definition alone.

Identity work scholarship has developed in two related directions. Earlier work focused on identity work as an ongoing individual process through which people manage uncertainty and construct a coherent sense of self across different contexts (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Watson, 2008). More recent scholarship has repositioned identity work as something that structural conditions require of individuals, particularly those whose belonging and legitimacy are conditional rather than assumed (Brown, 2015; Beech et al., 2016). This thesis draws on both perspectives but is particularly informed

by the latter. For second-generation South Asian women, identity work is not optional. It is ongoing, demanding, and unequally distributed labour, required because of their intersectional position within organisations, entrepreneurial spaces, and family and community contexts.

Later research shows that identity work operates through different dynamics and strategies. Studies show that entrepreneurial identity is shaped through dynamics such as visibility and invisibility, centrality and salience, and similarity and difference (Wagenschwanz, 2021). Research also identifies specific strategies through which individuals manage multiple identities, including compartmentalisation, integration, and deletion (Radu-Lefebvre et al., 2021). This suggests that different patterns of identity work are linked to different entrepreneurial pathways over time (Kulshrestha et al., 2024).

A further strand emphasises process and context. Identity work involves building identity as well as loss, disruption, and reconstruction over time, shaped by social, cognitive, and spatial conditions (Mmbaga et al., 2020). Identity work explains how individuals respond to changing expectations and evaluations across work and entrepreneurial settings. It also explains why those responses are shaped by the structural conditions within which they take place.

2.3.2 Identity Work and Legitimacy in Entrepreneurship

Entrepreneurial identity is not a fixed personal attribute but develops through ongoing engagement with audiences, institutional expectations, and evaluative norms that shape what is recognised as legitimate entrepreneurship (Down and Reveley, 2009; Shepherd and Haynie, 2009). Entrepreneurs therefore cannot rely on formal roles or job titles. Instead, they continually establish credibility through interaction with investors, customers, networks, and support organisations, each of which may hold different expectations of entrepreneurial behaviour and self-presentation (Leitch and Harrison, 2016; Radu-Lefebvre et al., 2021; Kelly and McAdam, 2023).

Identity work and legitimacy are closely interconnected in this process. Identity work refers to the ongoing effort to align how entrepreneurs present themselves with context-specific expectations of credibility and entrepreneurial fit (Leitch and Harrison, 2016; Hytti et al., 2017). Legitimacy, in turn, is not self-declared but socially granted through external judgement about whether an individual is seen as appropriate or credible within a given context (Suchman, 1995). Research shows that these processes are not experienced equally, as individuals who do not conform to dominant entrepreneurial norms often face greater pressure to perform identity work to secure recognition, reflecting broader inequalities in entrepreneurial settings (Essers and Benschop, 2007; Swail and Marlow, 2018; Ojediran, Discua Cruz and Anderson, 2022; Van Merriënboer, Verver and Radu-Lefebvre, 2025). For these individuals, legitimacy is not something achieved once and held; it must be continuously re-established across different contexts and audiences.

2.3.3 Identity Work under Power and Constraint

Research shows that identity work does not take place in neutral settings. Entrepreneurial and organisational contexts are shaped by power relations that determine how legitimacy is distributed (Terstriep et al., 2025). As a result, individuals do not engage in identity work under equal conditions; instead, some must invest significantly more effort to be recognised as credible (Ghosh and Barber, 2021). This shifts attention from identity as individual expression towards the unequal conditions under which recognition and belonging are produced (May, 2011; Stead, 2017).

Within entrepreneurship, studies show that identity work is shaped by dominant norms associated with whiteness and hegemonic masculinity (Ahl and Marlow, 2021; Giazitzoglu and Korede, 2023). Entrepreneurs may attempt to align with these expectations, resist them, or shift between conformity and difference depending on audience and context (James, Xiong and Anderson, 2022; Giazitzoglu and Korede, 2023; Smith et al., 2023). Similar dynamics are also evident in organisational settings, where misrecognition and conditional inclusion shape professional experiences. Research on racialised women shows that assumptions about competence often require repeated identity work to align with dominant norms of leadership and professionalism (Atewologun, Sealy and Vinnicombe, 2016; Opara, Sealy and Ryan, 2020). Intersectional studies further highlight how organisational practices such as accent bias, demographic homogeneity, and racialised expectations of authority shape who is perceived as legitimate, even among highly qualified individuals (Tariq and Syed, 2017; Shahbaz et al., 2025).

This literature cautions against treating identity flexibility as inherently empowering. Studies show that practices such as downplaying difference, reducing visibility, or performing acceptable identities may help entrepreneurs access resources or networks, but often leave existing hierarchies unchanged (Hidegh et al., 2023). Critical entrepreneurship studies emphasise that entrepreneurship does not provide a straightforward route out of inequality, with empowerment remaining partial and conditional (Verduijn and Essers, 2013; Jennings, Jennings and Sharifian, 2016; Ojediran, Discua Cruz and Anderson, 2022).

Identity work is a key mechanism through which intersectional power relations are both experienced and managed. This perspective is especially useful for examining settings that present themselves as meritocratic, where formal inclusion can exist alongside subtle and institutionalised exclusion.

A related body of work examines the effects of sustained pressures on identity over time. Petriglieri (2011) defines identity threat as an experience that is perceived as harmful to the value, meaning, or enactment of an identity, and distinguishes between responses that seek to protect an identity and those that involve reshaping it. This perspective is particularly relevant to the present study because it understands threat as a subjective and interpreted experience rather than an objective event, aligning with the interpretivist stance outlined in Chapter 3. It also provides a useful lens for examining how

repeated experiences of threat accumulate and shape individuals' experiences over time, rather than focusing solely on isolated incidents.

Although the identity threat literature provides important insights, it often conceptualises threat as a temporary episode that can be resolved through individual responses. This overlooks contexts where threat is persistent and structurally produced, such that it remains an ongoing feature of everyday experience. In addition, the emphasis on psychological outcomes means that less attention has been paid to how repeated threats influence career trajectories and decisions to remain within or leave a professional setting. The concept of accumulated identity strain addresses these limitations by foregrounding the cumulative effects of recurring identity threats over time (see Section 7.8.1)

2.4 Legitimacy and Belonging

Legitimacy and belonging are related concepts, but they refer to different aspects of how individuals experience inclusion and recognition. Legitimacy, as discussed in Section 2.3, refers to the process through which individuals, identities, and activities become recognised as appropriate, credible, and acceptable within particular social contexts (Suchman, 1995). In other words, legitimacy is external: it is about whether others judge someone as fitting the norms and expectations of a given setting. Legitimacy can be granted, withheld, or withdrawn, and must be actively maintained through ongoing identity work.

Belonging has been defined as "the subjective feeling of deep connection with social groups, physical places, and individual and collective experiences" and as "a fundamental human need that predicts numerous mental, physical, social, economic, and behavioural outcomes" (Allen et al., 2021, p. 87). Building on this understanding, this thesis treats belonging as internal: it is a person's own felt sense of fit. That feeling is not formed in isolation, though. It is shaped through recognition, trust, and shared identity within specific social and professional contexts (May, 2011; Stead, 2017).

Yuval-Davis (2006) further distinguishes between belonging and the politics of belonging, drawing attention to the processes through which individuals and groups are included, excluded, and positioned within social boundaries. Belonging often remains invisible when it is secure, becoming most apparent when it is questioned or challenged. This insight is particularly relevant to the experiences of the women in this study, whose place within organisational, entrepreneurial, and community settings is repeatedly subject to scrutiny. Rather than reflecting a simple absence of belonging, their accounts reveal ongoing processes through which belonging is negotiated, contested, and regulated (politics of belonging). Research shows that individuals can be formally included in an organisation or entrepreneurial network while still experiencing and feeling that the space is not designed for them (Neumeyer et al., 2019; Haq et al., 2024; Singh and Nurse, 2025).

For second-generation South Asian women, this distinction matters. These women often achieve a *degree of legitimacy*: they are qualified and formally recognised as capable professionals. However, belonging remains uncertain even when formal access is granted. Intersectional entrepreneurs may still experience themselves as not quite fitting, operating within spaces where dominant norms of professionalism and credibility prevail, while their cultural knowledge, identities, and lived experiences are neither recognised nor valued (Neumeyer et al., 2019; Singh and Nurse, 2025).

This distinction shapes how this thesis is structured. Essay 1 examines what happens when legitimacy is conditionally granted, but belonging is never fully achieved within organisations. Essay 2 examines how belonging is actively constructed within identity-based entrepreneurial spaces where shared experience creates different conditions for recognition. Essay 3 examines how legitimacy must be continuously negotiated across market, family, and community contexts even after entrepreneurial entry. Together, these essays trace how both legitimacy and belonging are sought, constructed, and only ever partially secured across the career contexts in which intersectional entrepreneurs operate. The relation between the two is asymmetric. Legitimacy can be granted without belonging, as Essay 1 shows in organisational settings where competence was recognised while acceptance was withheld. Belonging works differently. As Essay 2 shows, feeling that they belonged in identity-aligned spaces gave women confidence and support to keep going. But that inner sense of fit did not, by itself, change how outside audiences judged them, which is why Essay 3 looks at legitimacy separately.

2.5 Second-Generation South Asian Women: Identity, Legitimacy, and Conditional Recognition

This thesis focuses on second-generation South Asian women, a group that occupies a distinctive position in research on work and entrepreneurship. Although they are educated and socialised within the host-country context, their working lives remain shaped by racialised hierarchies and family and community expectations. Anthias (2008) offers a framework well suited to this position. Her concept of translocational positionality treats social position as produced across multiple and shifting locations rather than through membership of fixed groups and attends to how position changes with context and over time.

This perspective is particularly relevant to second-generation South Asian women, whose experiences cannot be fully captured through categories such as ‘migrant’ or ‘British professional’. Instead, their position is shaped through movement across these locations and varies according to context and audience. The framework also incorporates a temporal dimension, allowing inherited expectations and earlier experiences to be understood as active elements of present positioning rather than as background history. This is important for understanding how identity work and legitimacy are negotiated under conditions of conditional inclusion.

Much existing research focuses on first-generation migrants, whose experiences are shaped by factors such as language barriers, unfamiliar education systems, and limited institutional knowledge. By

contrast, second-generation South Asian women are educated within British schools and are familiar with organisational norms and expectations. Therefore, it is important to examine their experience within organisations, networks, and entrepreneurship. This enables an analysis of inequality that does not rest on migration barriers or ethnic push-pull factors, extending research on ethnic minority women's entrepreneurship to a group whose disadvantage cannot be explained by migration itself. This thesis nonetheless demonstrates that intersecting inequalities continue to shape their working lives and their movement between organisational employment and entrepreneurship.

2.5.1 South Asian Intersecting Identities, Inequalities, and Positioning

Much of the existing literature on South Asian women's entrepreneurship has focused on first-generation migrants and necessity-driven enterprise, emphasising ethnic enclaves, family labour, and survival strategies (Ram, Jones and Villares-Varela, 2017; Ram, 2026). While this work has been important in documenting structural disadvantage, it often overlooks generational differences and tends to treat culture as relatively fixed rather than evolving (Essers and Tedmanson, 2014). There is also limited focus on how second-generation women negotiate cultural and gender norms within their entrepreneurial fields, particularly when establishing their businesses.

Recent research shows that second-generation women's experiences are shaped not only by migration or culture, but by subtle forms of misrecognition and conditional inclusion within organisations that otherwise present themselves as meritocratic (Bhopal, 2020). Within these contexts, women may be acknowledged as competent professionals while simultaneously being positioned as not fully aligned with dominant norms of leadership, professionalism, and organisational fit (Arifeen and Syed, 2020). This creates conditions in which inclusion and differentiation coexist, requiring continual negotiation of legitimacy.

Family and community contexts add further complexity to these negotiations. Research on second-generation South Asian women shows that identity work is shaped by organisational and market settings and by intergenerational, community-based social surveillance. Family and community members act as ongoing evaluators, judging women's behaviour, visibility, and mobility against gendered norms of respectability (Somerville, 2019). Importantly, these forms of surveillance do not disappear across generations. Instead, they often become more subtle, requiring women to engage in ongoing identity work to manage reputation and legitimacy across different contexts.

Practices such as women living with their husband's family after marriage can reduce independence and increase everyday monitoring of behaviour (Frederick, Littrell and Bertsch, 2013). Older generations may also regulate younger women's choices around relationships, marriage, and sexuality through moral discourses of honour and shame, particularly in relation to public visibility (Werbner, 2005). Such expectations can limit women's participation in entrepreneurship, particularly where ideas of honour, respectability, and gender segregation shape judgements of appropriate behaviour (Selamat and Endut,

2020; Ginting-Carlström and Chliova, 2023). These dynamics position family and community as central sites for judging what forms of entrepreneurial activity are seen as legitimate.

Research across sociology and migration studies shows that this involves balancing British, South Asian, and gendered identities in everyday life (Gupta, Johnstone and Gleeson, 2007; Bagguley and Hussain, 2016). Women may draw on cultural symbols such as language, dress, or religious expression to manage visibility, assert belonging, or redefine femininity in different spaces (Shain, 2000; Hussein, 2017, 2023). These practices demonstrate agency but also highlight that identity work is sustained and relational, shaped by the need to secure recognition from multiple audiences with differing and sometimes conflicting expectations.

2.6 Research Gap

Despite a growing body of research on entrepreneurial identity and ethnic minority entrepreneurship, existing literature remains conceptually fragmented and limited in its ability to explain how inequality unfolds across the broader trajectory of women's careers. While studies have examined identity work, family influence, organisational experiences, or entrepreneurial activity, these domains are typically treated in isolation, resulting in a partial and static understanding of how entrepreneurial pathways are shaped. As Wagenschwanz (2021) highlights, the literature pays insufficient attention to how identities are legitimised and constrained within specific contexts, including how second-generation South Asian women move through organisational employment, entrepreneurial ecosystems, and family and community contexts while navigating intersecting expectations of gender, ethnicity, and cultural norms.

Existing research tends to frame entrepreneurship as an outcome of opportunity or constraint, without examining how experiences across organisational, entrepreneurial, family, and community contexts shape career transitions. Intersectionality itself contributes to this gap: although it highlights multiple axes of disadvantage, it has rarely been applied in ways that capture how inequality is produced relationally and dynamically across contexts, rather than within single sites of analysis. Understanding ethnic entrepreneurship requires moving beyond static, simplified accounts to examine how second-generation women are positioned across the different settings they navigate. This is particularly important because, despite their formal integration into education and employment and increased access to opportunities, second-generation South Asian women continue to experience a lack of legitimacy, belonging, and inclusion across organisational settings, entrepreneurial ecosystems, and entrepreneurial support hubs.

This thesis addresses these gaps by developing an integrated, process-oriented account of how intersectional inequalities shape women's transitions from organisational employment into entrepreneurship, their experiences of belonging within entrepreneurial ecosystems, and their ongoing negotiation of legitimacy across market, family, and community contexts. It introduces two conceptual contributions, each with two parts: conditional inclusion and the strain it produces over time, and

bounded legitimacy negotiation and the belonging built within it. Together they explain not only that inequality persists after entrepreneurial entry, but the mechanisms through which it is reproduced in each setting.

The literature pays limited attention to how constraints are shaped by the past. Research on bounded agency typically focuses on the institutional, market, and family conditions individuals encounter in the present. For second-generation women, perceptions of what is possible are often shaped by expectations inherited from the parental generation, long before they begin to consider entrepreneurship as a career path. As a result, inherited constraints and contemporary constraints are often treated as the same, despite operating in different ways. This issue is explored in Essay 3 and developed further in Chapter 7.

Chapter 3: Research Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the methodological framework used in this study. It outlines how the research was designed to explore how second-generation South Asian women experience inclusion, exclusion, and exit within organisations, and how these experiences shape their transitions into entrepreneurship and their ongoing negotiations of legitimacy and belonging across entrepreneurial contexts. The chapter sets out the study's philosophical foundations, research design, data collection methods, and analytical approach. It also discusses ethical considerations, researcher positionality, and the limitations of the methodology.

The study is situated within an interpretivist paradigm and employs a qualitative research design to investigate women's lived experiences and subjective interpretations of their career trajectories across organisational, entrepreneurial support hub, and entrepreneurial contexts. Qualitative methods were considered most suitable as they allow for rich, in-depth, and context-specific understanding of identity, intersectionality, and meaning-making (Myers, 2020; Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019). This approach facilitates in-depth exploration of the ways in which gender, ethnicity, culture, and caregiving responsibilities intersect within organisational settings and influence women's decisions to exit employment and pursue alternative career pathways.

The methodological approach does not seek to produce generalisable explanations. Instead, it prioritises participants' interpretations of organisational practices, career progression, and experiences of workplace belonging. This is consistent with an interpretivist perspective, which views meaning as socially constructed through interaction and acknowledges that social realities are shaped by individuals' positionality and contextual circumstances (Alharahsheh and Pius, 2020; Leitch, Hill and Harrison, 2010). Accordingly, the study examines women's narratives of inclusion, exclusion, and transition, focusing on how these experiences are interpreted through the lens of identity work and intersectionality.

This chapter should be read alongside the empirical chapters that follow. While each chapter addresses a distinct but related aspect of the research questions, this chapter outlines the overall philosophical and methodological foundations that underpin all three essays. It shows how the methodological choices were systematically aligned with the study's interpretivist perspective and its focus on identity construction and intersectional experience.

3.2 Research Aim and Objectives

This thesis aims to examine how second-generation South Asian women navigate work, networks, and entrepreneurship within the context of intersecting gendered, racialised, and culturally embedded constraints. The study does not treat organisational employment, networking spaces, and

entrepreneurship as distinct phases of a career journey. Instead, it approaches them as connected contexts that frequently overlap, shaping how women negotiate legitimacy, belonging, and recognition across different areas of their professional lives.

The thesis is structured around three empirical essays, each exploring a distinct yet interconnected context in which identity, legitimacy, and belonging are negotiated. Experiences, expectations, and evaluations formed in one context are carried into the others and reshaped over time. To address the overall aim of the thesis, the study is guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: How do intersectional workplace experiences shape the career trajectories and transitions of second-generation South Asian women from organisational employment into entrepreneurship?

RQ2: How is belonging constructed within entrepreneurial support hubs, and how do identity-based spaces shape the entrepreneurial experiences of second-generation South Asian women?

RQ3: How do second-generation South Asian women entrepreneurs negotiate entrepreneurial legitimacy across intersecting market, family, and community contexts?

These research questions explore how identity work is negotiated across organisational, networking, and entrepreneurial environments that are closely connected. By focusing on interpretation, context, and relational processes, the questions reflect the study's interpretivist stance and support the use of intersectionality and identity work as the primary analytical lenses (Crenshaw, 1997; Alvesson, Ashcraft and Thomas, 2008; Holvino, 2010; Brown, 2015; Leitch and Harrison, 2016).

3.3 Philosophical Positioning

This study is informed by a subjectivist ontological position and an interpretivist epistemology, which together provide the philosophical foundation for examining identity, intersectionality, and lived experience in entrepreneurship. These positions align with the study's aim of understanding how second-generation South Asian women interpret, negotiate, and experience work and entrepreneurship across organisational and community contexts.

3.3.1 Ontological Position: Subjectivism

From a subjectivist ontological perspective, reality is understood as socially constructed rather than objectively given. Meanings are produced through interaction and shaped by the contexts in which people live and work (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019). Social phenomena such as work, entrepreneurship, and career trajectories are not fixed entities but are shaped through individuals' meanings, interpretations, and social interactions. In line with the research questions and objectives, this study treats entrepreneurship as a lived experience shaped by cultural norms, organisational practices, and wider institutional contexts (Parkinson and Howorth, 2008).

This ontological stance is appropriate for research focused on ethnicity, gender, and identity, where experiences are shaped by unequal power relations and culturally embedded expectations. For second-generation South Asian women, entrepreneurial realities are experienced differently depending on positionality, family expectations, and social context (Leitch, Hill and Harrison, 2010; Welter et al., 2017). A subjectivist ontology allows these multiple realities to be examined as contingent and relational, rather than assuming a single or universal entrepreneurial experience.

3.3.2 Epistemological Position: Interpretivism

This study adopts an interpretivist approach, which assumes that knowledge is co-constructed through social interaction rather than discovered as objective fact (Myers, 2020). Interpretivism emphasises understanding how individuals make sense of their experiences, recognising that meaning is shaped by language, culture, and context (Alharahsheh and Pius, 2020).

This epistemological position is especially suitable for studying ethnic minority women, whose experiences of work and entrepreneurship are often marginalised within dominant research narratives. Interpretivism enables close attention to participants' own accounts of identity, belonging, and evaluation, rather than imposing predefined categories or assumptions (Cope, 2005). It also aligns with an intersectional lens, facilitating analysis of how ethnicity, gender, culture, and family expectations interact in shaping lived experience.

By foregrounding lived experience and meaning-making, interpretivism provides the foundation for analysing identity work as relational and ongoing. Rather than treating identity as a fixed attribute, this approach allows identity to be examined as something negotiated through everyday practices, interactions, and evaluative contexts (Cassell, Cunliffe and Grandy, 2018; Packard, 2017). This philosophical positioning therefore prepares the ground for the study's analytical focus on identity work across organisational employment, networking environments, and entrepreneurial practice.

3.4 Interpretivism, Identity, and Intersectionality

Within an interpretivist frame, work, entrepreneurship, and career transitions are understood as socially shaped processes influenced by norms, expectations, and power relations. The study aligns most closely with a social constructionist and interpretivist understanding of identity, which conceptualises identity as relational, context-dependent, and negotiated through interaction rather than as a fixed attribute or stable category (Huot and Rudman, 2010; Haslam, Cornelissen and Werner, 2017). Huot and Rudman (2010), for example, view identity as something enacted through everyday occupations in specific places. Their research highlights how recognition and belonging are not evenly distributed but are instead shaped through participation in activities that are socially valued within specific settings. This positioning is particularly relevant for examining how second-generation South Asian women experience organisational inclusion and exclusion, where identity is continuously evaluated and reworked across organisational, ecosystem, and entrepreneurial contexts.

3.4.1 Identity from an Interpretivist Perspective

For entrepreneurship research specifically, this perspective means treating entrepreneurial identity as something actively worked on rather than simply possessed, constructed and negotiated through social interaction, personal narratives, and ongoing engagement with institutional and cultural expectations (Alvesson, Ashcraft and Thomas, 2008; Brown, 2015; Leitch and Harrison, 2016).

Identity work refers to the ongoing processes through which individuals seek to present themselves as legitimate, credible, and coherent in relation to dominant norms and evaluative criteria (Alvesson, Ashcraft and Thomas, 2008). Within organisational and entrepreneurial contexts, this may involve the adaptation of behaviour, self-presentation, language, and strategic positioning in response to gendered, racialised, and culturally embedded expectations (Brown, 2015). Importantly, identity work is not solely individual or agentic. It is shaped and constrained by wider structural conditions, power relations, and external evaluations (Beech et al., 2016). Such identity performances may become difficult to sustain when institutional and cultural expectations restrict the forms of work and self-presentation that are recognised as legitimate (Huot and Rudman, 2010).

This understanding is central to the present study, which examines how women's identity work becomes strained within organisational employment, how it is subsequently renegotiated within identity-based entrepreneurial support hubs, and how it is reconfigured through entrepreneurial practice. An interpretivist approach allows close attention to how women understand and reflect on their identity across different contexts, rather than assuming a fixed or linear path (Leitch and Harrison, 2016; Mmbaga et al., 2020; Radu-Lefebvre et al., 2021; Wagenschwanz, 2021).

3.4.2 Intersectionality and Identity Negotiation

Intersectionality is used as an analytical lens to understand how multiple forms of inequality operate together in shaping women's experiences (Crenshaw, 1997; Holvino, 2010). Rather than treating gender, ethnicity, culture, or caregiving responsibilities separately, the study examines how they interact to shape recognition, legitimacy, and opportunity across organisational and entrepreneurial contexts.

From an interpretivist position, intersectionality is not treated as a fixed set of categories but as something that is experienced in everyday working life. This allows the study to focus on how South Asian women understand and interpret their intersecting identities, inequalities, and opportunities, rather than assuming how these operate in advance. This approach aligns with research in identity and entrepreneurship that emphasises identity as relational and shaped through ongoing interaction and evaluation (Mmbaga et al., 2020; Radu-Lefebvre et al., 2021). It also reflects calls for greater attention to how legitimacy and recognition are produced within unequal social contexts rather than treated as neutral outcomes (Wagenschwanz, 2021).

In this study, intersectionality is therefore used to analyse how identity work is shaped by overlapping expectations linked to gender, ethnicity, culture, and caregiving responsibilities. It provides a way of examining how inclusion, exclusion, and legitimacy are experienced and negotiated across contexts, while also recognising that these processes take place within broader structures of inequality. Women are understood as actively negotiating these conditions, but always within constrained and unequal power relations.

Bringing together interpretivism, identity work, and intersectionality, this study focuses on how women's experiences of work and entrepreneurship are shaped through ongoing interpretation and evaluation. Identity is understood not as fixed or measurable, but as continually constructed in relation to organisational norms, network expectations, and entrepreneurial contexts. This positioning informs the methodological choices in the study, particularly the use of qualitative, in-depth interviews to capture how participants describe and make sense of their experiences, and the focus on narratives of inclusion, exclusion, belonging, and transition, with attention to how these are shaped through intersecting gendered, racialised, cultural, and familial positions.

3.5 Research Approach

This study adopts an inductive research approach, consistent with its interpretivist orientation and its aim of developing a context-sensitive understanding of how second-generation ethnic minority women navigate identity, legitimacy, and entrepreneurship. Inductive research does not test theory. It develops ideas from data based on participants' experiences (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019; Myers, 2020).

An inductive approach is well suited to examining entrepreneurship as a complex, socially embedded phenomenon shaped by gendered, racialised, and cultural dynamics. Deductive approaches, which rely on predefined theoretical assumptions, may overlook how individuals interpret and respond to these dynamics in practice (Okoli, 2023). An inductive approach instead centres participants' meanings and interpretations, allowing closer attention to how identities are negotiated, evaluated, and reshaped across organisational, networked, and entrepreneurial contexts.

Inductive reasoning allows researchers to engage with qualitative data without imposing rigid analytical categories, supporting the emergence of recurring patterns and interpretive themes grounded in participants' narratives (Thomas, 2006). This flexibility is especially valuable in under-explored research areas, where existing theory provides limited guidance for understanding lived experience (Shepherd and Suddaby, 2017). Qualitative research in the entrepreneurship field focuses on process, meaning, and context, recognising entrepreneurship as a socially situated and evaluative practice rather than a purely individual choice (Dana and Dana, 2005; Leitch and Harrison, 2016).

The inductive approach keeps the analysis grounded in participants' interpretations rather than predefined models of entrepreneurial identity. This approach is well suited to generating original,

context-specific contributions to research on ethnicity, gender, and entrepreneurship (Hlady-Rispal, Fayolle and Gartner, 2024).

3.6 Research Design

In line with the philosophical foundations of the study, a qualitative research design was adopted to explore the entrepreneurial experiences of second-generation ethnic minority women. This approach is well suited to examining socially embedded phenomena where meaning is shaped through lived experience, interaction, and interpretation rather than measurable variables (Myers, 2020; Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019).

The emphasis is on participants' accounts of their experiences, how they understood, interpreted, and made sense of their working lives across organisational, networking, and entrepreneurial contexts. A key strength of qualitative research is its ability to work closely with lived experience, and the meanings people attach to it. Recent research highlights its value in entrepreneurship studies for capturing the dynamic and processual nature of entrepreneurial activity in context (Van Burg et al., 2022). It also supports a more reflexive engagement with data, where interpretation is shaped through interaction with participants rather than assumed in advance (Hlady-Rispal, Fayolle and Gartner, 2024).

In entrepreneurship research specifically, qualitative approaches are useful for understanding how knowledge is acquired and used, and how decisions are shaped by social expectations and institutional constraints (Busenitz and Lau, 1996; Hindle, 2004). Such methods give participants space to describe their experiences in their own terms, which helps reveal how identity work is negotiated in relation to organisational norms, cultural expectations, and ideas of legitimacy (Javadian et al., 2021). The study therefore adopts an inductive qualitative research design that allows patterns and themes to emerge from participants' accounts rather than being imposed in advance (Taylor, Bogdan and DeVault, 2015). This supports a more relational and context-sensitive understanding of entrepreneurship and identity, and ensures consistency between the study's interpretivist stance, inductive logic, and analytical focus.

3.7 Data Collection Methods

Data collection was designed to align with the study's interpretivist stance and inductive qualitative research design. The aim was to capture rich, contextualised accounts of women lived experiences across organisational employment, identity-based networking and learning environments, and entrepreneurial practice. Qualitative data collection methods are particularly appropriate for exploring identity work, as they enable participants to articulate how experiences are interpreted, evaluated, and negotiated over time (Creswell and Poth, 2017; Myers, 2020).

3.7.1 Semi-Structured Interviews

In line with the study's interpretivist orientation, semi-structured interviews were used to explore how participants understood and made sense of their experiences of work, identity, and entrepreneurship.

This method was chosen because it provided sufficient structure to address the research questions while allowing participants to discuss the points and narratives, they considered important in their own terms (Creswell and Poth, 2017; Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019). This approach allowed participants to reflect openly on their experiences, enabling themes to emerge inductively from their narratives rather than being imposed in advance.

The flexibility of the semi-structured format allowed the researcher to follow up on emerging themes, probe personal narratives, and adapt the flow of questions in response to participants' accounts (Johnstone, Ulhøi and Neergaard, 2007). This was important because experiences of inclusion, exclusion, belonging, and entrepreneurship were closely connected and could not be fully explored through fixed questions. This approach supported the exploration of identity work as it was articulated in participants' own terms, aligning with the study's inductive and interpretivist orientation (Harvey-Jordan and Long, 2001; Adams, 2015).

The initial interview guide was developed around the second and third research questions and focused on participants' experiences of entrepreneurship, networking and learning environments, and perceptions of legitimacy and belonging. However, the pilot study and early interviews suggested that discussions of identity rarely emerged through direct questioning. Instead, participants reflected on identity most clearly when describing workplace experiences, career transitions, and interactions with others. These early insights informed revisions to the interview guide.

Following the initial interviews, additional prompts were introduced when participants linked their motivations to previous workplace exclusion and organisational experiences. Further prompts were also used to explore issues such as organisational inclusion and exclusion, career turning points, and workplace evaluation in greater depth. Participants reflected more openly when asked to compare their experiences, for example, differences between men and women across work, family, and community contexts, or comparisons with White women and White employees. Such prompts enabled participants to articulate their experiences more deeply and critically.

This iterative process ensured that the interviews remained focused on the issues most relevant to the study. While participants' experiences varied, each interview explored how ethnicity, gender, culture, and family expectations shaped their working lives and entrepreneurial journeys. A total of 17 interviews were conducted between July and December 2022. Each interview lasted approximately 50 to 60 minutes and was conducted in English. Fourteen interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent. Where recording was not possible, detailed notes were taken during and immediately after the interview to ensure an accurate record of participants' accounts.

3.7.2 Supplementary Digital Materials

In addition to interviews, the study drew on supplementary digital materials. These included participants' publicly available social media posts, business websites, podcasts, and discussions within women-only professional and entrepreneurial online groups. These materials were not treated as a separate dataset and were not systematically coded. Instead, they were used alongside the interview data to contextualise and support interpretation of participants' accounts.

Online environments can make certain aspects of people's experiences more visible. The anonymity of online spaces sometimes allows people to express views and feelings they would not share in a face-to-face setting (Kozinets, 2018). Existing research recognises that publicly available online content, including forum discussions, social media profiles, and community spaces, can serve as a valuable contextual resource alongside interviews, offering insight into participants' collective sense-making and shared experiences (Paccagnella, 1997; Hine, 2017).

Research on entrepreneurial learning similarly shows that online communities are important spaces where shared experiences, knowledge, and support are exchanged, and that these spaces hold collective meaning (Schou, Bucher and Waldkirch, 2022). Research on identity and legitimacy in digital entrepreneurship also demonstrates that online spaces are active sites where women entrepreneurs construct and present their identities and navigate belonging (Dy, Marlow and Martin, 2017). Using online community content is an established practice in qualitative research (Kozinets, 2018; Hine, 2017). In this study, digital materials gave access to shared narratives and collective concerns that helped contextualise and enrich what participants described in their interviews.

The online community materials served two purposes. First, they confirmed that the themes emerging from interviews were not unique to the interview context. Participants discussed similar experiences, concerns, and narratives within their online communities, which suggests that what they shared with the researcher reflected genuine and shared concerns rather than responses shaped by the interview itself. This supported the credibility of participants' accounts, although the materials were not coded and are not treated as a second dataset. This overlap is also why the materials were not coded: because the online discussions largely reproduced what participants had already described, systematic coding would have added little new analytical insight. Combined with the ethical risk of identifying participants through their online contributions, this made it more appropriate to use the digital materials for contextualisation only rather than as a primary data source.

All digital materials were handled carefully and ethically. Only publicly accessible content was used. No individually identifiable information was kept. Rather than quoting directly from online posts or discussions, materials were paraphrased and summarised to protect the confidentiality of both participants and other group members. This is consistent with ethical guidance on the use of online data

in qualitative research (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019). Examples of how digital materials were used to contextualise the interview findings are provided in Appendix B.

3.8 Research Procedure and Sampling

3.8.1 Access and Recruitment

Before participant recruitment, the researcher engaged with online communities on platforms such as Instagram and Facebook. These spaces were typically managed by private entrepreneurial support hubs and networking groups designed for South Asian women and women of colour. The researcher observed discussions, posts, and shared experiences relating to work, entrepreneurship, identity, and everyday challenges. Over time, this developed into more active participation within these communities, helping to establish familiarity and trust.

Most participants were recruited through culturally specific online groups, including women-only entrepreneurial communities, professional networks, training groups, and South Asian community platforms. These spaces were particularly important because they provided access to women whose entrepreneurial activities often operated through informal networks and community connections rather than formal business organisations.

Participants were identified through discussions relating to entrepreneurship, career transitions, and professional development and were approached individually. Recruitment was not straightforward. Many women expressed interest in the study but were unable to participate because they were balancing business activities alongside employment, childcare, and family responsibilities. Building the sample therefore required time, persistence, and ongoing engagement within these communities.

Trust played an important role throughout the recruitment process. As relationships developed, some participants introduced the researcher to other potential participants, supporting further recruitment through referrals. Participants were provided with clear information regarding the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and the measures in place to protect confidentiality. This was particularly important given the personal nature of discussions relating to work, family expectations, identity, and experiences of exclusion. The researcher's positionality also shaped access to participants. As a South Asian woman, the researcher shared cultural reference points that often helped establish rapport and mutual understanding.

3.8.2 Sampling Strategy

This study employed purposive sampling to select participants who were best positioned to provide insight into the research questions (Patton, 2002). Participants were selected on the basis of the following inclusion criteria: they self-identified as second-generation South Asian women; they were born, raised, and educated in the UK; and they were either currently running their own businesses or self-employed, with a minimum of one year of entrepreneurial experience at the time of interview. Most

participants also had direct experience of engaging with formal or informal entrepreneurial networks, spaces, or hubs, whether through training programmes, networking events, mentoring relationships, or online entrepreneurial communities.

Several participants were identified through referrals from existing participants. This recruitment strategy constitutes snowball sampling, which is often used to access participants through personal and professional networks (Creswell and Poth, 2017). It was shaped by the nature of the online communities in which participants were active. Many women within these spaces already knew one another and communicated regularly through shared groups and platforms. As a result, when some participants did not respond directly via social media, others in the same community were able to pass along contact details or introduce the researcher informally. This meant that recruitment through referral was often more straightforward than direct outreach, as trust had already been established within these shared community spaces before any formal contact was made.

The selected participant group was appropriate for the study's intersectional focus, as it allowed exploration of how shared structural conditions were experienced differently across individual circumstances. While participants shared a common ethnic and generational background, they varied in age, family responsibilities, business sectors, and stages of entrepreneurial engagement. This diversity enabled the study to capture both common patterns and points of divergence in how identity work, legitimacy, and belonging were negotiated.

Rather than aiming for representativeness, the sampling strategy prioritised depth, relevance, and experiential richness, consistent with qualitative and interpretivist research. The participant group therefore supported a nuanced examination of identity work as relational and context-dependent, providing a strong foundation for addressing the study's research questions across organisational, networked, and entrepreneurial settings.

Not all 17 participants contributed data to every essay. The essays draw on different subsets of the data depending on the focus of each research question. All 17 participants contributed to Essays 1 and 3, which examine organisational experiences and entrepreneurial legitimacy, respectively, contexts that all participants had navigated. For Essay 2, which focuses specifically on experiences within entrepreneurial support hubs and networking spaces, 15 participants contributed data. Two participants did not have sufficient experience of formal or informal entrepreneurial support hubs (RP and SD) to contribute meaningfully to this essay's focus, and their accounts were therefore not included in the Essay 2 analysis. This approach ensured that data used within each essay were directly relevant to the specific research question being addressed.

3.9 Pilot Study

A pilot study was conducted to test and refine the interview guide before the main phase of data collection. The pilot interviews were used to assess the clarity, relevance, and flow of the questions and were not included in the final analysis. One of the main insights from the pilot was that participants rarely engaged with abstract concepts such as identity, legitimacy, or inclusion when these were raised directly. Instead, discussions became richer when participants were invited to reflect on their work experiences, career transitions, and interactions within organisational and entrepreneurial settings. Through these accounts, issues relating to identity, belonging, ethnicity, gender, and cultural expectations emerged naturally.

The pilot also highlighted the importance of using accessible and experience-based questions. Participants often reflected on their experiences as British Asian women through discussions of workplace relationships, family expectations, career decisions, and entrepreneurial journeys rather than through explicit identity-focused questions. These insights informed the revisions to the interview guide described in Section 3.7.1. This ensured that the interviews remained grounded in participants' experiences while maintaining alignment with the study's research questions and interpretivist, inductive approach.

3.10 Participant Profile

The participants in this study were 17 second-generation South Asian women with experience of organisational employment and engagement in entrepreneurial activity, either through self-employment, business ownership, or entrepreneurial learning and networking environments. As a group, they represent women who have navigated multiple work contexts shaped by gendered, racialised, and culturally embedded expectations, making them particularly well positioned to reflect on identity work, legitimacy, and belonging across organisational and entrepreneurial settings.

The sample spans four faith backgrounds. Six participants identified as Hindu, five as Muslim, four as Sikh, and one as Christian; religious affiliation was not recorded for one participant. Faith was not a sampling criterion, and this distribution reflects the composition of the networks through which participants were recruited rather than the wider South Asian population in the UK. Religion is reported here because it emerged inductively as a distinct axis of evaluation in participants' accounts, shaping which spaces and practices were treated as appropriate (see Sections 4.4.4 and 6.4.1). The numbers are too small to support comparison between faith groups, and no such comparison is attempted.

While all participants shared a second-generation South Asian background, they varied in age, family circumstances, educational background, marital status, business sector, and stage of entrepreneurial development. Most were between 28 and 45 years old and held undergraduate or postgraduate qualifications. Their businesses spanned a range of sectors, including creative industries, health and wellbeing, beauty, fashion, photography, education, and faith-based enterprises. Most participants had

established their businesses within the previous five to eight years and were in the early stages of entrepreneurial development, although some were beginning to expand their ventures.

This diversity was important to the study. It enabled exploration of how experiences of entrepreneurship differed across life stages, family situations, and business contexts, while also highlighting common experiences linked to gender, ethnicity, and culture. Rather than treating South Asian women as a homogeneous group, the study sought to capture the variation that existed within participants' experiences and entrepreneurial journeys.

The sample included participants from three main religious backgrounds: Hindu, Sikh, and Muslim, all of whom were second-generation women of South Asian origin. For some participants, religion shaped identity and entrepreneurial practice more strongly than cultural norms; for others, the reverse was true. These backgrounds are situated within South Asian contexts where family and cultural structures continue to shape women's experiences of work, legitimacy, and belonging.

This diversity is analytically significant for an intersectional approach, as it enables examination of how multiple dimensions of identity interact to shape women's experiences of inclusion, exclusion, and legitimacy. The participant group therefore supports the study's focus on identity work as relational, contextual, and uneven, rather than as a uniform or linear process.

An overview of the participants' demographic characteristics, educational backgrounds, business sectors, and entrepreneurial experience is provided in Table 3.1. The table is included as a reference point to support transparency and contextual understanding, while the analysis prioritises participants' narratives and interpretations rather than demographic comparison.

Table 3.1: Participants' Profiles

No.	Name	Age	Marital Status	Business Experience	Education Level	Business Sector	Brief Background	Religion
1	DP	39	Married with children	2 years as a side business, 3 years as the main business	Undergraduate	Yoga Therapist	Transitioned from a corporate job; integrates wellness and mindfulness into her work.	Muslim
2	JN	30	Single	3 years as a side business, 3 years as	Undergraduate	Brand and Logo Designer	Self-taught graphic designer, expanded her business	Muslim

				the main business			because of her creativity and use of digital platforms.	
3	NB	42	Married with children	8 years	Undergraduate	Choreographer	Former professional dancer, now teaches and choreographs cultural performances.	Hindu
4	SN	38	Married with children	8 years (with a break due to relocation)	Undergraduate	Event Décor	SN is a creative event organiser specialising in decor for parties and special events. She took a break from her business to focus on raising her children but has now resumed her work as they've started school.	Muslim
5	RA	37	Married with children	4 years	Undergraduate	Custom Clothing Business	Specialises in custom family-matching outfits, particularly ethnic wear for events and parties. Blends cultural traditions with modern fashion, offering unique parent-child	Hindu

							coordinated designs	
6	SA	40	Married with children	4 years	Undergraduate	Fashion Retail (Mix and Match Clothing)	Runs a boutique, curating South Asian fashion for Western markets.	Muslim
7	SZ	42	Divorced children	3 years as a part-time business	Undergraduate	Psychological Coach	SZ is a women's empowerment coach who helps build strength and confidence through mindset coaching.	Muslim
8	SB	34	Divorced, Remarried	3 years as a side business, 1 year as the main business	Undergraduate	Cultural and Religious Gifts	Started business to promote religious and cultural heritage globally.	Sikh
9	SM	26	Married	5 years	Undergraduate	Photographer and Prop Rental	Focuses on wedding and event photography, leveraging digital marketing.	Sikh
10	SL	48	Married with children	4 years	Undergraduate	Brand Photographer	Shifted from corporate to personal branding for small businesses.	Sikh
11	TK	30	Married with child	2 years	Postgraduate	Speech Therapist	Specialising in language therapy, she primarily serves South Asian communities while also working	Hindu

							with white clients. Her practice was founded to address the unique linguistic needs she's expertly trained to support	
12	TS	35	Married with children	6 years (expanded into makeup artistry 2 years ago)	Undergraduate	Wedding and Formal Clothing	Started with bridal fashion, later expanded into beauty services.	Christian
13	NJ	36	Married with children	6 years (started after the 2020 lockdown)	Undergraduate	Ethnic Jewellery Business	Transitioned from hobbyist to full-time entrepreneur post-pandemic.	Not mentioned
14	JR	37	Married with children	4 years	Undergraduate	British Asian Food Business	Blends traditional Asian recipes with a modern twist, targeting niche markets.	Hindu
15	HK	29	In a relationship	5 years	Undergraduate	Yoga and Physical Intimacy Trainer	Incorporates Eastern wellness practices into Western wellness trends.	Hindu
16	RP	40	Married with children	13 years as side income, 7 years full-time	Undergraduate	Professional Makeup Artist	Built a successful career in bridal and event makeup.	Hindu

17	SD	37	Married with children	7 years	Postgraduate	Fashion and Design Business	Designs modern ethnic fashion, focusing on sustainable practices.	Sikh

3.11 Data Analysis Strategy

The data analysis strategy adopted in this study combines Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as the primary interpretive approach with Gioia-style data structuring to enhance analytic transparency. This combination was chosen to balance interpretive depth with methodological clarity, while maintaining a fully inductive approach. Importantly, IPA guided the interpretation of meaning, while Gioia-style structuring was used only to organise and communicate the analytic process. This approach directly responds to calls for qualitative entrepreneurship research that foregrounds lived experience and identity work while also demonstrating analytic rigour (Gioia, Corley and Hamilton, 2013; Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2021).

3.11.1 Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was used as the primary analytic approach to explore how second-generation South Asian women made sense of their experiences across organisational employment, identity-based networking and learning environments, and entrepreneurial practice. IPA is well suited to research focused on lived experience, meaning-making, and identity because it aims to understand how individuals interpret significant events in their lives, rather than treating experience as fixed or objectively given (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2021; Larkin, Watts and Clifton, 2006).

In this study, IPA was used as a flexible interpretive approach rather than a fixed set of procedures. In line with contemporary IPA literature, the analysis focused on close engagement with participants' accounts and their processes of sense-making, while also recognising the researcher's active role in interpretation (Smith, 2004; Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2021).

IPA is grounded in three interrelated principles: phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2021). From a phenomenological perspective, the analysis focused on how participants experienced legitimacy, belonging, exclusion, and transition in their working lives. From a hermeneutic perspective, a double hermeneutic was involved: participants made sense of their experiences, and the researcher, in turn, interpreted those accounts of sense-making (Larkin, Watts and Clifton, 2006). Throughout this process, reflexive awareness was maintained to ensure interpretations stayed close to participants' own language and narratives rather than being shaped by prior assumptions (Pietkiewicz and Smith, 2014).

IPA analysis in this study followed a case-by-case, iterative, and reflexive process, in line with its idiographic focus. Each of the 17 transcripts was read several times to develop close familiarity with the individual participant's account. Initial notes were written soon after each interview, while the interaction was still fresh, focusing on descriptive detail, language use, and early interpretive reflections. Attention was given to how participants described experiences of work, identity, legitimacy, and transition (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2021). In this study, idiographic analysis was completed for each participant before cross-case comparison began, preserving the approach's interpretive integrity while enabling broader pattern identification across the dataset.

From these initial notes, emergent themes were developed at the individual case level, focusing on participants' sense-making (Eatough and Smith, 2017). Once all interviews were completed, each transcript was revisited and manually recoded, allowing earlier interpretations to be checked and refined through closer engagement with the data. Only after completing the idiographic analysis for each participant were patterns explored across cases. This cross-case stage involved identifying points of convergence and divergence while still preserving the distinctiveness of individual accounts, consistent with IPA's emphasis on depth before broader comparison (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2021).

IPA was well suited to this study: it provided a robust interpretive framework for examining identity work, lived experience, and sense-making, while remaining sensitive to context and intersectional conditions. This iterative and reflexive analytic process ensured that analytical insights were grounded in participants' narratives and interpretations, rather than imposed through predefined categories or theoretical models (Larkin, Watts and Clifton, 2006; Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2021). To illustrate how IPA was applied in practice, one case-level example is presented in Tables 3.2a and 3.2b, with further illustrative analytic traces provided in Appendix D.

Table 3.2a: IPA Analytic Example 1

Stage	**Participant TK**
Raw interview quote	"It wasn't one big thing… everything added together… I reached a point where I was completely exhausted."
Initial interpretive thinking	The participant describes exhaustion as cumulative rather than linked to a single incident, suggesting prolonged emotional and identity strain.
Case-level meaning	Exhaustion experienced as accumulated intersectional pressure rather than momentary stress.
Reflexive check	Re-reading the transcript after completing all interviews confirmed that the emphasis remained on accumulation rather than a single trigger.

Resulting case theme	Accumulated intersectional strain

Table 3.2b: IPA Analytic Example 2

Stage	**Participant HK**
Raw interview quote	"I must pretend to be the Western version of myself."
Initial interpretive thinking	Belonging appears to require suppressing cultural identity, indicating emotional labour and conditional acceptance.
Case-level meaning	Identity regulation is experienced as necessary to be seen as legitimate at work.
Reflexive check	Later readings reinforced the interpretation of identity concealment rather than voluntary adaptation.
Resulting case theme	Identity regulation and emotional labour

3.11.2 Use of Gioia-Style Data Structuring

Following the interpretive, case-by-case analysis conducted using IPA, Gioia-style data structuring was used to organise and present the analytic insights clearly and transparently. In this study, the Gioia approach was employed as a representational and transparency mechanism, rather than a theory-driven analytic framework (Gioia, Corley and Hamilton, 2013; Magnani and Gioia, 2023).

Although Gioia-style structuring is most associated with grounded theory and inductive organisational research, it was adopted here as a practical tool for communicating how analytical insights developed from participants' accounts to higher-level themes not as a framework that shaped the analysis itself. This distinction is important. IPA determined how meaning was generated; Gioia-style structuring determined how that meaning was organised and presented. This approach is consistent with calls for greater methodological transparency in qualitative entrepreneurship research, where presenting the link between raw data and conceptual insights is important for demonstrating analytical rigour (Gehman et al., 2018; Micelotta, Glaser and Dorian, 2020).

The data were organised into three levels: first-order participant categories, second-order interpretive themes, and higher-level aggregate dimensions (Gioia, Corley and Hamilton, 2013). The first-order categories stayed close to participants' own words and reflected how they described their work, entrepreneurial journeys, and experiences of organisational, training, and networking environments.

These categories were not set in advance but developed inductively from the data after the IPA-based analysis had been completed.

Second-order themes were developed through reflexive engagement with the first-order categories, allowing more abstract interpretations to be formed while still staying close to participants' meanings. These themes helped identify patterns and connections across cases without losing the idiographic detail developed earlier. The final aggregate dimensions brought these insights together into broader patterns across the dataset, which formed the basis of the study's empirical contributions.

Gioia-style structuring was applied after interpretive analysis had taken place and did not guide how meaning was generated. Data were not forced into categories, and identity meanings were explored at the experiential level before any conceptual organisation occurred. For each empirical essay, codes and themes were developed in relation to the specific research questions, while maintaining consistency in analytic logic across the thesis. Detailed coding tables and thematic outputs are presented in the analysis sections of each essay, aligned with their respective research questions.

3.11.3 Integrating IPA and Gioia

The integration of IPA and Gioia-style data structuring followed a clear and sequential analytic logic. IPA guided the interpretation of participants lived experiences at the individual case level, focusing on how meanings of identity, legitimacy, and work were understood and negotiated. This idiographic, interpretive analysis was completed before any cross-case comparison took place.

After meanings had been interpreted within individual cases, patterns were examined across participants. At this stage, Gioia-style data structuring was used to organise and present these inductively derived patterns transparently and systematically. Gioia-style structures did not guide interpretation or shape meaning; they were used solely to show how insights developed from participants' accounts were mapped to themes and dimensions.

This sequencing ensured that data were not forced into predefined categories and that interpretation always preceded abstraction. IPA provided interpretive depth and sensitivity to lived experience and identity work, while Gioia-style structuring enhanced methodological transparency by clearly tracing how conceptual insights emerged from the data. Together, this approach supports inductive rigour and coherence with the study's interpretivist research design, without imposing an external analytic framework.

The analysis also included a deliberate search for accounts that did not fit the emerging patterns. Once themes had been developed, each transcript was re-read specifically to identify participants who described mainstream organisations or entrepreneurial spaces positively, who found identity-based support unhelpful, or who explained career decisions without reference to intersectional pressure. Where such accounts appeared, they were retained and reported rather than set aside.

Quotation was guided by interpretive fit rather than by even coverage. Not every participant spoke to every theme, and some women gave fuller accounts of experiences than others, so the number of extracts attributed to each participant varies across the three essays. Selection was based on how clearly an extract illuminated the meaning under discussion, and, where several participants expressed a similar meaning, on which account expressed it most directly. This is consistent with the idiographic commitments of IPA, where depth of individual meaning takes priority over representational balance. Themes were nonetheless developed from the full dataset rather than from the extracts presented, and the analytic examples in Appendix D show how this process moved from individual accounts to shared themes.

3.12 Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were central to the design and conduct of this study, given its focus on identity, work experiences, and potentially sensitive issues related to ethnicity, gender, family expectations, and exclusion. Ethical practice in qualitative research shapes access to participants, data collection, and analysis, and is therefore integral to methodological rigour (Kovalainen and Eriksson, 2008; Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019). This study was conducted in accordance with institutional ethical guidelines and received formal approval from the University of Strathclyde Ethics Committee before participant recruitment and the pilot study.

Informed consent was obtained from all participants. Before interviews took place, participants were provided with an information sheet outlining the research aims, procedures, data usage, and data protection measures. A consent form was also shared, and both documents were explained verbally at the start of each interview to ensure that participants were fully informed (Creswell and Poth, 2017). Participants were clearly informed that participation was voluntary and that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any time, including during the interview, without consequence.

Participants were also informed that they could decline to answer any questions they felt uncomfortable discussing. In one instance, a participant exercised this right and chose not to discuss a particular topic; this decision was fully respected, and the interview proceeded without disruption. Such flexibility was essential given the personal nature of discussions around identity, family dynamics, and workplace experiences.

Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the research process. Participants were assigned initials, and any identifying details relating to individuals, organisations, or businesses were removed or modified. Although some participants were willing to be identified, anonymity was applied consistently across the study to ensure fairness and to protect privacy within close-knit professional and community networks. All data were managed in accordance with appropriate data protection and storage procedures.

Interviews were conducted primarily via Zoom and WhatsApp. Verbal consent was obtained from all participants at the start of each interview and was audio-recorded where participants had consented to recording. Participants were informed that recordings would be used only for transcription and analysis purposes and would not be shared. Audio and video files will be permanently deleted following thesis submission, with only anonymised transcripts and field notes retained for potential future academic use. Where participants did not consent to recording, detailed notes were taken during and immediately after the interview. All data were stored securely on password-protected devices accessible only to the researcher.

Ethical practice was treated as an ongoing responsibility rather than a procedural requirement. Attention to informed consent, confidentiality, secure data handling, and participant wellbeing was central throughout the study and supported the ethical integrity of the research. This ethical commitment extended to the supplementary digital materials used in the study. Although these materials were drawn from publicly accessible online spaces, they were handled with the same care as interview data. This was particularly important because many participants were active members of the same online communities, meaning that direct quotation could have made individuals identifiable even within anonymised accounts. For this reason, digital materials were not treated as a named or attributed data source.

3.13 Researcher Positionality and Reflexivity

Reflexivity is widely recognised as a central methodological practice in qualitative research, particularly within interpretivist approaches such as IPA (Shaw, 2010). It involves sustained reflection on how the researcher's assumptions, experiences, and social positioning shape the research process and the production of knowledge (Hardy, Phillips and Clegg, 2001). As Pillow (2003, p.180) argues, reflexivity is not a neutral procedure but an ongoing methodological practice that requires attention to how researchers interpret and represent participants' accounts.

In this study, reflexivity was particularly important given the focus on identity, ethnicity, and gender. The researcher occupied a dual insider-outsider position. As a South Asian woman, she shared ethnic and gendered cultural reference points with participants, which supported rapport and trust. This often-enabled participants to speak openly about sensitive issues such as family expectations, cultural norms, religion, and experiences of exclusion.

At the same time, the researcher remained an outsider in important respects. As a non-British researcher, she did not share participants' second-generation experiences of growing up in the UK, nor did she have direct entrepreneurial or UK organisational work experience. This distance helped reduce assumptions of shared meaning and supported a more critical engagement with participants' accounts.

Rather than treating insider and outsider positions as fixed, the study approached positionality as something actively managed throughout the research process (Unluer, 2012). During interviews, the researcher prioritised listening and avoided introducing personal interpretations. When participants used phrases such as "as you know," the researcher asked follow-up questions to clarify meaning rather than relying on assumed understanding.

Reflexivity also shaped specific analytical decisions throughout the study. For example, during the analysis of one participant's account of leaving organisational employment, an initial interpretation drew on cultural familiarity, reading the decision as shaped primarily by family expectations. However, upon re-reading and closer engagement with the participant's language, it became clear that the account was more centrally shaped by workplace misrecognition and identity strain than by cultural obligation. This led to a revised interpretation that stayed closer to the participant's own framing and strengthened the analytical link to the study's theoretical framework. Overall, reflexivity was treated as an ongoing methodological practice rather than a one-off reflection.

3.14 Methodological Limitations

This study has certain methodological limitations that should be acknowledged. These limitations do not undermine the study's value but reflect the epistemological and methodological choices made to enable an in-depth, context-sensitive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

First, the study's interpretivist orientation prioritises subjective meaning, lived experience, and contextual understanding over generalisability. The findings are not intended to represent all generations of South Asian women entrepreneurs or ethnic minority women more broadly. Instead, they provide insight into how identity, legitimacy, and belonging are negotiated within particular social and organisational contexts (Myers, 2020; Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019).

Second, the sample is to some extent self-selecting. Participants were women who were active within online entrepreneurial communities and who were willing to discuss their experiences with a researcher. Women who did not engage with such communities, or who chose not to participate, may have different experiences. This is an inherent feature of purposive and snowball sampling, but it does mean that claims should not be extended beyond the specific population and context studied.

Third, the analysis is based entirely on the perspectives of the women themselves. This was appropriate given the study's interest in lived experience and identity work. However, it means that organisational, family, and community perspectives are not directly represented. Future research using multi-perspective designs including interviews with family members, employers, or community leaders would provide further insight into how legitimacy is granted, contested, and negotiated from different positions.

Finally, the supplementary digital materials enhanced contextual understanding but were used solely for contextualisation rather than as primary data. Future research could adopt a more explicit methodological approach to digital spaces using digital ethnographic or social media analysis methods to examine how identities, inequalities, and entrepreneurial experiences are collectively constructed and negotiated in online and community-based contexts.

Chapter 4: Essay 1

From Organisational Employment to Entrepreneurship: Intersectional Career Experiences of South Asian Women in the UK

This essay explores how everyday workplace practices shape the career paths of second-generation South Asian women in the UK, and why some women move into entrepreneurship. The study is based on semi-structured interviews with 17 second-generation South Asian women working across different entrepreneurial sectors. Participants described experiences of workplace inclusion, recognition, promotion, and the impact of gendered cultural norms and caregiving responsibilities. The findings show that formal diversity policies often exist alongside everyday practices that continue to disadvantage ethnic minority women. Informal hierarchies and daily interactions reinforce gendered and racialised expectations, which place ongoing pressure on women over time. These experiences influence career decisions and contribute to exits from organisational employment. Entrepreneurship allowed women to regain a degree of control over their work and to draw on cultural knowledge, although it reconfigured rather than removed the inequalities they faced. This essay contributes to research on diversity, careers, and entrepreneurship by showing how intersectional workplace inequalities shape career transitions over time, introducing conditional inclusion and accumulated identity strain as the concepts that explain this process, and conceptualising these women as intersectional entrepreneurs whose pathways are shaped by accumulated organisational constraint rather than individual preference alone.

4.1 Introduction

Despite decades of diversity and inclusion initiatives, ethnic minority women in UK organisations continue to face unequal treatment, limited recognition, and restricted career progression (Opara, Sealy and Ryan, 2020). While organisations increasingly promote formal inclusion through diversity policies, everyday workplace practices often continue to privilege white and masculine norms of professionalism (Acker, 2006; Ahmed, 2012). As a result, ethnic minority women frequently experience misrecognition, exclusion from informal networks, and pressure to adapt and adjust their identities to be seen as legitimate organisational members (Opara, Sealy and Ryan, 2020; Ullah, 2025).

Research shows that these experiences are not isolated or temporary (Adamson et al., 2021). Instead, ethnic minority women often engage in ongoing identity regulation, managing how they speak, dress, and behave to fit dominant organisational expectations (Tariq and Syed, 2017; Adamson et al., 2021). Over time, these pressures lead to increased stress, emotional exhaustion, and long-term processes of identity negotiation and reconstruction (Opara, Sealy and Ryan, 2020; Adesina et al., 2025). While existing studies document workplace inequality well, less attention has been paid to how these experiences influence career exit and decisions to leave organisational employment altogether.

Intersectional scholarship highlights that workplace inequality cannot be understood through gender or ethnicity alone, but emerges through the interaction of multiple social categories, including race, gender, religion, class, and organisational power relations (Crenshaw, 1991; Collins, 2000; Holvino, 2010). Studies show that ethnic minority women experience gendered racism through microaggressions, heightened scrutiny, and persistent questioning of competence and leadership potential (Bhopal, 2020; Kele et al., 2022; Begum and Sobolewska, 2024). These dynamics are often intensified for women with visible religious identities, such as Muslim women, who face additional forms of exclusion, discrimination, and surveillance at work (Khattab et al., 2020; Nazari, 2024).

Although diversity initiatives have expanded in recent years, research suggests that they often result in symbolic forms of inclusion, where ethnic minority women are formally included but remain marginalised in everyday organisational life (Tariq and Syed, 2017; Adamson et al., 2021; Bourabain, 2021). Such forms of inclusion provide surface-level belonging without addressing deeper inequalities in recognition, progression, and decision-making power. These conditions shape women's workplace experiences, sense of belonging, professional identity, and future career possibilities.

UK-based research has provided important insights into the organisational experiences of South Asian women, particularly in relation to leadership, identity negotiation, and workplace discrimination (Tariq and Syed, 2017; Hwang and Beauregard, 2022; Shahbaz, Chan and Uluğ, 2025). However, much of this work focuses on experiences within organisational employment, rather than on what happens when women decide to leave these environments. There is limited understanding of how prolonged exposure to workplace inequality shapes career exit and transitions into alternative forms of work.

Research on ethnic minority and migrant women entrepreneurs in the UK often focuses on first-generation migrants or specific national groups, and tends to frame entrepreneurship as opportunity-driven, flexible, or lifestyle-based (Valdez, 2016; Maharjan, Nazir and Roomi, 2025). Less attention has been given to second-generation South Asian women, who are born and educated in the UK yet continue to experience racialisation and exclusion within professional workplaces. In addition, existing research rarely examines how organisational inequality, identity regulation, and care responsibilities interact over time to shape entrepreneurial transitions. Research shows that motherhood and caregiving often intensify gendered workplace inequalities, particularly for ethnic minority women who may face additional cultural expectations and reduced organisational support (Tariq and Syed, 2017; Raimi et al., 2023).

To address these gaps, this essay explores how second-generation South Asian women in the UK experience organisational work and how these experiences shape their transitions into entrepreneurship. Drawing on an intersectional perspective, it examines how gender, ethnicity, religion, and cultural norms interact to produce conditional inclusion, gendered racism, and the devaluation of ethnic cultural capital (Holvino, 2010; Opara, Sealy and Ryan, 2020; Hwang and Beauregard, 2022). It also considers

how motherhood and caregiving intersect with these organisational dynamics to influence career decisions and entrepreneurial pathways (Raimi et al., 2023). The essay develops accumulated identity strain to explain how these conditions build up over time and eventually make organisational employment unsustainable.

This essay makes three key contributions. First, it introduces the idea of conditional inclusion as a form of inequality rather than a solution to it. It shows that, although organisations may appear inclusive, individuals still face ongoing pressure to adapt their identities without gaining lasting recognition or job security. Second, it introduces accumulated identity strain to explain how repeated identity work under unequal organisational conditions gradually weakens belonging and attachment to organisational careers, and how this shapes career exit over time. Third, it reframes entrepreneurship not simply as an individual choice or aspiration, but as a form of intersectional identity reclamation, in which the cultural knowledge and community ties that organisations had devalued become sources of credibility and recognition. In developing these arguments, the essay also addresses the experiences of second-generation South Asian women, who remain under-represented in UK research on organisational inequality and entrepreneurship.

The research question guiding this essay is RQ1: How do intersectional workplace experiences shape the career trajectories and transitions of second-generation South Asian women from organisational employment into entrepreneurship?

Methodologically, the essay draws on in-depth semi-structured interviews with 17 second-generation South Asian women in the UK who have experience of organisational employment and have established their own businesses. Using an IPA and Gioia-inspired data structuring, the essay examines women's narratives of work, identity, exclusion, and transition, highlighting how organisational inequality accumulates over time and reshapes career trajectories. The following section reviews the literature relevant to this essay, followed by an outline of the methodology, the presentation of findings, and a discussion of the key contributions.

4.2 Literature Review

This literature review is organised around three key themes that frame the focus of this essay. The first examines intersectionality, gendered racism, and organisational inequality, highlighting how race, gender, and other social categories shape workplace experiences. The second focuses on intersectional constraints in organisational life, including conditional inclusion, identity regulation, and unequal access to recognition and progression. The third explores the transition to entrepreneurship as an intersectional career response, examining how entrepreneurship emerges as a pathway shaped by prolonged organisational inequality and life-course responsibilities. Together, these themes provide the theoretical foundation for understanding how intersectional workplace processes shape career exit and

entrepreneurial trajectories and how they give rise to accumulated identity strain, the concept developed in this essay.

4.2.1 Intersectionality, Gendered Racism, and Organisational Inequality

Intersectionality provides a critical framework for understanding how inequality operates within organisations, particularly in relation to racialised women's careers. Crenshaw (1991) developed this concept to challenge legal approaches that treated race and gender as separate forms of discrimination. She argued that Black women's experiences became invisible when these systems of power were examined separately rather than together. Intersectionality therefore shifts analysis away from additive models of oppression and towards an understanding of how race, gender, and other social categories intersect to produce qualitatively distinct forms of inequality.

From this perspective, inequality is not the result of individual difference but is embedded within organisational structures and everyday practices. Social categories such as gender, race, and class operate simultaneously, shaping how power is distributed and experienced (Collins, 2000; Holvino, 2010). This positions intersectionality not as a descriptive account of identity, but as an analytical lens through which the operation of power can be examined across institutional contexts.

Intersectionality is now widely used in organisational research, yet its critical perspective is often overlooked. Scholars argue that when incorporated into diversity and inclusion frameworks, intersectionality risks being reduced to a tool for categorising difference rather than interrogating structural inequality (Anthias, 2013; Kaufmann and Derry, 2024). In such cases, the focus shifts towards representation and visibility, while leaving underlying power relations intact (Rodriguez and Freeman, 2016). This essay responds to these concerns by engaging intersectionality as a framework for analysing how organisational processes reproduce inequality over time, rather than treating identity as a static variable.

Feminist and critical race scholars further challenge the assumption that organisations operate as neutral or meritocratic spaces. Acker's (2006) concept of inequality regimes demonstrates how organisational processes such as hiring, promotion, and performance evaluation systematically advantage certain groups while marginalising others. These processes often remain normalised and invisible, which allows inequality to persist without being explicitly recognised. Research shows that organisational norms are structured around whiteness, masculinity, and middle-class professionalism, which shape expectations of competence, leadership, and organisational fit (Holvino, 2010; Nkomo and Rodriguez, 2019). Individuals who do not align with these norms are therefore positioned as outsiders, even when formally included.

More recent work conceptualises organisations explicitly as racialised structures, where whiteness operates as an unmarked standard that defines legitimacy and authority (Ray, 2019; Glass and Cook,

2020). Within these contexts, diversity initiatives often fail to disrupt existing hierarchies. Instead, they produce forms of symbolic inclusion in which representation increases but access to power remains limited (Adamson et al., 2021; Fletcher, Dashper and Albert, 2023). This distinction between access and power is critical. It highlights how inclusion can coexist with ongoing inequality, and how organisations can appear progressive while continuing to marginalise the very people they claim to include.

Within such environments, racialised and ethnic minority women experience a persistent tension between visibility and marginality. While they may be visible as symbols of diversity, they often remain excluded from decision-making processes and leadership pathways (Purdie-Vaughns and Eibach, 2008; Smith et al., 2019). Research identifies recurring patterns of exclusion, including restricted access to informal networks, heightened scrutiny of behaviour, and ongoing questioning of competence (Ghumman and Ryan, 2013; Glass and Cook, 2020). These dynamics collectively shape who is recognised as legitimate within organisational settings.

Inclusion, therefore, is not an equalising process but is frequently conditional. Racialised women may be expected to contribute to organisational diversity narratives while conforming to dominant norms and avoiding disruption to existing power structures (Ghosh and Barber, 2021). This form of conditional inclusion requires ongoing identity regulation, emotional labour, and the management of visibility, placing additional burdens on ethnic minority employees (Bhopal, 2020; Bourabain, 2021; Hussein, 2023). Over time, these demands affect both career progression and sense of belonging within organisations (Netto et al., 2020).

Religious visibility further intensifies these inequalities. Muslim women who wear the hijab often experience discrimination and symbolic devaluation that can affect hiring, career progression, and workplace mobility (Dwyer, 2000; Khattab and Modood, 2015; Nazari, 2024). Research also highlights a wider "Muslim penalty," where visible religious identity is linked to labour market disadvantages (Khattab et al., 2020). These experiences are reinforced by stereotypes that portray Muslim women as less compatible with professional expectations, shaping perceptions of their credibility and leadership potential (Ahmad, 2001; Mirza, 2013; Fernando and Cohen, 2014; Gottardello, Cascón Pereira and Anderson, 2025).

Labour market research reinforces these patterns by demonstrating that while access to employment may improve, progression into senior and high-status roles remains uneven (Drange et al., 2025; Han and Hermansen, 2024). Career trajectories are therefore shaped through the interaction between individual agency and structural constraint over time (Netto et al., 2020). Despite the depth of this literature, most intersectional organisational research focuses on how individuals manage inequality at work, paying less attention to what happens when these conditions become unsustainable and how

prolonged exposure to conditional inclusion shapes decisions to disengage from organisational employment entirely.

4.2.2 Intersectional Constraints in Organisational Life

Structural inequality in organisations is enacted through everyday workplace experiences and accumulates over time. These inequalities are created and maintained through daily interactions, decisions, and organisational practices that shape career opportunities.

One key way in which these dynamics operate is through conditional participation, where access to organisational spaces does not equate to equal involvement. For ethnic minority women, engagement is often shaped by implicit expectations around behaviour, communication, and identity presentation. These expectations influence how individuals are evaluated and included in everyday interactions, particularly in high-status professional environments (Bhopal, 2020; Glass and Cook, 2020). Participation depends on how well individuals are seen to fit the accepted norms of the organisation, norms that constrain participation while offering only limited scope for recognition.

These conditions are further intensified through differentiated forms of visibility. Minority women are frequently positioned in visible roles within organisations, yet this visibility does not translate into influence or decision-making power (Bargallie and Carlson, 2025). Instead, it is often associated with increased scrutiny, limited authority, and restricted access to influential networks (Zanoni and Janssens, 2007; Adamson et al., 2021; Ghosh and Barber, 2021; Bargallie and Carlson, 2025). Such patterns shape trajectories of progression, where access to senior roles and strategic decision-making remains uneven (Kossek, Su and Wu, 2017).

Organisational practices can also create additional pressures by placing unequal demands on people and expecting them to continually adapt to existing ways of working. Minority women are often required to take on supplementary roles which are not fully recognised within formal career structures (Ahmed, 2012; Wingfield, 2019). Alongside this, individuals engage in ongoing identity management to align with expectations of professionalism, often regulating the visibility of ethnicity, religion, and gendered roles (Syed and Özbilgin, 2009; Opara, Sealy and Ryan, 2020; Ferguson and Dougherty, 2022). These demands create a persistent imbalance between recognition and effort.

Over time, these intersecting pressures contribute to identity strain. Rather than being experienced as isolated challenges, they build gradually through repeated exposure to evaluation, adjustment, and constraint (Kenny and Briner, 2013; Mirza, 2013; Adesina et al., 2025). While prior research has documented identity work in detail, less attention has been given to how such strain accumulates and changes career trajectories over time. This essay responds to this gap by introducing the concept of accumulated identity strain. It explores how continuous pressure to manage one's identity can gradually lead individuals to disengage from organisational careers.

Care responsibilities introduce an additional dimension to this process. Organisational structures often remain incompatible with caregiving demands, reinforcing inequalities in pay, progression, and stability (Cortés and Pan, 2023; Avram, Harkness and Popova, 2024; Xie et al., 2025). For ethnic minority women, these challenges are shaped by both organisational expectations and broader cultural norms related to family and caregiving (McDowell, 2008; Bhopal, 2010; Mehra et al., 2023). The interaction between workplace constraints and caregiving responsibilities creates competing demands that can be difficult to sustain within traditional organisational pathways (Ahmad, 2001; Collins, 2000; Goodman, Williams and Dow, 2021).

These dynamics highlight how inequality operates through intersecting constraints rather than a set of isolated barriers. Conditional participation, uneven recognition, identity strain, and caregiving pressures interact and gradually reshape career paths.

4.2.3 Transition to Entrepreneurship as an Intersectional Career Response

When organisational barriers continue over time, individuals may seek alternative pathways outside traditional career structures (Meléndez and Özkazanç-Pan, 2021). Careers shaped by structural inequality are often non-linear, including periods of limited progress, stepping back, or changing direction entirely (Kossek, Su and Wu, 2017). Career exit is therefore shaped by organisational conditions, not only individual decisions.

Organisational exit is no longer understood solely as an individual decision or lack of resilience, but as a structurally conditioned response to sustained inequality (Ghosh and Barber, 2021). Studies show that ongoing experiences of marginalisation, limited recognition, and restricted progression gradually weaken attachment to organisational careers over time (Kossek, Su and Wu, 2017). Ghosh and Barber (2021) demonstrate how sustained legitimacy work and exposure to cultural tokenism generate fatigue and disengagement, prompting individuals to reconsider their career choices. These findings challenge traditional narratives that position exit as voluntary, highlighting instead how organisational and gendered norms shape career reorientation.

In much of the mainstream literature, entrepreneurship is often seen as a positive alternative that provides autonomy, flexibility, and a sense of personal fulfilment (Bruni, Gherardi and Poggio, 2004; Carter et al., 2015). However, this framing overlooks the structural contexts in which entrepreneurial transitions occur. Emerging studies show that self-employment is often influenced by a mix of workplace constraints and a lack of clear career progression, rather than simply being driven by opportunity (Yang, Kacperczyk and Naldi, 2024). This pattern is especially evident for racialised women, whose movement into entrepreneurship reflects experiences within organisational environments that failed to provide recognition, security, or progression on equitable terms (Knight, 2016; Agius Vallejo and Canizales, 2016).

Scholars examining the experiences of women of colour further highlight how entrepreneurial transitions are shaped by everyday organisational inequalities. Ongoing experiences of microaggressions and restricted progression can slowly reduce professional attachment, making continued participation in organisational careers increasingly difficult (Meléndez and Özkazanç-Pan, 2021; Norman, Aiken and Greer, 2024). In this context, entrepreneurship reconfigures work in ways shaped by prior organisational experience.

This view challenges the common assumption that entrepreneurship is simply a matter of personal preference or available opportunity. Instead, it positions entrepreneurship as an intersectional outcome, shaped by the combined effects of gender, race, class, and organisational power relations (Carrim and Nkomo, 2016; Martinez Dy and Agwunobi, 2019). Entrepreneurial transitions cannot therefore be understood in isolation from the employment contexts from which they emerge.

Following sustained organisational marginalisation and identity negotiation challenges, individuals may turn to self-employment as a means of regaining control over work and redefining professional identity (Al-Dajani and Marlow, 2013; James, Xiong and Anderson, 2022). Entrepreneurship in this sense reflects the interaction of push factors, discrimination, stalled progression, and organisational rigidity, with pull factors including autonomy, flexibility, and access to alternative social and cultural resources (Carter et al., 2015; Raimi et al., 2023). Entrepreneurial pathways therefore emerge through a dynamic interplay of constraint and agency rather than a single motivation.

Moreover, transition into entrepreneurship does not eliminate inequality. Evidence suggests that women entrepreneurs, particularly those from racialised backgrounds, continue to encounter structural barriers beyond organisational employment, including limited access to financial resources, discrimination within support systems, and concentration within lower-growth sectors (Sahira and Surangi, 2022). Inequality is therefore not limited to organisational settings but extends across the broader entrepreneurial experience.

Despite these advances, significant limitations remain in the literature. Existing research rarely integrates organisational inequality, identity strain, and entrepreneurial transition within a single process-based framework. Many UK studies focus on first-generation migrant women or treat South Asian women as a uniform group, offering limited insight into the specific experiences of second-generation women (Ram and Jones, 2008; Dhaliwal and Kangis, 2006). This gap is particularly significant for second-generation South Asian women, whose experiences reflect both access to professional opportunities and continued exposure to racialised and gendered constraints. This essay responds to this gap by developing a process-based, intersectional account of career transition through which second-generation South Asian women emerge as intersectional entrepreneurs.

4.2.4 Contextualising Second-Generation South Asian Women's Organisational Experiences in the UK

Research on South Asian women in the UK consistently demonstrates that labour market inequalities are produced through the intersection of gender, ethnicity, religion, and racialised organisational norms (Arifeen and Syed, 2020). Intersectional organisational studies show that South Asian women experience restricted occupational mobility, exclusion from informal networks, and racialised misrecognition within workplace contexts (Tariq and Syed, 2017; Naseem, 2019). Gender intersects with religion, ethnicity, and family expectations to shape hiring decisions, career progression, and everyday workplace experiences in ways that compound over time.

These dynamics are particularly pronounced for second-generation South Asian women who, despite being UK-born, educated, and professionally socialised within British institutions, continue to encounter processes of racialisation and perceptions of being "not fully British" (Naseem, 2019). Research shows that British South Asian women engage in strategic self-presentation to navigate organisational expectations, managing dress, speech, and the visibility of cultural or religious identity in order to secure recognition (Tariq and Syed, 2017; Mirza, 2013).

Studies also highlight that visibly Muslim South Asian women experience heightened forms of discrimination embedded in recruitment outcomes and in everyday judgements of competence, organisational fit, and professionalism (Dwyer, 2000; Khattab and Modood, 2015). Alongside organisational inequalities, culturally embedded gender norms and care expectations continue to shape South Asian women's career trajectories. Women disproportionately shoulder domestic and caregiving responsibilities, frequently within extended family structures, which further constrains their participation and progression in paid employment (Dhaliwal, 2007; Arifeen and Syed, 2020).

Although entrepreneurship has been identified as a potential strategy through which South Asian women navigate organisational constraints, it has been examined almost entirely in relation to first-generation migrants (Dhaliwal and Kangis, 2006). This essay addresses this gap by examining entrepreneurship as a career response to accumulated gendered racism, conditional inclusion, and care-based constraints within the UK context.

4.3 Methodology

This essay adopts a qualitative approach using semi-structured interviews to explore participants lived experiences within organisational employment. A detailed account of the overall research design, data collection methods, and philosophical foundations is provided in Chapter 3. This section outlines how the analytical approach was applied specifically to the data relevant to this essay's focus.

Data from all 17 participants were drawn on for this essay, as all had direct experience of organisational employment before transitioning into entrepreneurship. Data were analysed using an inductive and interpretive approach, combining case-level Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) with

Gioia-style data structuring to organise emerging themes. Each interview was first analysed individually through repeated readings to capture how participants understood their workplace experiences.

The analytical process followed three stages. In the first stage, each transcript was read multiple times to develop familiarity with the participant's individual account. Initial interpretive notes were made focusing on how participants described experiences of inclusion, recognition, progression, and identity within organisational settings. For example, one participant reflected: "I began to question myself… am I good enough?" This was initially coded as self-doubt and internalised pressure and was interpretively developed into an early formulation of what this essay theorises as accumulated identity strain, showing how repeated experiences of marginalisation shaped participants' confidence and sense of professional legitimacy.

In the second stage, emergent themes were developed at the individual case level, staying close to participants' own language and sense-making. In the third stage, patterns across cases were examined to identify shared experiences and points of divergence, which were then organised using Gioia-style data structuring into first-order categories, second-order themes, and aggregate dimensions. The Gioia table for this essay was developed specifically in relation to RQ1's focus on organisational experience and career transition, rather than applying categories carried over from the other essays. First-order codes stayed close to participants' own language about recruitment, progression, and everyday workplace interaction, and second-order themes were developed to capture the mechanisms through which conditional inclusion operated over time. This structuring was applied after the interpretive analysis was complete, serving as a transparency mechanism rather than a guide to interpretation. Further examples of the analytical process for this essay are provided in Appendix D.

4.4 Findings

This section presents and interprets the findings of the essay, examining how participants' organisational experiences shape their transitions into entrepreneurship. Drawing on a Gioia-style analytic approach, the analysis explores how second-generation South Asian women experience organisational life as a cumulative and intersectional process, where access is often accompanied by forms of conditional inclusion that influence both identity and career trajectories.

The findings are organised around six interrelated themes that together explain how organisational inclusion is experienced, constrained, and ultimately re-evaluated over time. These themes highlight how participants navigate workplace expectations, manage identity, and respond to continuing inequalities within professional environments.

Table 4.1 presents the data structure, showing how first-order experiences developed into higher-level themes that explain organisational experiences and subsequent transitions into entrepreneurship. In addition to interview data, contextual insights drawn from blogs and online discussions are used to

support interpretation and highlight wider shared experiences (see Appendix B1). Detailed participant narratives are also included in Appendix C to provide further depth and transparency in the analysis.

Table 4.1: Gioia Data Structure (Organisational Experiences)

Interview Quotes	1st Order Codes (Informant-Centred)	2nd Order Themes	Aggregate Dimensions
"Companies always talk about diversity… hired for diversity… must work twice as hard… both fired were Asian." (TS)	• Hired to fill diversity targets • Having to work twice as hard • Asian staff let go first	**Tokenistic Recruitment and Symbolic Inclusion**	**Recruited for Diversity, Excluded in Practice**
"I quit my previous role because colleagues made me feel I was hired mainly for diversity." (RP)	• Called a diversity hire by colleagues • Quitting because of how colleagues saw her		
"When I first started, I felt I'd been recruited for diversity." (RA)	• Feeling recruited for diversity		
"You know, sometimes you just start asking yourself, 'Am I good enough?'" (SL)	• Asking herself if she is good enough		
"If I apply for the same role… a man has a higher chance." (TS)	• A man has a higher chance for the same role		
"Managers treat people of colour differently… white colleagues are more accommodated." (JN)	• Managers treating staff differently by race • White colleagues given more flexibility	**Conditional Inclusion and Racialised Double Standards**	**Inclusion Without Equality**
"You notice who gets promoted, who is on PIP… that's when you start questioning." (RA)	• Noticing who gets promoted and who does not • Noticing who is put on a performance plan • Starting to question		
"English people always got promotions over Asians." (JR) *"Good enough to do extra work but not good enough to get a promotion." (NB)*	• Race affecting promotion • Doing extra work but not getting promoted		
"Skin colour is always there." (NJ)	• Skin colour always noticed at work		
"They valued my labour, not who I was." (SL)	• Valued for her labour, not for who she was	**Devaluation of Ethnic and Cultural Capital**	
"My cultural ideas were ignored." (TS)	• Cultural ideas ignored at work		
"Some people's ideas mattered more." (SA)	• Some people's ideas mattered more		
"Used linguistic values, never appreciated." (TK)	• Language skills used but never valued		

“Ask to leave cultural stuff outside.” (HK)	• Culture treated as out of place at work		
"I must pretend to be the Western version of myself." (HK)	• Having to act like a Western version of herself • Feeling she has no choice	**Identity Regulation and Emotional Labour**	**The Burden of Belonging: Identity Suppression and Emotional Labour**
"Sometimes you go to social events, so colleagues don't judge." (SD)	• Going to social events to avoid being judged		
"It wasn't just about doing your job well… how you dressed, spoke, and carried yourself." (SL)	• Doing the job well is not enough • Judged on dress, speech and manner		
“When you’re visibly religious at work, even if people seem open, … you need to be careful, because you don’t want to seem unprofessional.” (SB)	• Being careful about showing religion at work • Worrying about seeming unprofessional		
"Redundant during maternity leave." (JR) *"Being a mother of teenagers, I have to give more presence to my kids." (SL)*	• Made redundant while on maternity leave • Motherhood changing career choices • Care seen as a problem at work	**Gendered Care Penalties and Motherhood Responsibilities**	**Gendered and Racialised Care Penalties**
"There is pressure to balance everything." (DP)	• Pressure to balance everything		
"Asian women are seen as homemakers." (SB)	• Asian women are seen as homemakers		
"Husband's work was never disrupted in the same way." (TK)	• Care fell on her, not on her husband		
"Left career after marriage to move." (SN)	• Left her career after marriage to move		
"It wasn't one big thing… everything added together." (TK)	• No single big event • Pressure building up until she left	**Cumulative Strain and the Decision to Exit**	**Exiting Under Intersectional Pressure**
"I left because of toxic gender attitudes." (RP)	• Leaving because of toxic gender attitudes		
"I reached a point where I was completely exhausted." (DP)	• Reaching complete exhaustion		
"After having my child… I had to choose myself, my baby." (TK)	• Motherhood as the turning point for leaving		
"Different things many times, and they kept happening." (SD) *"Things build up over time… not treated equally… I was waiting for an opportunity." (SD)*	• Unfair treatment repeating over time • Waiting for the right moment to leave		
"I'm proving people wrong." (SM)	• Proving people wrong		

"Being a businesswoman helped me thrive." (DP)	• Doing well personally and financially in her own business	**Entrepreneurship as Identity Reclamation and Resistance**	**Reclaiming Voice, Value, and Visibility Through Entrepreneurship**
"Motherhood made me start a business." (TK)	• Motherhood made her start a business		
"I use Asian rituals in Western workplaces." (HK)	• Using Asian rituals in Western workplaces		
"I speak Urdu and Punjabi in therapy." (TK)	• Language skills now an asset in her own business		
"Muslim women feel seen in my business" (SZ)	• Making a space where Muslim women feel seen • Giving others the recognition she did not get		
"To be honest, I don't feel like I have to prove anything anymore. I work on my own schedule, on my own terms. I'm also earning more than I would in a job…less time, more money. There's no judgement; it just feels like a win for me." (NB)	• No longer having to prove herself • Working on her own terms • Earning more in less time • No judgement		

4.4.1 Recruited for Diversity, Excluded in Practice

Within this theme, participants described a clear tension between being included through diversity initiatives and feeling excluded in everyday organisational practice. Although many were recruited under diversity agendas, their experiences suggested that this inclusion was often symbolic rather than meaningful. Participants felt that their presence was valued more for organisational image than for their skills or contributions. This highlights how diversity efforts can operate at a surface level, without changing how recognition, promotion, and value are distributed in practice.

As second-generation women, participants did not highlight barriers such as language or education, which are often emphasised in first-generation migrant contexts. Instead, they described subtler forms of exclusion, in which their competence was present but not fully recognised.

Tokenistic Recruitment and Symbolic Inclusion

Several participants explained how this shaped their early organisational experiences. TS, for example, described how both gender and ethnicity influenced how she was treated at work, particularly in relation to promotion and job security:

"You know, companies always talk about diversity, and they hire us for their diversity. However, when it comes to promotions, you must work twice as hard as your white colleagues. I have experienced this. And even when it's about redundancy, you're the first on the target list… Last year, my company had to fire two people, and both were Asian. How is that even possible?" (TS)

TS highlights two related but distinct forms of inequality. First, she describes having to work harder than her White colleagues to achieve promotion. This suggests that advancement was experienced as requiring greater effort and proving herself more extensively. Second, she points to the redundancy of two Asian colleagues, referring to an observable outcome rather than a personal perception. This distinction is important because the first reflects her experience of unequal treatment, while the second concerns a pattern she witnessed within the organisation. These experiences shaped her understanding of how ethnicity influenced career opportunities and outcomes. Her ethnicity shaped both entry and exit opportunities, highlighting how inclusion remained conditional and could be withdrawn when organisational priorities changed.

Similarly, some participants felt that they had been hired to meet organisational diversity goals rather than because their skills and abilities were fully recognised. However, these perceptions were not fixed. RA reflected that such experiences were more noticeable during the early stages of her career:

"I'd say things improved with time, especially once you get into a good position. But when I first started, there were moments when I felt I was there more as a diversity hire." (RA)

This suggests that tokenistic positioning was felt most intensely at entry level, where legitimacy was least established and most closely examined. With increased experience, some participants gained confidence and recognition, but the initial positioning as "diversity hires" shaped their early sense of belonging and professional identity. Some participants highlighted that these encounters often triggered internal self-questioning. SL reflected on how such experiences led her to question her self-worth and capability:

"You know, sometimes you just start asking yourself, 'Am I good enough?" (SL)

This experience was not limited to formal policies but was reinforced through everyday interactions. Participants described feeling subtly labelled as "diversity hires," which affected how they were perceived by colleagues and how they viewed themselves. Over time, this led to a sense of uncertain belonging, where inclusion was present but constantly questioned. As a result, many participants reported a decline in confidence and a growing need to prove their competence.

This account was not isolated to the interview data. Similar experiences appeared in public accounts by South Asian women describing their organisational careers, where being the only South Asian woman in a team was described as increasing the pressure to continually prove herself (Appendix B1). The recurrence of this pattern outside the interview setting suggests that conditional inclusion is not particular to this sample but a more widely shared experience among South Asian women in UK workplaces.

This illustrates how external inequalities can become internalised, shaping participants' sense of self-worth and confidence. Diversity recruitment did not necessarily result in equal participation or recognition. Instead, it produced conditional inclusion, where participants were allowed in but not fully accepted. From an intersectional perspective, participants recognised that their gender and ethnicity influenced how their competence was evaluated from the start. Inclusion had to be actively maintained rather than being automatically granted, and these early experiences shaped their longer-term career expectations in ways that eventually contributed to exit.

4.4.2 Inclusion Without Equality

Within this theme, participants described two main experiences. First, they reflected on double standards, observing different treatment from managers in everyday interactions and promotion opportunities. Second, they described how their labour, ethnic knowledge, and cultural insights were often utilised by organisations but not appropriately recognised or valued.

Conditional Inclusion and Racialised Double Standards

Participants described ongoing differences in how they were treated within everyday organisational practices, particularly in relation to promotion, flexibility, performance management, and access to

informal networks. These experiences were not always visible at a formal level but were embedded in routine interactions that shaped how participants were perceived and valued. As NJ stated:

"Skin colour is always there." (NJ)

This highlights how racialised identity remained a constant factor influencing workplace experiences. Participants described how this affected both their treatment and how their actions were interpreted. Routine interactions such as flexibility requests became spaces where inequality was reproduced. While policies appeared neutral, how they were applied differed across employees JN described how everyday managerial behaviours reflected clear double standards:

"I have seen managers treat people of colour differently. Even for holiday requests or flexibility, their tone changes. With white colleagues, they are more accommodating, but with us, everything has to stay strictly within policy. You can tell it's a clear double standard." (JN)

JN's account suggests that inequality was experienced through everyday managerial practices rather than formal organisational policies. Although the same rules applied to all employees, she perceived that managers were more willing to show flexibility towards White colleagues, while employees of colour were expected to follow procedures and policies more strictly. This highlights how unequal treatment can emerge through discretionary decisions, making inequalities difficult to identify through formal policies alone. This is the same pattern seen in Section 4.4.1, where formal inclusion existed alongside unequal treatment.

Organisational practices were therefore not experienced equally but were shaped by informal judgements and unstated assumptions about who deserved accommodation. JR's account further illustrates how these patterns extended into career progression:

"I did well in the corporate world, but the racial atmosphere held me back. I could never progress, even though I knew I did my job well and worked better than others… but English people always got the promotions over Asians. It is still there." (JR)

JR's experience shows how perceptions of who is "suitable" for promotion were shaped by racialised expectations rather than performance alone. The intersection of gender and ethnicity is evident in a further aspect of her account, as JR also described being made “redundant during maternity leave”, an experience that shows how gender and ethnicity intersected to increase vulnerability within organisational decision-making.

Devaluation of Ethnic and Cultural Capital

Participants also described exclusion from informal networks and social interactions, which are central to career advancement. TK explained:

"I was often excluded from team lunches and activities, but whenever patients came in who spoke another language, they came straight to me and said they needed me for community patients. That is when I realised they valued my labour, not who I was." (TK)

TK describes two things happening at once. She was left out of team lunches and social activities, and she was also sought out whenever her language skills were needed for community patients. Exclusion and demand existed together in the same workplace. Her conclusion that the organisation valued her labour rather than who she was captures the difference between being useful and being accepted.

A similar experience was described by other participants, who felt that their ideas, contributions, and ethnic knowledge were often overlooked or undervalued within organisations. For example, HK recalled being told to *"leave the cultural stuff outside",* suggesting that aspects of her identity and cultural expertise were not seen as relevant or legitimate in the workplace.

This shows how conditional inclusion worked in practice. Participants were not excluded from the work itself, since their skills were used regularly. What they were excluded from was the informal relationships through which progression happens. TK's languages were treated as a resource for the organisation rather than as a reason to value her as a colleague. The same skills appear again in Section 4.4.6, where she uses them in her own business under different conditions.

Public accounts described a related pattern at a broader scale, with highly skilled South Asian women reporting that they were not progressing in their careers despite their qualifications (Appendix B1). This supports the interview finding that inclusion without equality was not a matter of individual skill but of how progression was structured.

These experiences show that inclusion within organisations often operates without equality. Participants were present but not fully recognised as legitimate or influential members. Differences in treatment were not always formal but were embedded in everyday practices that shaped access to opportunities, support, and progression. The need to constantly navigate unequal expectations reinforced a sense that legitimacy was conditional rather than secure, a pattern that, over time, eroded both confidence and organisational attachment.

4.4.3 Gendered and Racialised Care Penalties

Motherhood emerged as a central factor shaping how participants experienced inequality within organisational contexts. Participants described how care responsibilities intensified existing challenges, particularly in relation to flexibility, workload expectations, and career progression. These experiences were not driven by organisational policies alone but were shaped by gendered and cultural expectations that positioned women as primarily responsible for care.

Gendered Care Penalties and Motherhood Responsibilities

Participants consistently highlighted how motherhood changed their relationship with work. TK described how, despite both partners being employed, responsibility for childcare was expected to fall on her:

"Both of us had jobs, but when the baby needed something, a doctor's appointment, nursery issues, anything really, I was the one expected to reschedule my work and make it all fit. My husband's work was never disrupted in the same way." (TK)

This account shows how organisational expectations intersect with cultural norms to place both practical and emotional demands on women. As a result, participants had difficulty maintaining the same level of availability and flexibility expected within professional roles. This created tension between organisational expectations and family responsibilities, making continued participation in full-time employment increasingly challenging.

This highlights how motherhood is not a single event but an ongoing process that reshapes career decisions. Over time, participants described feeling pressure to prioritise family responsibilities, which contributed to reduced working hours, slower progression, or eventual exit from employment. SN's experience further illustrates how these dynamics are shaped by multiple intersecting factors, including relocation, marriage, and ethnicity:

"I moved to England with him. I left my family behind, I left my career behind, and everything changed. Then it took me years to get back into work because I had children and stayed at home with them." (SN)

Her account shows how motherhood is embedded within broader social and relational contexts, where decisions are influenced by family expectations and life transitions. Across accounts, motherhood was described as a turning point that made organisational careers difficult to sustain. Participants managed work and childcare while also navigating expectations about being a "good mother". These expectations shaped how they were perceived, often prompting assumptions of reduced commitment.

These findings show that care responsibilities are not separate from organisational inequality but are central to how it is experienced. Gendered and cultural expectations intersect with workplace norms to shape how women are evaluated, supported, and able to progress. For intersectional entrepreneurs, the decision to move into entrepreneurship was rarely driven by care alone, but care worked alongside organisational inequality to make remaining in employment increasingly difficult. Entrepreneurship offered not a resolution to care demands, but a context in which those demands could be managed more flexibly and, on the women’s own terms.

4.4.4 The Burden of Belonging: Identity Suppression and Emotional Labour

Within this theme, participants described how belonging within organisations often required active adjustment of their identity. Women spoke of changing how they spoke, behaved, and presented themselves to align with dominant expectations of professionalism. These adjustments were not experienced as personal choices, but as necessary responses to organisational pressure. Over time, this created a sense that acceptance depended on how well they could adapt rather than who they were.

Identity Regulation and Emotional Labour

Participants described these expectations as subtle but consistent. Rather than being fully excluded, they were included on the condition that they conformed to organisational expectations. HK described how this process affected her sense of self:

"It didn't take me long to get to a place where I was very, very unhappy. I was like—I don't even know who I am. I can't express who I really am. Instead, I must pretend to be, you know, the 'Western version' of myself. And that's not who I am, you know? I'm Indian, and I'm British. I cannot only be one. I can't choose… They made me choose." (HK)

HK's account shows that workplace acceptance was tied to suppressing important aspects of her identity. Rather than feeling able to bring her whole self to work, she felt pressure to present a more "Western" version of herself to fit organisational expectations. Over time, this created a sense of disconnection from her own identity, suggesting that inclusion was available only when cultural differences were minimised.

Participants felt they had to manage their identity in ways that matched organisational norms, which often resulted in emotional strain and feelings of disconnection. For some participants, these expectations became explicit. SZ described how visible aspects of identity could be directly questioned in relation to career progression:

"I remember one manager asking me, 'If you got promoted, would you take your hijab off?' My immediate response was, 'No chance.' Then she laughed it off and said, 'I was just checking.' But honestly, checking what? After that, I started applying for other jobs." (SZ)

SZ's account highlights how concerns about belonging and career progression can become closely connected. By raising her hijab in a discussion about promotion, the manager implied that an aspect of her religious identity was relevant to advancement. Although the comment was later dismissed as a joke, SZ's reaction suggests that it left a lasting impression. Her decision to start applying for other jobs shortly afterwards indicates a shift in how she viewed her future within the organisation. Rather than feeling supported, she began to question whether she could progress while remaining true to her identity. This is how the accumulation described in Section 4.4.5 starts.

SB, who was visibly religious, highlighted how her visibility shaped her experiences at work, reinforcing how visibility itself becomes a site of regulation, where participants actively manage how much of their identity they reveal to maintain professional legitimacy:

"When you're visibly religious at work, even if people seem open, they still ask you some strange questions. Then of course you start thinking you need to be careful, because you don't want to seem unprofessional." (SB)

SB's account suggests that identity regulation did not always come from managers or organisational policies. Although she described her colleagues as open, the questions she received about her religion made her more conscious of how she might be perceived at work. As a result, she felt the need to monitor her own behaviour to avoid being seen as unprofessional. This indicates how workplace norms can encourage individuals to regulate themselves, even when no direct pressure is applied.

A similar dynamic was visible in public accounts, where repeated subtle discrimination was described as gradually reducing confidence over time (Appendix B1). This supports reading identity suppression in this essay as a cumulative pressure rather than a series of unconnected incidents.

Visible Religious Identity and Professional Self-Monitoring

For some participants, faith was a central part of their identity, making these experiences particularly significant. Requests to change their appearance or behaviour were therefore not viewed as simple workplace expectations, but as challenges to an important aspect of who they were. SZ's account illustrates this clearly:

“For me, my religion is important. For them it was just a piece of cloth, and they asked me to remove it. But for me it is my identity, it is my religion. And you start thinking, why do these things bother them so much?” (SZ)

For the organisation, the hijab may have been viewed as a matter of appearance. For SZ, however, it was closely connected to her faith and identity. As a result, requests to remove it were experienced not as routine workplace expectations but as challenges to an important part of who she was. Not all participants described work in these terms. For some, religion was not central to working life, and the adjustments they made were cultural rather than religious. RP was clear about this difference:

“To be honest, I am not a religious person. At work I was fine with British culture. I don’t follow my religion closely, and my family are okay with that too.” (RP)

HK's account also suggests that faith and cultural identity did not have to be separate from British identity. Although she felt pressure in organisational settings to present a more "Western" version of herself, she later described creating a business where she could combine both aspects of her identity. This highlights that many British Asian participants did not view their religious and cultural identities

as conflicting with being British. Instead, they wanted to express both simultaneously without having to prioritise one over the other. For these women, faith was not something they had to negotiate at work, and the pressures they described came through gender and ethnicity alone. Religion therefore did not work as a fixed feature shared by all South Asian women. It mattered more to some than to others, and this changed the identity work required.

These accounts also highlight important differences in how participants understood and negotiated their identities. Some participants interpreted workplace experiences primarily through a religious lens, making faith central to how they understood inclusion and exclusion. Others were more interested in combining different aspects of their identity, including their British, cultural, and religious identities. This helps explain why identity regulation took different forms across participants. Where faith was highly visible and central to self-understanding, negotiations often focused on appearance and religious expression. For others, the challenge centred more on how their cultural knowledge, values, and experiences were recognised within organisational settings.

Participants responded to these pressures in different ways. Some chose to disengage, actively seeking alternative employment or starting their own businesses. Others remained within organisational settings and engaged in ongoing identity work, negotiating and managing aspects of their identity to navigate workplace expectations. Over time, this process contributed to fatigue, reduced confidence, and a weakened sense of connection to the organisation. For many participants, the cumulative impact of identity suppression made organisational environments difficult to sustain. In this way, the burden of belonging became a key factor shaping disengagement and, ultimately, decisions to leave organisational employment.

4.4.5 Exiting Under Intersectional Pressure

In this stage, participants described how these intersectional pressures gradually accumulated over time. Decisions to leave organisational employment were rarely triggered by a single incident. Instead, repeated experiences of exclusion, identity regulation, and unequal treatment combined to make organisational careers feel increasingly unsustainable. Many participants remained in employment for a period because of financial commitments and job security.

Accumulated Identity Strain and Exit

This theme builds on earlier findings by showing how organisational experiences accumulated over time to shape participants' decisions to leave employment. Exit was not described as a sudden decision or a single turning point. Instead, participants explained it as a gradual process shaped by ongoing experiences of inequality, identity strain, limited progression, and care responsibilities. As TK summarised:

"It wasn't one big thing… everything added together…" (TK)

This highlights how organisational exit developed through the accumulation of pressures rather than isolated events. Participants described remaining in employment for long periods, often for financial stability, despite recognising unequal treatment. Over time, however, these conditions became harder to sustain. TS reflected on how financial security initially kept her within organisational work, but later enabled her to leave:

"I worked for several years, and of course, everyone works for money. The job gave me financial reasons to stay; I worked for different companies. Once I started earning enough, I decided to leave this place where your ideas are not welcomed." (TS)

TS's account shows that financial security both delayed and enabled her exit. Her salary provided a reason to remain in a workplace where she felt undervalued, while also giving her the resources needed to eventually leave. This helps explain why participants often stayed despite difficult experiences, as the financial means to exit could only be built through continued employment.

Similarly, SD described how repeated experiences of inequality influenced her decision to move away from organisational employment:

"I didn't like how we were treated unequally at the workplace. It wasn't just once… I experienced different things many times, and they kept happening." (SD)

SD's account shows that these experiences were not defined by a single major incident but by their repetition over time. Although each experience may have seemed minor on its own, their cumulative effect shaped how she felt about her work and workplace. This highlights the concept of accumulated identity strain, where repeated experiences of exclusion, questioning, or unequal treatment gradually become difficult to ignore. Over time, it is the build-up of these experiences, rather than any one event, that can make organisational careers feel increasingly difficult to sustain.

These accounts show how experiences of exclusion were cumulative. Rather than reacting to a single incident, participants gradually reassessed their position as repeated patterns of unfair treatment shaped their longer-term expectations of organisational careers. Importantly, participants did not leave immediately. Several described a transition period during which they developed small businesses alongside paid employment, building financial stability and testing alternative career paths before fully leaving organisational work.

For some participants, motherhood acted as a key turning point within this process. The lack of flexibility and organisational support made it difficult to balance work and care responsibilities. DP explained:

"After having my child, everything became harder. There was no flexibility, no understanding. I had to choose myself and my family." (DP)

For some participants, leaving was mainly influenced by a wider mismatch between organisational structures and their everyday lives. This mismatch concerned not just workplace inequality but the difficulty of holding a stable identity in environments requiring constant self-suppression. As HK reflected:

"I got tired of pretending. I just wanted to be myself and create something where I did not have to explain or change who I am." (HK)

HK's experience suggests that exit was the result of cumulative pressures rather than a single incident. The need to continually adapt, explain, and justify her identity became increasingly exhausting, leading her to seek a working environment where she could be herself without having to negotiate her place constantly.

These experiences show how exit was shaped by multiple, intersecting pressures rather than a single factor. Participants were responding to inequality at work, emotional strain, identity loss, and external expectations. Leaving organisational employment was not an individual failure or lack of resilience. Instead, it represented a response to conditions that had become unsustainable over time, a transition rather than an ending, reflecting a move away from environments where belonging and legitimacy were restricted towards alternative pathways that provided more control and better alignment with participants' needs.

4.4.6 Reclaiming Voice, Value, and Visibility Through Entrepreneurship

Entrepreneurship emerged as a key space through which participants were able to rebuild and redefine their working lives. Following experiences of constraint within organisational settings, self-employment offered an environment where women could regain control over their work, identity, and sense of value. Participants described entrepreneurship not only as an alternative source of income, but as a way of reshaping how they were recognised and how they experienced work.

Entrepreneurship as Identity Reclamation and Resistance

Many participants emphasised how starting a business increased their autonomy, flexibility, and sense of purpose. TK reflected on how entrepreneurship enabled both financial stability and meaningful family life:

"I can provide for his education, give him the things he needs, and afford holidays, making memories with my family, all because of my business." (TK)

Entrepreneurship also changed how participants were perceived by others. Women described increased recognition from family, friends, and wider networks, particularly when their businesses became financially successful. This suggests that while participants moved away from organisational constraints, legitimacy did not disappear but was redefined, often through financial and visible success.

Recognition extended beyond income. Many participants described using their businesses to engage with their communities, act as role models, and create opportunities for others. As SM explained:

"I'm proving people wrong. I absolutely love it. It's not only my business. It's opening doors for other Asian women." (SM)

This demonstrates how entrepreneurship functioned as a space of collective visibility and representation, rather than only individual advancement. Entrepreneurship also enabled participants to express aspects of identity that had previously been constrained. Rather than suppressing cultural or religious identity, women were able to actively incorporate these into their businesses. TK used her language skills to offer culturally sensitive services, while HK integrated South Asian practices into her work:

"I embraced both sides, Asian and British. I used my Asian culture rituals, meditation, and practices for deeper consciousness, within Western workplaces." (HK)

TK's account shows this shift clearly, because the skill itself did not change. As described in Section 4.4.2, her employer used her Urdu and Punjabi to help community patients but never recognised this in her pay or progression. In her own practice, she uses the same languages to deliver therapy and assessments, and they are now the reason clients come to her. The ability is the same. What differs is who decides whether it counts.

TK's account suggests that entrepreneurship did not create new skills but provided a space where existing skills were recognised and valued. The language skills she developed before leaving employment were already part of her expertise, yet they were not fully appreciated within the organisation. Moving into entrepreneurship allowed her to use these skills on her own terms and gain greater control over how her value was recognised. Across accounts, entrepreneurship enabled participants to transform aspects of identity that had previously been marginalised or suppressed within organisations. Cultural knowledge, religious identity, and language skills, which had been devalued or overlooked, became sources of value and credibility. Rather than managing these aspects of identity to fit dominant norms, participants were able to draw on them as assets. NB captured this shift clearly:

"To be honest, I don't feel like I must prove anything anymore. I work on my own schedule, on my own terms. I'm also earning more than I would in a job… less time, more money. There's no judgement; it just feels like a win for me." (NB)

NB's use of the word prove is important when read against earlier accounts. As reported in Section 4.4.1, TS had to work twice as hard as white colleagues, and SL asked herself whether she was good enough. Proving competence was a constant demand in employment, and it was never finished, because each demonstration only lasted until the next assessment. NB describes the point where that demand

stops. She does not say she has finally proved herself. She says the requirement no longer applies, because she no longer answers to the audience that set it.

This shift from suppression to expression is central to understanding entrepreneurial transition not as escape from inequality but as intersectional identity reclamation, a rebuilding of self, legitimacy, and professional recognition on different terms. Rather than continuing to regulate themselves to fit dominant organisational norms, these women created work environments where their identities were recognised as assets. As intersectional entrepreneurs, they did not simply exit inequality. They entered a new context where identity work continued, but on more enabling terms. The analysis here concerns reclamation as an outcome of exit: how identities constrained in employment could be expressed again. How those same identities were subsequently mobilised as market resources, and evaluated as such by customers and communities, is examined in Essay 3.

Entrepreneurship provided a space where participants could regain control over their working conditions, their visibility, and their own definition of success. However, while entrepreneurship offered new opportunities, it did not fully remove the need for recognition and legitimacy. Participants continued to seek validation, visibility, and credibility in their new roles. This raises an important question: to what extent does entrepreneurship fully resolve the challenges experienced in organisational settings? This question is explored in Essay 2, which examines how participants continue to negotiate identity and belonging within entrepreneurial support hubs.

4.5 Discussion

This essay shows that inclusion for South Asian women in UK organisations was often conditional rather than secure. While organisations presented themselves as inclusive through diversity initiatives and recruitment practices, participants' everyday experiences showed that inclusion was shaped by racialised and gendered norms. As a result, access did not lead to full belonging, recognition, or long-term career stability.

The findings show that conditional inclusion works as a process that unfolds over time. It moves through six stages, running from conditional entry through differential everyday treatment, required identity regulation, and accumulated identity strain, to exit and the reclamation of devalued identities through entrepreneurship. Care responsibilities acted as an intensifier rather than as a separate stage, because they reduced the capacity to sustain identity regulation rather than introducing a different demand. The process also varied from woman to woman, since career stage, religious visibility, and financial resources shaped how heavily strain was felt and when exit became possible. And the process did not simply end with the move into entrepreneurship, because constraint carried on there in a new form.

Conditional inclusion as a dynamic organisational mechanism: Participants described being recruited in the name of diversity, yet this inclusion was largely symbolic. While organisations benefited from appearing progressive, participants reported limited access to decision-making, progression, and recognition. This supports existing research that critiques diversity initiatives as performative rather than transformational (Ahmed, 2012; Adamson et al., 2021). However, this essay extends this work by showing that inclusion itself can function as a mechanism of inequality, shaping careers over time rather than improving them.

This essay shows that conditional inclusion itself produces new demands on ethnic minority women. The requirement to perform diversity, to represent inclusion while conforming to dominant norms, creates a distinctive burden that is different from simple exclusion. Women are required to be visible enough to serve organisational diversity narratives, but not so visible that they disrupt the hierarchies those narratives leave intact (Ghosh and Barber, 2021; Purdie-Vaughns and Eibach, 2008). This reflects what Dobusch (2021) describes as the exclusivity of inclusion, the way formal inclusion mechanisms can reproduce the conditions they claim to address.

Participants also described how inclusion required ongoing identity adjustment. They felt pressure to change how they spoke, behaved, and presented themselves to be seen as professional. Belonging was therefore not stable but something that had to be continuously managed. This aligns with existing research on identity regulation (Adamson et al., 2021; Ghosh and Barber, 2021), but this essay shows that such processes become routine and normalised within everyday organisational life. Similar narratives were echoed in wider community discussions among South Asian women, suggesting that conditional inclusion reflects shared and patterned organisational experiences rather than individual encounters. Inclusion was unstable and unequal: it granted access without lasting security, recognition, or belonging.

Accumulated identity strain and career exit: This essay introduces accumulated identity strain to explain how conditional inclusion shapes long-term career outcomes for South Asian women. Accumulated identity strain refers to the gradual weakening of belonging, legitimacy, and confidence in future career possibilities that develops through sustained identity regulation under unequal organisational conditions. Importantly, identity work in this context is not freely chosen but required. Participants continuously adjust, suppress, and manage aspects of themselves to align with organisational expectations. Over time, when such identity work becomes difficult to sustain or fails to secure recognition, it contributes to increasing pressure and, eventually, career exit.

Participants described inequality as something that built over time. Their ideas were often overlooked, their contributions undervalued, and in some cases, they were asked to separate aspects of their identity from their work. These experiences reduced confidence that effort would lead to progress. While existing research highlights how advancement is shaped by gendered and racialised norms (Bohnet et

al., 2025), this essay extends this understanding by showing how repeated misrecognition undermines the outcomes of identity work itself, gradually weakening commitment to organisational careers in ways that go beyond burnout or individual stress. This extends identity work scholarship (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Brown, 2015) by theorising what happens when identity work is continuously required but consistently fails to deliver the recognition it seeks, a dynamic that has received limited attention in the existing literature (Ghosh and Barber, 2021; Kossek, Su and Wu, 2017).

Accumulated identity strain is different from burnout. Burnout is usually linked to heavy workloads and emotional exhaustion, and it may be reduced through rest, fewer responsibilities, or a change in role. In contrast, participants in this study did not describe being overwhelmed by the amount of work. Instead, they described repeatedly having to prove their competence without receiving lasting recognition. Similarly, accumulated identity strain extends beyond emotional labour. Rather than managing emotions alone, participants often managed how their ethnicity, religion, or gender were perceived in the workplace in order to be seen as professional and credible.

Accumulated identity strain was further intensified during key life transitions, particularly motherhood. Participants described how caregiving responsibilities intersected with existing workplace inequalities, creating additional demands on their time, energy, and identity management. Where organisations lacked flexibility, the ability to sustain multiple forms of identity work was further constrained (Cortés and Pan, 2023; Avram, Harkness and Popova, 2024). Together, these pressures generated exhaustion and isolation, weakening participants' attachment to organisational careers (Ghosh and Barber, 2021; Kossek, Su and Wu, 2017). Career exit emerged as a response to the cumulative burden of managing identity, performance, and legitimacy under unstable conditions, not as individual failure, but as a structurally conditioned response to conditions that had become untenable.

The account developed here is intersectional rather than gendered or racialised alone, and the data support that reading in several ways. When participants explained unequal treatment, they compared themselves with white colleagues rather than with men. JN described managers treating people of colour differently and accommodating white colleagues more readily. TS described having to work twice as hard as her white colleagues for promotion and being first on the list when redundancies were made. A gender-only account cannot explain comparisons of this kind.

Participants' experiences cannot be understood through race alone. Caregiving responsibilities were shaped by both gendered and cultural expectations, which, when combined with organisational inflexibility, created additional pressures for many women. This highlights how multiple aspects of identity worked together to shape their workplace experiences.

Participants' experiences also differed according to the role of religion in their lives. While SZ and SB described managing visible aspects of their religious identity at work, RP did not identify as religious

and did not report similar experiences. This suggests that religion operated as a separate dimension of identity, intensifying workplace pressures for some participants but not for others.

Participants did not describe barriers related to language, education, or qualifications. Instead, they were highly skilled, and their competence was often formally recognised. The difficulties they encountered arose through everyday interactions, workplace evaluations, and questions of belonging rather than a lack of ability or experience. This suggests that their experiences were shaped less by deficits in human capital and more by how their identities were perceived and valued within organisational settings.

Accumulated identity strain was not experienced in the same way by all participants. Career stage appeared to shape how these pressures were experienced. For example, RA felt that tokenistic treatment was more noticeable at the beginning of her career, when she had less established credibility and was subject to greater scrutiny. As participants gained experience and recognition, some found it easier to manage these everyday challenges, although the underlying conditions remained unchanged.

Importantly, accumulated identity strain did not automatically lead to exit. Participants responded in different ways, and some remained in organisational employment despite these challenges for some time. Where women did leave, the decision depended not only on dissatisfaction but also on access to resources and alternative opportunities. TS, for example, remained in employment because it provided financial security and later used those resources to support her transition into entrepreneurship. Similarly, DP described motherhood as a key turning point that made organisational employment increasingly difficult to sustain. These accounts suggest that accumulated identity strain gradually weakened participants' attachment to organisational careers, but the timing of exit was shaped by financial circumstances, caregiving responsibilities, and the availability of other career options.

Entrepreneurship as intersectional identity reclamation: In the context of conditional inclusion and accumulated identity strain, entrepreneurship emerged as a meaningful career alternative. Participants did not describe entrepreneurship simply as financial opportunity. Instead, it functioned as a response to prolonged organisational constraint, a space where sustained careers within organisations had appeared increasingly limited or unviable.

This finding aligns with research showing that entrepreneurial transitions are often shaped by labour market exclusion and blocked progression rather than individual preference (Meléndez and Özkazanç-Pan, 2021; Norman, Aiken and Greer, 2024). However, this essay extends this literature by showing that exclusion was not always overt. For second-generation South Asian women, access to organisations was often granted through diversity initiatives, yet inclusion remained conditional, producing strain that gradually pushed women to seek alternative career paths.

Entrepreneurship enabled participants to redefine legitimacy on their own terms. Women described building businesses that drew on cultural knowledge, language, religious identity, and community ties

that had previously been marginalised or devalued within organisational environments. Through entrepreneurship, these resources became sources of credibility, trust, and recognition. This supports existing research on ethnic and gendered entrepreneurship (Al-Dajani and Marlow, 2013; James, Xiong and Anderson, 2022), while showing how entrepreneurship can operate as a response to sustained misrecognition rather than a voluntary lifestyle choice.

Participants also highlighted the collective dimensions of entrepreneurship. Several described their businesses as spaces that supported other ethnic minority women, offering mentorship, networks, and shared understanding. Entrepreneurship therefore operated as both an individual career outcome and a form of social contribution and resistance to exclusionary organisational norms. In this sense, entrepreneurship functioned as a site of intersectional identity reclamation, enabling women to rebuild professional legitimacy and belonging after experiences of prolonged organisational inequality, and to emerge as intersectional entrepreneurs who drew on the very identities that organisations had devalued.

4.5.1 Contributions to Theory

This essay makes three contributions to research on organisational inequality, careers, and entrepreneurship. First, this essay shows that inclusion can sometimes reinforce inequality rather than reduce it. Inclusion was experienced as unstable and contingent, requiring ongoing identity work that placed unequal burdens on participants without delivering stable recognition or career security. This reframes inclusion as a dynamic, identity-dependent process rather than a simple opposite of exclusion, extending existing critiques of diversity frameworks as performative (Ahmed, 2012; Adamson et al., 2021) by showing how inclusion can actively reproduce the conditions for inequality over time. It also builds on Dobusch's (2021) notion of the exclusivity of inclusion by showing how this mechanism shapes cumulative career trajectories rather than isolated workplace experiences.

Second, the essay introduces the concept of accumulated identity strain, which explains how repeated experiences of inequality alongside sustained identity work shape long-term career outcomes. Over time, participants' efforts to manage and negotiate their identities became difficult to sustain and increasingly ineffective in securing recognition and progression. This highlights how the gradual breakdown of identity work connects everyday organisational experiences to longer-term outcomes such as disengagement and career exit. The concept extends existing identity work scholarship (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Brown, 2015) by addressing a gap in the existing literature (Ghosh and Barber, 2021; Kossek, Su and Wu, 2017) where the cumulative effects of sustained identity regulation on career trajectories have received limited attention.

Third, the essay reconceptualises entrepreneurship as a form of intersectional identity reclamation rather than merely an economic activity or flexible career choice. For participants, entrepreneurship created a space where identity work could shift from suppression to expression, where cultural knowledge, dual identities, and community ties became valued rather than managed. This extends existing research on

entrepreneurship as a career response to organisational constraint (Meléndez and Özkazanç-Pan, 2021; Al-Dajani and Marlow, 2013; James, Xiong and Anderson, 2022) by showing how the transition involves a reconstruction of identity and legitimacy, one through which second-generation South Asian women emerge as intersectional entrepreneurs whose businesses are built from the same identities that organisations had devalued.

Together, these three contributions establish a foundational argument for this thesis: that intersectional identity work is cumulative, structural, and connected across contexts. The following essays examine how this process continues within entrepreneurial support hubs (Essay 2) and across market, family, and community legitimacy arenas (Essay 3), building towards a comprehensive account of how second-generation South Asian women operate as intersectional entrepreneurs across their working lives.

4.6 Conclusion

This study set out to examine how intersectional inequalities experienced within organisational settings shape the career trajectories of second-generation South Asian women and how these experiences inform transitions into entrepreneurship. Drawing on the lived experiences of seventeen such women in UK organisations, the findings demonstrate that inclusion remains conditional, enacted through everyday organisational practices that require ongoing identity regulation and conformity to dominant gendered and racialised norms. Career transitions and entrepreneurial exit are shaped by prolonged exposure to organisational and gendered inequality, limited recognition, and unequal care expectations.

By applying an intersectional lens to career exit, this essay demonstrates how disadvantage accumulates across organisational and domestic spheres, gradually reshaping professional identities and future possibilities. Rather than experiencing inequality as isolated incidents, participants described cumulative pressures linked to gendered racism (Bhopal, 2020; Kele et al., 2022), care penalties (Cortés and Pan, 2023; Avram, Harkness and Popova, 2024), and the devaluation of cultural capital (Acker, 2006; Ray, 2019). These dynamics collectively produced what this essay conceptualises as accumulated identity strain, a gradual erosion of belonging, confidence, and attachment to organisational careers that made continued participation increasingly untenable.

The findings highlight that women's decisions to respond to these conditions by starting a business were not simply acts of escape. They represented attempts to reclaim legitimacy, identity, and control over their working lives. These women shifted from an environment where identity had to be managed and suppressed to one where it could be expressed and valued. Through entrepreneurship, participants transformed previously marginalised cultural knowledge, language, and community ties into sources of credibility, trust, and recognition (Al-Dajani and Marlow, 2013; James, Xiong and Anderson, 2022). They challenged the organisational norms that had constrained them in formal employment. This essay therefore contributes to gender and organisation scholarship by reframing entrepreneurship as a context-specific and relational response to structural barriers, rather than a purely individual or opportunity-

driven choice (Knight, 2016; Marlow and Dy, 2018), and by positioning second-generation South Asian women as intersectional entrepreneurs whose pathways are shaped by the cumulative operation of intersecting systems of inequality.

4.6.1 Limitations and Future Research

This essay focuses on the experiences of second-generation South Asian women in the UK, so the findings are specific to this group and context. It does not describe the experiences of men, first-generation migrants, or women from other ethnic or national backgrounds. The essay also focuses on entrepreneurship as one response to workplace inequality and does not explore other possible responses, such as remaining within organisations, seeking role changes, or engaging in collective action.

Future research could explore whether similar dynamics of conditional inclusion and accumulated identity strain operate across different ethnic groups, generations, and genders, as well as across intersecting axes such as religion, class, and age. Longitudinal research could further examine how identity strain and career decisions unfold over time, tracing whether the conditions that produce accumulated strain shift as careers develop and as organisations respond to diversity pressures. Comparative studies between genders, generations, and different religious or national identities would also extend research on identity and intersectionality in the UK context.

4.6.2 Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings suggest that organisational efforts to address inequality need to go beyond surface-level diversity policies and focus on how inclusion is practised in everyday working life (Noon, 2018). Managers and HR professionals should pay attention to routine organisational processes that reproduce conditional inclusion. Organisations should examine whether performance evaluations, promotion opportunities, informal networks, and access to flexible working arrangements are genuinely accessible on an equal basis irrespective of employees' race, religion, gender, or ethnic background.

While organisations increasingly promote diversity, equal attention should be given to employees' everyday experiences, emotional wellbeing, and sense of belonging within the workplace. Regular training and open discussions within teams can raise awareness of inclusion, unconscious bias, and the challenges faced by ethnic minority women. However, awareness alone is insufficient (Noon, 2018). Practical initiatives such as mentoring, sponsorship, and leadership development programmes should explicitly recognise the structural pressures that often require ethnic minority women to regulate and adapt their identities to progress (Dobbin and Kalev, 2016; Kossek, Su and Wu, 2017).

Workplace cultural knowledge, language skills, and community expertise should be recognised as professional assets (Syed and Özbilgin, 2009). Support for motherhood and caregiving, including access to flexible working arrangements and consistent support during maternity transitions, should be implemented equitably across the workforce (Kossek, Su and Wu, 2017). Addressing these issues

promotes inclusion and wellbeing and reduces staff turnover and the loss of talented employees whose contributions organisations are currently failing to value fully.

Chapter 5: Essay 2

Constructing Belonging in Identity-Based Entrepreneurial Support Hubs: The Experiences of Second-Generation South Asian Women

Entrepreneurial support hubs are commonly presented as inclusive spaces that support entrepreneurial development, yet research shows that access does not necessarily translate into meaningful participation or belonging for marginalised entrepreneurs. This essay examines how intersectional identity dynamics shape experiences of belonging within identity-based entrepreneurial support hubs, focusing on second-generation South Asian women in the UK. Drawing on qualitative interviews with 15 of the 17 participants, the essay explores how participants engage with identity-based hubs and how belonging is constructed through everyday relational practices, including peer support, mentoring, and identity-aligned credibility. The findings show that belonging is not a fixed outcome of inclusion, but a relational and negotiated process shaped by shared identity, recognition, and trust. By foregrounding intersectional identities and relational dynamics, this essay develops the concept of constructed belonging as a process through which belonging is actively created within entrepreneurial learning and networking spaces.

5.1 Introduction

Entrepreneurial support hubs shape entrepreneurial development by providing access to knowledge, resources, and networks (Orser et al., 2025; Serpente, Bolzani and Grimaldi, 2025). Accelerators, training programmes, mentoring initiatives, and networking hubs are commonly presented as open and inclusive settings intended to support a wide range of entrepreneurs (Brush, Greene and Welter, 2019; Harrison, Leitch and McAdam, 2020). However, studies of entrepreneurial ecosystems show that these spaces are not neutral: institutional arrangements often reproduce exclusion and limit the participation and voice of marginalised entrepreneurs (Chowdhury, 2021; 2023; Anand, Attri and Sahasranamam, 2025).

Research shows that although access may be formally available, inclusion does not necessarily translate into recognition or influence. Relational dynamics and informal networks continue to privilege dominant groups, positioning women and marginalised entrepreneurs at a distance from the social capital through which opportunities, credibility, and resources are circulated (Neumeyer et al., 2019; Haq et al., 2024; Singh and Nurse, 2025).

Studies show that ethnic minority women often experience exclusion within mainstream entrepreneurial spaces (Harrison, Leitch and McAdam, 2020; Merino and Duchemin, 2022; Stahl, Burnard and McDonald, 2023; Stoker et al., 2025a). In contrast, identity-based spaces have been shown to foster relational support, knowledge exchange, and trusted peer networks, alongside visible role models (Harrison, Leitch and McAdam, 2020; Anand, Attri and Sahasranamam, 2025). These hubs function as

platforms for identity negotiation, where shared identity fosters trust, openness, and confidence (Bergh, Thorgren and Wincent, 2011).

Despite these insights, existing research remains underdeveloped in explaining how belonging is produced and sustained within entrepreneurial support hubs and networking spaces. This gap is significant, as entrepreneurial support hubs are frequently positioned as universal support mechanisms, despite their capacity to mirror and reinforce inequalities within wider ecosystems and to reproduce implicit norms of the "ideal" entrepreneur (Orser et al., 2025).

This essay addresses this gap by examining how intersectional identity dynamics shape the construction of belonging for second-generation South Asian women within entrepreneurial support hubs. It introduces constructed belonging to describe a relational process produced through everyday interactions, recognition, and identity-aligned practices, showing how these spaces function not only as support infrastructures but as key sites where belonging and identity are actively negotiated (Maharjan, Nazir and Roomi, 2025). The essay focuses on identity-based entrepreneurial support hubs and the spaces they create for belonging and confidence among intersectional entrepreneurs.

The main objective of this essay is to examine how the intersecting identities of second-generation South Asian women shape their experiences of entrepreneurial learning and networking hubs, and how belonging within these spaces supports entrepreneurial development. To address this objective, the essay draws on 15 qualitative interviews with second-generation South Asian women entrepreneurs, a subset of the 17 participants in the wider study, selected because these 15 had direct experience of engaging with entrepreneurial support hubs.

This essay makes three contributions. First, the essay shows how women actively created supportive relationships and networks within entrepreneurial spaces. These connections helped them access knowledge, opportunities, and confidence, supporting their entrepreneurial development. Second, it foregrounds relational dynamics, including mentors, peers, and identity-aligned credibility as key factors shaping engagement with learning and networking spaces. Third, it shows how second-generation South Asian women navigate structural barriers and internalised cultural and gendered expectations, while exercising strategic agency in selecting identity-based learning and networking spaces.

In this essay, belonging is understood not as an emotional state that follows automatically from formal inclusion, but as an active, relational achievement produced through shared understanding, mutual recognition, and trust within particular social settings (May, 2011; Stead, 2017; Stoker, Cruz-Garcia and Wakkee, 2025b). This essay argues that access and recognition do not automatically create belonging. Participants could gain entry to entrepreneurial spaces and be seen as credible entrepreneurs yet still feel disconnected or excluded.

The research question guiding this essay is RQ2: How is belonging constructed within entrepreneurial support hubs, and how do identity-based spaces shape the entrepreneurial experiences of second-generation South Asian women? The following section reviews literature on identity, belonging, inclusion, and exclusion, with particular attention to the roles of peers and trainers within entrepreneurial support hubs.

5.2 Literature Review

This section reviews literature on ethnic minority women's entrepreneurship to examine how networking dynamics, identity-based entrepreneurial spaces, and learning environments shape access to support, knowledge, and opportunity. Rather than treating networks as neutral resources, the review focuses on how identity and belonging structure participation within entrepreneurial support hubs. It proceeds by outlining structural patterns of uneven inclusion, examining identity-based support hubs as alternative learning environments, analysing peer learning and mentoring as relational mechanisms, and situating agency and identity negotiation within entrepreneurial networks.

5.2.1 Entrepreneurial Support Hubs, Ecosystems, and Intermediaries

Entrepreneurial intermediaries such as incubators, accelerators, and co-working spaces are defined as private and/or public *"entities that operate in the void between the scientific discovery and the ultimate realisation of value from commercialisation, providing specialised services and access to equipment and resources beyond the reach of many start-up firms"* (Clayton, Feldman and Lowe, 2018, p. 104). These organisations provide a critical context for this essay, as they actively facilitate connections between entrepreneurs, mentors, and service providers, shaping access to resources and opportunities (Busch and Barkema, 2022; Gur and Mathias, 2021). These networks provide spaces for interaction and relationship-building, enabling the formation of social ties and collective identities that support entrepreneurial action.

The literature reviewed above commonly refers to these organisations as entrepreneurial intermediaries. In this essay, they are referred to as entrepreneurial support hubs, defined as organised spaces that provide support to entrepreneurs in starting and developing their businesses. These may include incubators, accelerators, training programmes, mentoring schemes, and networking groups operating both in person and online. Entrepreneurial support hubs form part of the wider entrepreneurial ecosystem, which includes the broader range of actors, institutions, and resources that shape entrepreneurial activity within a particular context (Neumeyer et al., 2019). However, this essay focuses specifically on support hubs and the spaces they provide for women to engage with mentors and peers and develop a sense of belonging. Identity-based support hubs refer to organisations structured around a shared identity, including women-only, South Asian, or faith-based groups.

Entrepreneurial intermediaries play an important role in connecting entrepreneurs with knowledge, resources, and networks, influencing how recognition and credibility are developed (Welter et al., 2017;

Armanios et al., 2017; Hernández-Chea et al., 2021). They do not function merely as neutral support providers. They influence how entrepreneurs access opportunities, learn, and are perceived within wider ecosystems (Lechner, Delanoë-Gueguen and Gueguen, 2022). In this essay, support hubs are particularly significant as they create structured spaces through mentoring, training, and networking within which identity and belonging (see definitions in Chapter 2, Section 2.4) are actively produced and negotiated.

5.2.2 Intersectional Barriers in Entrepreneurial Networks

Research consistently shows that ethnic minority women entrepreneurs face compounded disadvantages in accessing professional networks due to intersecting identities (Fielden and Davidson, 2012; O'Brien, Cooney and Blenker, 2019; Dennissen, Benschop and Van den Brink, 2020). Barriers to formal networks often leave women reliant on community and family support instead. While these relationships provide emotional support and locally embedded social capital, they offer fewer bridging connections and limited exposure to resource-rich networks (Davidson, Fielden and Omar, 2010; Pio and Essers, 2014). As a result, restricted network access constrains resource mobilisation and contributes to slower business growth over time (Lyons and Zhang, 2017; Neumeyer et al., 2019). These effects are more pronounced for ethnic minority women compared to white women, reflecting the cumulative impact of intersecting disadvantage (Neumeyer et al., 2019).

Throughout this essay, the term intersectional entrepreneurs refers to entrepreneurs whose experiences are shaped by several social positions at once, such as gender, race and ethnicity, religion, class, and migration background. These positions do not simply add up. They interact, so the barriers and resources an entrepreneur meets cannot be understood by looking at gender or ethnicity on its own (Valdez, 2016; Dy, Marlow and Martin, 2017; Martinez Dy, 2020). Second-generation South Asian women are a clear case. Their entrepreneurship is shaped by being women, by being racialised as South Asian, and often by religious and family expectations, all at the same time.

Recent scholarship further differentiates between access and belonging within entrepreneurial support settings. While ethnic minority women may enter mainstream networking spaces, inclusion does not necessarily translate into integration or meaningful participation (Neumeyer et al., 2019). Relational hierarchies within these environments continue to privilege dominant groups, limiting recognition, influence, and access to high-value opportunities (Haq et al., 2024; Anand, Attri and Sahasranamam, 2025; Van Merriënboer, Verver and Radu-Lefebvre, 2025). Formal inclusion can therefore coexist with unequal outcomes, producing visibility without influence, and participation without recognition (Singh and Nurse, 2025).

Belonging itself requires definition before it can be examined in these settings. It has been described as a felt connection to people, places, and shared experience, and as a basic human need with consequences across social and economic life (Allen et al., 2021). Sociological accounts treat it as relational rather

than purely psychological, produced through recognition and shared understanding within particular settings (May, 2011; Stead, 2017). Yuval-Davis (2006) distinguishes between belonging as a personal sense of attachment and the politics of belonging, which shape who is accepted and on what terms. While this highlights that belonging is unequal and contested, less attention has been paid to how belonging is created in entrepreneurial settings and what it enables once established. These questions form the central focus of this essay.

Diversity and gender focused networks are often positioned as corrective interventions, but their effects are uneven. For example, while such spaces can provide support and visibility, they may also simplify complex identities by prioritising gender while marginalising ethnicity, religion, or migration histories (Dennissen, Benschop and Van den Brink, 2020). While access to networks has been widely examined (Neumeyer et al., 2019; Haq et al., 2024), less attention has been paid to how belonging is experienced within these spaces, a gap this essay addresses.

5.2.3 Identity-Based Support Hubs as Entrepreneurial Intermediaries

Building on these structural inequalities, identity-based support hubs have been theorised as alternative environments through which marginalised entrepreneurs seek support, learning, and recognition. Women-only and identity-aligned hubs are associated with lower levels of anxiety, greater confidence, and more open forms of learning and networking interaction (Harrison, Leitch and McAdam, 2020; Merino and Duchemin, 2022). In contrast to mainstream settings, these environments create space for alternative forms of participation, reducing the pressure to conform to dominant entrepreneurial norms.

Engagement within such hubs can generate forms of gender capital alongside access to trusted role models and mentoring relationships, which can support women's confidence and entrepreneurial development (Woodwark, Wood and Schnarr, 2021; Arshed, Martin and Knox, 2023). Drawing on Bourdieu's (1986) concept of capital, gender capital refers to the knowledge, skills, dispositions, and relationships associated with being a woman that may hold value within a particular field (Huppatz, 2009). In entrepreneurship, however, these forms of capital become valuable resources when they are recognised within a particular context and can be converted into other forms of value, including social or economic capital (Pret, Shaw and Drakopoulou Dodd, 2016). Participation in identity-based spaces may therefore provide women with resources and relationships that strengthen confidence and credibility and support their engagement within wider entrepreneurial environments.

The value of these relationships may also depend on the extent to which women experience alignment between their own identities and values and those of the support environment. This can be understood through the concept of cultural congruence. In entrepreneurship research, the idea of culture fit has mostly been examined at the national level, where entrepreneurial activity is expected to thrive when it aligns with the values and norms of the wider society (Stephan, 2022). Stephan (2022) argues, however, that this perspective needs refining and that culture should be examined in more specific contexts. This

essay responds by applying the idea to everyday support settings. Here, cultural congruence refers to the extent to which the cultural, religious, and family values represented within a hub, including those of mentors and peers, align with those of the entrepreneur. Such alignment may reduce the need for women to explain or justify aspects of their background, creating conditions for stronger relationships and a greater sense of belonging. Research on migrant entrepreneurs supports this, showing that connecting with people from similar backgrounds helps entrepreneurs feel validated and accepted and develop a greater sense of belonging (Stoyanova and Stoyanov, 2025). Similarly, the importance entrepreneurs place on their community has been linked to greater trust and engagement, which in turn shape their entrepreneurial identity (Poblete et al., 2025). Cultural congruence therefore provides a way of understanding how shared identity within support hubs may contribute to trust, supportive relationships, and a stronger sense of belonging.

Digital platforms extend these dynamics by enabling marginalised entrepreneurs to form learning-oriented communities beyond traditional ecosystem boundaries. Research on coactive vicarious learning highlights how shared experience, emotional support, and collective reflection shape learning processes in these settings (Schou, Bucher and Waldkirch, 2022). However, existing work continues to prioritise outcomes over processes, offering limited insight into how belonging, learning, and motivation are enacted within these environments, particularly for intersectional entrepreneurs facing structural constraints.

5.2.4 Peer Learning and Mentoring as Relational Mechanisms

Where prior sections establish structural exclusion and alternative spaces, this section focuses on how learning and support operate relationally within networks. Peer learning and mentoring are often described as resources that people "access", but in practice, they are more relational than that framing suggests. The concept of homophily in the literature describes the tendency for entrepreneurs to form ties with others who share similar identities, which can facilitate trust, open knowledge exchange, and reduced fear of judgement (Gompers et al., 2017). For ethnic minority women, this pattern is not simply preference. It can operate as a strategic response to professional environments in which difference is quietly penalised, even when inclusion is formally on offer (Mehra, Kilduff and Brass, 1998; Haq et al., 2024).

Shared experiences of marginality can generate forms of collective social capital, including trust, reciprocity, and mutual obligation, which support learning and confidence-building (Bergh, Thorgren and Wincent, 2011; Hidegh et al., 2023). These interactions enable entrepreneurs to exchange tacit knowledge, discuss failure, and navigate uncertainty collaboratively (Rocha, Paço and Alves, 2024). What matters are the relational conditions under which learning occurs, not access to support alone. In such spaces, psychological safety shapes who participates, what can be shared, and how knowledge is developed collectively. Research on online entrepreneurial communities shows that coactive vicarious

learning emerges through peer exchange, critique, and emotional support (Schou, Bucher and Waldkirch, 2022).

Similarly, mentoring relationships are important as they provide opportunities for shared experience within support hubs. Mentors who understand intersecting identities can provide context-specific guidance and emotional reassurance often absent in mainstream models (Thomson et al., 2025). Trust-based mentoring has been associated with increased confidence, self-efficacy, and access to resources for underrepresented entrepreneurs (Elliott, Mavriplis and Anis, 2020; Virga, Gomes and Guerreiro, 2025). However, such relationships are shaped by whether intersecting identities are recognised rather than reduced to single categories, which reinforces the importance of relational alignment in generating belonging within support hubs.

5.2.5 Agency, Identity, and Strategic Navigation

Many intersectional entrepreneurs continue to experience exclusion and limited belonging within Western, mainstream entrepreneurial spaces. While these challenges are well documented, recent research has increasingly focused on how ethnic and marginalised entrepreneurs actively navigate and respond to these exclusionary environments rather than simply adapting to them (Anand, Attri and Sahasranamam, 2025; David and Terstriep, 2025).

Research shows that women often engage selectively with spaces that meet both their identity-related and practical needs, a pattern described as gendered network consciousness, in which entrepreneurs assess which environments offer safety, respect, and access to opportunities (Stoker, Cruz-Garcia and Wakkee, 2025b). For example, women may rely on identity-based spaces for emotional safety and peer support while engaging with mainstream networks for broader opportunities (Woodwark, Wood and Schnarr, 2021).

Research shows that ethnic, migrant, and women entrepreneurs use identity-based resources as strategic assets. Identity-aligned spaces may provide opportunities to remain authentic without having to fully conform to dominant expectations (Van Merriënboer, Verver and Radu-Lefebvre, 2025). At the same time, entrepreneurs strategically develop connections beyond immediate family and ethnic networks, actively navigating and reshaping constrained entrepreneurial ecosystems rather than remaining confined within them (Cederberg and Villares-Varela, 2019; Giazitzoglu, Volery and Musu, 2024; Anand, Attri and Sahasranamam, 2025). These networks emerge from structural necessity as much as preference (Mehra, Kilduff and Brass, 1998; Neumeyer et al., 2019).

Despite growing attention to entrepreneurial agency, limited research has examined how everyday relational practices, such as trust-building, recognition, and learning, collectively produce belonging and confidence within identity-based support hubs. These gaps collectively point towards what this essay theorises as constructed belonging, the active, relational process through which intersectional

entrepreneurs build recognition, trust, and confidence within identity-aligned spaces, rather than receiving these as outcomes of formal inclusion (May, 2011; Stead, 2017). The following sections trace the specific mechanisms through which this construction occurs.

5.3 Methodology

This essay adopts a qualitative approach using semi-structured interviews to explore participants' lived experiences of networking, belonging, and learning within entrepreneurial support hubs. A detailed account of the overall research design, data collection, and analytical approach is provided in Chapter 3. In this essay, entrepreneurial support hubs are understood as organisations that create and structure mentoring, networking, and learning spaces through which entrepreneurs build connections, develop skills, and gain confidence.

As set out in Section 3.8.2, this essay draws on 15 of the 17 participants; the two excluded had no direct experience of entrepreneurial support hubs. The 15 whose data were used provided rich insight into how networking, mentoring, and identity-based support spaces shape belonging and learning for second-generation South Asian women.

Data were analysed using an inductive and interpretive approach, combining case-level Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) with Gioia-style data structuring to organise emerging themes. Each of the 15 relevant transcripts was first read individually through repeated readings and manual coding to capture how participants understood their experiences of networking, mentoring, and identity-based support before any cross-case comparison took place.

The analytical process followed three stages. In the first stage, each transcript was read multiple times to develop familiarity with the individual participant's account, focusing specifically on how they described their experiences of entrepreneurial spaces, belonging, mentoring, and peer relationships. Initial interpretive notes were made at the case level. For example, one participant described: *"I'm heading toward people who are within my ethnic group… they understand my background."* This was initially coded as seeking shared identity and was interpretively developed into the theme of identity-based belonging, showing how cultural similarity shaped trust, learning, and confidence in networking spaces.

In the second stage, emergent themes were developed at the individual case level, staying close to participants' own language and sense-making. In the third stage, cross-case patterns were identified and organised using Gioia-style data structuring into first-order categories, second-order themes, and aggregate dimensions. The Gioia table for this essay was developed specifically in relation to RQ2's focus on belonging and networking, rather than applying the same coding categories used in Essay 1. First-order codes stayed close to participants' own language about networking experiences, mentoring relationships, and feelings of belonging or exclusion. Second-order themes were developed to capture

the mechanisms through which belonging was constructed: cultural congruence, identity-aligned mentoring, relational identification, and peer exchange, before these were brought together into the aggregate dimensions presented in Table 5.1. This structuring was applied after the interpretive analysis was complete, serving as a transparency mechanism rather than a guide to interpretation. Further examples of the analytical process for this essay are provided in Appendix D.

5.4 Findings

The analysis revealed that participants' experiences clustered around recurring patterns relating to inclusion, belonging, and relational support within entrepreneurial spaces. Through coding and comparison, three aggregate dimensions were identified that capture participants' movement from constrained participation to more meaningful engagement within identity-based settings. These dimensions show how belonging is experienced, negotiated, and constructed across different entrepreneurial spaces. In addition, similar themes are reflected in blogs and online discussions, reinforcing the findings by showing how these experiences are collectively shared and interpreted by participants. Representative examples are presented in Appendix B2.

Table 5.1: Gioia Data Structure (Identity-Aligned Entrepreneurial Support Hubs)

Interview Quotes	1st Order Codes (Informant-Centred)	2nd Order Themes (Researcher-Centred)	Aggregate Dimensions
"It seemed like white women prefer to collaborate with whites only." (SA) *"But I was the only Asian there, and I didn't feel a connection." (SA)* *"I mean, you're in the room, but you're still an outsider." (RA)*	• Feeling excluded by white groups • Being the only Asian in the room • In the room but still an outsider	**Partial Inclusion in White-Dominated Spaces**	**Conditional Inclusion in Mainstream Support Hubs**
"Mostly white women there; it does feel a bit harder to connect." (NJ) *"You sort of get the sense something's missing… I only connect with Black and brown." (NJ)*	• Harder to connect with white women • Missing connection • Feeling closer to Black and brown people		
"All our Asian community mostly supports Asians." (NB) *"I believe in South Asian collectiveness…" (HK)*	• Asian community mostly supports Asians • Believing in South Asian collectiveness		
"I'm sort of heading toward people who are within my ethnic group, knowing that they may understand my background, and where I'm coming from." (RA)	• Heading toward people within her own ethnic group		
"I attended several, but I have to put extra effort to be noticed in those spaces." (RA)	• Put extra effort to be seen		
"I never felt like I was excluded. It was a great experience, I learnt a lot, and there was a mix of nationalities there." (RA)	• Never felt excluded • Mixed-nationality composition • Learning and value gained	**Mainstream Spaces Experienced as Open**	
"You know, a classical business coach will not address the specifics for us South Asian women." (HK)	• Lack of understanding from traditional coaches	**Identity-Aligned Mentoring**	**Constructed Belonging**
"For me to find someone that I could relate to… you know, we have cultural issues." (SB)	• Wanting someone relatable • Shared cultural issues		
"Just having someone who understands what it means to be South Asian women…" (RA)	• Being understood as a South Asian woman • Shared understanding of family and community pressures		

"How can someone like me, a daughter-in-law, wife, a mother of 2, run a business… she helped me break those barriers." (DP) *"I chose her because I believed she would understand the pressures of being a woman in our community…" (SN)*	• Support in managing gendered and cultural roles • Help to overcome barriers		
"For me, my religion is important. For me, loan … it's haram (not allowed in religion)." (SZ)	• Religious values not understood	**Cultural Congruence and Shared Identity**	
"I always look for somebody who's got the same values as me." (SZ) *"She understands my religion… Encourages ideas into my faith-business without compromising my values." (SB)*	• Understanding of religious values		
"She understands that whole generational side of things." (NJ)	• Understanding of shared generational experience		
"She understands childhood issues, like being picked on at school because of how we look." (NJ)	• Understanding racialised childhood experiences		
"Women understand the cultural layers that shape South Asian women." (DP) *"She mentioned cultural taboos we face and how to deal with them… which was really reassuring." (SM)*	• Understanding cultural layers and taboos		
"We could chat, no judgement, no stress, you know everyone just got it." (NB)	• No judgement and stress		
"It's nice to be able to see it in terms of, if she can do it, so can I." (TK)	• Seeing someone like me succeed	**Developing Support and Confidence Through Relational Identification**	
"When I see her, I always say to myself, does she ever stop?"… (SZ)	• Admiring mentor who keeps going		
"I look up to the successful women in our group as my role models. Their stories inspire me and give me confidence." (SN)	• Being inspired by other women		
"Now I feel confident enough to do it. Seeing other women so confident, even working abroad, was incredibly inspiring." (JR)	• Gaining confidence from other women • Role models give confidence		
"I checked her page and felt like she was talking about me." (SM)	• Feeling personally reflected		

"What I got out of this course is the network of women that I met through that; that's valuable." (SB)	• Valuing women's networks	**Peer-Based Learning and Network Support**	**Identity-Based Social Capital**
"We share information… we share information." (JN) *"We get ideas from each other… marketing apps, software tools, what's happening in the market." (SA)*	• Sharing information • Exchanging ideas • Sharing practical tools and market knowledge		
"When you have an Asian networking group, you almost have clients handed to you on a plate." (SL)	• Getting clients through the group • Practical benefits of Asian networks		
"You're not alone. Nearly everyone has faced some kind of challenge like that." (SM) *"Talking about shared challenges and experiences… gives confidence." (SM)* *"We have childhood issues with our parents…" (SB)*	• Not feeling alone • Others have similar challenges • Shared struggles with others		
"You learn from each other's mistakes." (JN) *"Especially in those early years of starting a business, it helps you keep going and not let your mistakes take over." (JN)*	• Learning from others' mistakes • Support in early business years; help to keep going		
"I've had good recommendations from women, and their businesses were doing well. Seeing that encouraged me to sign up." (RA)	• Being encouraged by others' success	**Co-Ethnic Peer Recommendations**	
"I knew all the businesswomen … so, it was word of mouth and positive feedback." (TS)	• Word-of-mouth trust		
"One of my close friends had attended her course, and she was always talking about how helpful it was… then decided from there." (DP)	• Recommendations from people I know • Trusting others' experiences		
"I watched other women… they were making good money from their businesses." (SA)	• Seeing results before joining		
"In future, I really want to go beyond women-only groups and join subscriptions with male coaches and mentors as well. I believe sometimes we just miss so many things." (DP)	• Wanting to go beyond women-only groups • Wanting to join male coaches and mentors • Feeling they miss so many things	**The Limits of Identity-Based Support**	**Boundaries of Identity-Based Support**
"I follow him, I like his coaching, and I joined it. Why just stay with women only and Asian?" (SA)	• Following and joining a male coach • Asking why it stays with women only and Asian		

	• Wanting to see what other people are doing		

5.4.1 Experiencing and Navigating Partial Inclusion in Entrepreneurial Spaces

This dimension highlights how participants encountered mainstream entrepreneurial spaces that presented themselves as open and accessible, while still limiting deeper engagement, recognition, and belonging.

Partial Inclusion in White-Dominated Spaces

Participants who engaged with mainstream and women-only support hubs described experiences characterised by formal inclusion but limited belonging. While access to these spaces was not restricted, participants' experiences highlighted subtle forms of exclusion, social distance, cultural misalignment, and racialised patterns of interaction. These dynamics were not overt discrimination; rather, they operated through everyday relational practices that shaped who connected, collaborated, and shared insider knowledge. Several participants described entering women-only entrepreneurial spaces expecting support and connection but instead experiencing feelings of exclusion and limited belonging. As SA reflected:

"I joined a business workshop for women only, but I was the only Asian there… The women were nice, but I didn't feel a connection. It seemed like white women prefer to collaborate with whites only." (SA)

Similarly, NJ reported attending a networking event dominated by white participants:

"It was helpful, to be fair, but when it's mostly White women there, it does feel a bit harder to connect. You sort of get the sense something's missing. I introduced myself to a few women there, but they were mostly Black and brown…" (NJ)

These accounts point to relational exclusion rather than explicit rejection. Participants were present and welcomed, yet meaningful interaction and connection remained limited. Belonging was not denied outright but withheld through subtle social cues and interactional boundaries, reinforcing a sense of being present in the room while remaining an outsider. Some participants drew on broader cultural understandings when interpreting social connections. NB, for example, referred to an expectation that Asian women support one another, suggesting that feelings of belonging were shaped through wider identity-based narratives as well as entrepreneurial experiences:

"I haven't had any white people approach or help me in any way… all our Asian community mostly supports Asians." (NB)

For some participants, these experiences were understood in relation to earlier encounters with workplace exclusion documented in Essay 1. Their reluctance to engage with mainstream networking hubs was not based on a single interaction but reflected accumulated experiences of conditional inclusion that had already shaped their expectations of professional spaces. The same dynamics of formal access without genuine recognition that drove women out of organisations reappeared here, in

different forms, in different spaces, but with the same effect. Conditional inclusion, it seems, follows intersectional entrepreneurs across professional domains.

The issue extended beyond belonging to the limited availability of meaningful, culturally relevant guidance within mainstream entrepreneurial spaces. Advice was often described as generic and disconnected from participants' lived realities, particularly in relation to religion, family responsibilities, and community expectations. As SZ noted:

"For me, my religion is important… for them it's just a loan, for me it's haram." (SZ)

Similarly, SB questioned whether mainstream business coaches possessed the cultural and contextual understanding required to address the specific barriers faced by South Asian women:

"I don't think a white business coach would have really understood the barriers that Asian women face." (SB)

These accounts show how misrecognition operates within mainstream support hubs. While programmes were designed to be universally applicable, they often failed to acknowledge how religious values, gendered family roles, and cultural norms shape entrepreneurial decision-making. As a result, participants struggled to build trust or view mentors as credible sources of support. For second-generation South Asian women, the issue was not always direct discrimination but the absence of meaningful connection and culturally relevant guidance, contributing to feelings of limited engagement and belonging and reinforcing the value of identity-aligned spaces examined in the following sections.

Counter-Accounts: Mainstream Spaces Experienced as Open

This pattern was not universal. RA described her engagement with a mainstream, mixed programme in markedly different terms, reporting neither exclusion nor social distance:

"I never felt like I was excluded. It was a great experience, I learnt a lot, and there was a mix of nationalities there." (RA)

RA's account is important for two reasons. First, it shows that experiences of exclusion were not universal and that some participants felt included in mainstream entrepreneurial spaces. Second, she highlights the importance of the composition of the space itself. Unlike settings where one group clearly dominated, the environment she described was more diverse, with people from different backgrounds represented. This diversity appeared to reduce the social distance and feelings of exclusion reported by other participants, making it easier for individuals to participate and connect with others.

These findings suggest that exclusion was not a feature of mainstream entrepreneurial spaces in themselves. Instead, participants were more likely to experience partial inclusion when they were one of very few minority women in a space dominated by a majority group. In these settings, access to

relationships, knowledge, and opportunities often remained centred around established insiders. By contrast, when spaces were more diverse, participants were more likely to feel both included and able to participate fully. This suggests that partial inclusion is not fixed but depends on the social and cultural composition of the space.

5.4.2 Constructing Belonging Through Shared Identity and Cultural Understanding

In this dimension, three aspects of identity-based hubs as spaces for belonging are identified: cultural congruence and shared identity, which define the emotional and symbolic mechanisms; ethnocultural mentoring (identity-aligned), which captures the practical and instructional side; and relational identification, which reflects the psychological connection with mentors and peers.

Cultural Congruence and Shared Identity

A key finding is that participants actively selected identity-based spaces based on cultural congruence and shared identity. Participants described feeling a stronger sense of belonging, trust, and being understood when mentors and peers shared similar ethnic, cultural, religious, and gendered backgrounds. Identity-aligned spaces enabled participants to engage without having to explain or justify their experiences.

Participants emphasised that entrepreneurship was not experienced as a neutral or purely economic activity. Instead, it was deeply intertwined with religion, family responsibilities, and community expectations. Mentors who shared these lived realities were perceived as more credible and relevant. SZ explained how shared values shaped her choice of mentor:

"I always look for somebody who's got the same values as me. When we talk business, we're not just talking about compound interest and Bitcoin, because that's not really in line with my values." (SZ)

SZ's experience suggests that belonging was closely linked to the practical value of support. Mentors who shared her values were better able to offer advice that fitted her business goals and beliefs. This highlights how cultural alignment influenced not only relationships but also access to relevant knowledge and guidance.

This theme was also reflected in participants' discussions of online entrepreneurial platforms, where identity-based entrepreneurial programmes were described as spaces in which women felt an immediate sense of connection because of shared experiences and understanding (Appendix B2). However, these accounts typically emphasised the emotional benefits of belonging, such as feeling understood, supported, and accepted. SZ's account extends this discussion by showing that cultural alignment also has practical value. Shared values and experiences shaped the relevance of advice, guidance, and support, suggesting that cultural congruence contributes not only to emotional connection but also to entrepreneurial learning and decision-making.

Many participants highlighted that South Asian mentors were better able to integrate cultural and religious considerations into business advice. Unlike mainstream coaches, identity-aligned mentors were seen as understanding the specific constraints participants faced as South Asian women. As SN reflected:

"I chose her because I believed she would understand the pressures of being a woman in our community, like the responsibilities and expectations from women." (SN)

SN's account reflects an active process of selection rather than a passive allocation of mentoring support. Before entering the relationship, she assessed whether a potential mentor would understand the gendered expectations and responsibilities she experienced within her community. Cultural understanding therefore shaped mentor choice from the outset, acting as a criterion for access rather than simply influencing the quality of the relationship once established. This suggests that considerations of cultural fit influenced who participants approached for support, highlighting how gendered and community-based expectations shaped professional relationships before they began.

Identity-Aligned Mentoring

Identity-aligned mentoring also created emotional safety. Participants shared their challenges related to family roles, religion, and community expectations without fear of judgement. RA highlighted how shared identity enabled mentors to recognise participants' multiple roles as entrepreneurs, mothers, daughters, and wives:

"Just having someone who understands what it means to be South Asian, and the pressure of being a mum and setting up a business." (RA)

An important dimension of participants' accounts was mentors' understanding of intergenerational experiences, their parents' migration histories, experiences of childhood racialisation, and the cultural expectations passed down across generations. These experiences shaped participants' identities, influencing self-confidence, boundaries, and comfort zones. Several women described how expectations passed down generationally, such as not speaking too much or not appearing overly confident, continued to influence their entrepreneurial behaviour. NJ explained:

"She just gets it, you know? The way we've grown up as South Asian women; it's not just our own experiences, it comes from what our parents went through as well. A lot of that gets passed down, and it really affects your confidence. She understands that whole generational side of things, even stuff like being picked on at school because of how we look." (NJ)

NJ's account highlights the importance of shared understanding between mentors and participants. She explains that confidence was shaped not only by her own experiences but also by family histories and experiences passed down across generations. For NJ, a mentor with a similar background was valuable

because they understood these influences without needing lengthy explanations. Shared experiences therefore provided more than emotional support; they enabled mentors to offer guidance that was grounded in an understanding of the wider factors shaping participants' confidence and entrepreneurial journeys.

Participants described feeling "in-between" different expectations, balancing being a "good woman" with desires for confidence and independence. Mentors who understood these tensions were seen as more effective, as they could recognise how cultural conditioning and generational experiences shaped confidence and entrepreneurial behaviour. This made mentoring more than technical support, providing validation, guidance, and a stronger sense of self-belief. SB articulated this clearly:

"For me to find someone that I could relate to… we have cultural issues. I really invest in someone I can relate to." (SB)

SB's use of the term "invest" suggests that shared understanding was viewed as a practical resource rather than simply a source of personal comfort. She attached value to support from individuals who understood her experiences because their advice was more relevant to the realities of her entrepreneurial journey. Cultural similarity therefore enhanced not only trust, but also the perceived usefulness of mentoring relationships.

These accounts also highlight the additional work involved when mentors do not share a similar background. Identity-aligned mentoring reduced this need for explanation, allowing participants to move more quickly to issues of strategy, growth, and decision-making. In this way, shared cultural understanding functioned as a resource that made mentoring more efficient and immediately relevant.

Beyond emotional support, identity-aligned mentoring provided practical and context-specific guidance. Mentors were able to address culturally embedded barriers, including family resistance, religious constraints, and community expectations, because they had navigated similar challenges themselves. SM noted:

"She mentioned cultural taboos we face and how to deal with them… which was really reassuring." (SM)

SM's experience highlights why participants valued identity-aligned mentoring. Mentors with similar backgrounds already understood the cultural and social challenges participants faced, allowing them to provide practical advice. This suggests that shared identity contributed not only to connection and trust but also to the quality and relevance of entrepreneurial support.

Public accounts of identity-based coaching and mentoring programmes described them in similar terms, framed explicitly as spaces designed to address shared experiences of exclusion, described by some as “shared traumas” (Appendix B2). This corroborates the interview finding that mentoring in these spaces

addressed constraints mainstream provision does not recognise, rather than providing generic business advice.

These findings show that cultural congruence and identity-aligned mentoring function as mechanisms through which belonging, learning, and confidence are produced. When participants felt culturally recognised, they found it easier to engage and reported more meaningful learning experiences.

Developing Support and Confidence Through Relational Identification

In addition to culturally aligned mentoring, participants highlighted the importance of relational identification in shaping their entrepreneurial confidence, aspirations, and sense of possibility. While mentoring provided practical and contextual guidance, relational identification emerged through participants' recognition of themselves in the experiences and everyday struggles of other women within identity-based environments.

This process played a key role in constructing both belonging and confidence. By seeing women with similar backgrounds, constraints, and responsibilities succeed, entrepreneurship became more relatable and achievable. Identification reduced the perceived distance between participants and the idea of being a “real” entrepreneur, allowing them to reposition themselves within that category. Participants emphasised that role models were influential not because they were exceptional, but because they were similar. As TK explained:

"It's nice to be able to see it in terms of, if she can do it, so can I." (TK)

This sense of similarity enabled participants to translate others' success into their own possibility, supporting both confidence and aspiration. Their self-belief was not handed to them from outside. It grew from comparing themselves with, and recognising themselves in, other women in the group. SZ highlighted how observing others created ongoing inspiration and validation:

"When I see her, I always say to myself, does she ever stop? She's always doing something, coming up with new ideas, and she's always helping her clients." (SZ)

Through this process, participants began to reframe how they understood their own capabilities. Relational identification became a mechanism through which women shifted their self-perceptions, moving from uncertainty towards greater confidence and acceptance of themselves as entrepreneurs. This learning was often implicit, emerging through observation rather than direct instruction, as participants watched how others managed challenges, sustained businesses, and navigated similar cultural constraints. As SN explained:

"I look up to the successful women in our group as my role models. Their stories inspire me and give me confidence. I ask myself, 'If these women can do it, why can't I?'" (SN)

As participants began to relate to these narratives, they reported learning to navigate and challenge culturally imposed limitations. This contributed to increased self-confidence, improved boundary-setting, and a reduction in people-pleasing behaviours described as common within South Asian women's communities. DP explained how learning helped her to set boundaries: "*she really helped me break those barriers*" (DP). JR noted how observing other women enabled her to build confidence and step into new opportunities:

"Before that, I'd never even considered travelling on my own. Now I feel confident enough to do it. Seeing other women so confident, even working abroad, was inspiring." (JR)

In some cases, identification started even before participants engaged directly with mentors or structured programmes. Through social media platforms, mentors discussed culturally specific challenges around gender roles, family expectations, and community pressures, fostering an early sense of recognition and connection. As SM explained:

"Her story pops up on my Insta feed talking about her business journey and Asian culture boundaries… I checked her page, and I felt like she is talking about me." (SM)

Although cultural congruence supports initial belonging and mentoring contributes to skill development, relational identification emerges as the key mechanism through which self-belief is built and sustained. Through observing women with similar backgrounds successfully navigating comparable constraints, participants began to close the perceived gap between themselves and the idea of the “real” entrepreneur. Entrepreneurship was reinterpreted as attainable rather than exceptional, strengthening confidence and enabling participants to position themselves as credible entrepreneurial actors within identity-based environments.

This suggests that participants who found culturally aligned mentors were able to access support that resonated with their lived experiences, reducing the need to translate or explain the cultural and family contexts that shaped their entrepreneurial decisions. They were also able to develop a stronger entrepreneurial self-concept by observing women in similar positions. These advantages did not arise from access alone, but from recognition. Being understood within mentoring spaces enabled participants to draw greater value from the resources, advice, and role models available to them.

5.4.3 Building Entrepreneurial Support Through Relational and Community Networks

This dimension explains how mechanisms of belonging operated within identity-based entrepreneurial hubs and how peers influenced participants' experiences and decisions. Two interlinked processes are identified. First, participants learned from one another within these spaces, where peer interactions facilitated both experiential learning and support networks. Second, participants' trust and perceptions of credibility towards programmes and events were shaped through the testimonies, recommendations, and word-of-mouth shared by other South Asian women within their networks. This analysis highlights

how belonging within identity-based spaces enabled participants to navigate uncertainty, build confidence, and make informed decisions.

Peer-Based Learning and Network Support

Within identity-based learning and networking spaces, participants consistently described peer learning as a key mechanism through which a sense of belonging was developed, reinforced, and sustained over time. Rather than viewing learning as an individual or competitive process, participants experienced these environments as relational spaces where knowledge and support were exchanged openly. Women actively supported one another's progress, sharing both successes and challenges, which fostered a sense of collective growth and mutual recognition. As SB reflected:

"What I got out of this course is the network of women that I met through that; that's valuable." (SB)

SB's account suggests that the value of the programme extended beyond its formal content. Rather than highlighting specific training or learning materials, she emphasised the relationships she developed with other women. This indicates that the most valuable outcome was the network itself, which provided ongoing connections, support, and opportunities after the programme had ended. The programme therefore functioned not only as a learning space but also as a space where women could build relationships that continued to benefit their entrepreneurial journeys.

Peer learning extended beyond formal sessions or structured activities. Many participants maintained ongoing relationships after programmes ended, continuing to exchange advice and information as their businesses evolved. As JN described:

"We share information. If I find something interesting, I share it with them, and they do the same. We learn from each other." (JN)

This exchange of knowledge was both practical and meaningful. Participants exchanged knowledge about suppliers, clients, tools, and business strategies, ensuring that learning remained closely tied to their own entrepreneurial contexts. For some, these networks also produced tangible outcomes, including access to clients and opportunities. As SL explained:

"When you have an Asian networking group, you almost have clients handed to you on a plate… one of my friends asked me how I get so many clients, and it's because of that Asian networking group." (SL)

SL's account illustrates how belonging generated tangible business benefits. The value of the networking group was not limited to emotional support or a sense of connection; it also created opportunities for business growth. Through relationships within the group, participants gained access to clients, recommendations, and commercial opportunities that might not otherwise have been available. The fact that SL's friend could not easily explain her success suggests that these opportunities were embedded within trusted relationships and shared networks. This highlights that belonging was

not simply a feeling of inclusion but a resource that enabled participants to access opportunities, strengthen their businesses, and expand their client base.

Public accounts described peer networks in comparable terms, with women describing these spaces as places for sharing experiences and supporting one another through business challenges (Appendix B2). This is consistent with the essay's argument that peer learning operates as a collective, relational process rather than a series of one-off exchanges of advice.

Beyond practical support, peer learning played a crucial role in reducing isolation and strengthening confidence. Hearing others' experiences normalised participants' own challenges and reinforced a shared sense of resilience. As SM noted:

"Hearing those experiences really gives you courage, because you realise you're not alone. Nearly everyone has faced some kind of challenge like that." (SM)

Through this process, participants collectively produced belonging, validating one another's journeys and struggles. Peer learning therefore functioned as both emotional and practical support, enabling participants to persist during periods of uncertainty, particularly in the early stages of business development. As JN reflected:

"You learn from each other's mistakes… especially in those early years of starting a business. It helps you keep going and not let your mistakes take over." (JN)

Peer learning in identity-based spaces built both belonging and confidence. Through shared experience, reciprocal exchange, and ongoing connection, participants transformed learning into a sustained and collective process, converting belonging into confidence, knowledge, and opportunity, while also strengthening their self-belief as intersectional entrepreneurs.

Co-Ethnic Peer Recommendations

Building on peer learning as a relational mechanism, this theme shows how co-ethnic peer recommendations shape access to entrepreneurial training and networking spaces, while reinforcing both belonging and trust. Participants described relying on recommendations from women within their identity-based networks when deciding whether to invest time and money in particular programmes. Rather than relying on formal or institutional information, decisions were made relationally, through trust, familiarity, and shared identity.

As TS explained:

"I knew all the businesswomen who had done the training course; they were all Asian, so it was word of mouth and positive feedback." (TS)

Peer recommendations were particularly influential when participants could see visible signs of business progress. RA described how seeing other women's progress encouraged her to take part:

"I've had good recommendations from women, and their businesses were doing well. Seeing that encouraged me to sign up." (RA)

Similarly, DP explained that personal recommendations from trusted contacts reduced the perceived risk of participation:

"One of my close friends had attended her course, and she was always talking about how helpful it was. So, I thought, why not attend one event first and then decide from there?" (DP)

For some participants, assessing value also involved observing tangible financial outcomes. SA described carefully watching whether peers who had completed a programme were able to generate income before committing herself:

"It was a big investment, so before putting my money into it, I really wanted to make sure the training would help me make profits. I watched other women who had taken the course and saw that they were making good money from their businesses." (SA)

These accounts suggest that peer recommendations functioned as relational indicators of credibility and trustworthiness. Trust was not formed through formal assessment but through shared identity, familiarity, and observed results. As a result, credibility came to be something the group vouched for together through network-based experiences and endorsements, rather than something assigned from outside. At the same time, these recommendations contributed to the construction of belonging, signalling to participants that these environments were designed for "people like them", reducing the feelings of exclusion often associated with mainstream entrepreneurial spaces.

The Limits of Identity-Based Support

While participants highly valued identity-based entrepreneurial spaces, they did not always see them as sufficient for long-term business growth. DP's account suggests that these spaces were particularly important in the early stages of entrepreneurship, providing support, confidence, and a sense of belonging. However, she also recognised that expanding her business would require access to a wider range of networks, perspectives, and expertise. Rather than rejecting women-only spaces, she viewed mixed-gender networks as a complementary source of support.

"In future I really want to go beyond women-only groups and join subscriptions with male coaches and mentors as well. I believe sometimes we just miss so many things. So yes, in future I want to join mixed-gender networking and hubs." (DP)

SA described a similar experience. Although she continued to value support from South Asian and women-focused networks, she no longer saw them as meeting all her business needs. As her business developed, she sought advice from a wider range of coaches and mentors to access new ideas, resources, and approaches. Her decision reflects a desire to broaden her network rather than move away from identity-based support entirely.

"I follow him, I like his coaching, and I joined it. Why just stay with women only and Asian? To be honest, I want to see how and what other people are doing, and what their advice is." (SA)

SA's account complicates the assumption that identity-aligned support is always the preferred option. Although she did not reject women-focused or Asian-focused initiatives, she did not view them as sufficient in themselves. Instead, she actively sought opportunities to engage with a broader range of entrepreneurs and coaches

These accounts suggest that identity-based entrepreneurial spaces played an important role in helping women develop confidence, build relationships, and establish themselves as entrepreneurs. However, participants also recognised that business growth often required connections beyond these networks. Belonging provided an important foundation, but access to wider markets, resources, and professional networks became increasingly important as businesses matured. Identity-based spaces were therefore not a permanent destination but often served as a starting point from which women could expand into broader entrepreneurial ecosystems.

This finding highlights an important distinction between belonging and opportunity. Identity-based networks were effective in creating supportive environments where women felt understood and valued, but some participants felt that broader networks were necessary to access additional resources, expertise, and commercial opportunities. The challenge is therefore not whether identity-based spaces are valuable, but how entrepreneurs can maintain the benefits of belonging while also gaining access to wider entrepreneurial networks.

5.5 Discussion

This essay advances understanding of how identity, belonging, and entrepreneurial learning operate by examining the lived experiences of second-generation South Asian women within identity-based hubs. A consistent finding is that mainstream, Western-designed learning and networking environments often require ethnic minority women to fit in, not through formal exclusion, but through subtle expectations to accommodate dominant norms. Recent research similarly shows that inclusion in Western-designed spaces is often conditional, requiring identity accommodation rather than recognition (Neumeyer et al., 2019; Haq et al., 2024).

These findings extend the thesis's central argument, developed in Essay 1, that conditional inclusion operates not only within organisations but also across the wider entrepreneurial ecosystem. Identity-

based spaces emerge in response to this continuity of conditional inclusion across contexts, where intersectional entrepreneurs can construct a sense of belonging that mainstream environments consistently fail to provide.

Participants' accounts demonstrate a clear distinction between access and belonging. While women were able to enter mainstream entrepreneurial hubs, relational dynamics shaped who was recognised, whose knowledge circulated, and who gained access to influential networks. Participants described being physically present yet socially marginalised, with limited influence and restricted access to high-value social capital. These experiences reflect what has been described as a "glass wall," where participation is possible, but belonging and recognition remain constrained (Neumeyer et al., 2019; Haq et al., 2024). These experiences were not isolated events but formed a recurring pattern across educational, professional, and entrepreneurial contexts. These dynamics were also reflected in broader collective narratives shared through blogs and social media posts by South Asian women entrepreneurs (see Appendix B2), reinforcing that these experiences are socially shared and recognised, not individualised and strengthening participants' need for spaces where identity is acknowledged rather than managed.

Identity-based entrepreneurial spaces emerged as important alternatives to mainstream support environments. The findings show that belonging within these spaces develops through a process that begins with participants' experiences of partial inclusion in mainstream entrepreneurial settings, which encouraged them to seek forms of support more closely aligned with their identities. Within these spaces, five mechanisms contributed to this process: cultural congruence, identity-aligned mentoring, relational identification, peer learning, and identity-based social capital. Together, these mechanisms supported the development of trust, confidence, reciprocal support and knowledge exchange, while also providing access to social and economic resources. These interconnected experiences form what this thesis conceptualises as constructed belonging.

Constructed belonging, however, extends beyond participants' sense of acceptance within identity-based spaces. It creates conditions that enable women to participate more fully, seek support, openly discuss difficulties, and present themselves with greater confidence and credibility. Moreover, findings indicate that belonging within identity-based spaces does not necessarily provide access to all the resources required for business development. Belonging and market reach remain distinct resources, and as their businesses developed, some participants extended their networks beyond identity-based spaces by engaging with mixed-gender networks and paid mainstream mentoring.

Identity-based hubs as intersectional learning spaces: The findings demonstrate that identity-based support hubs provide forms of support and learning that are not readily available in mainstream entrepreneurial settings. For intersectional entrepreneurs, these spaces function not only as sites of support but as intersectional learning environments where identity and belonging are actively

negotiated. As shown in prior research, identity work within entrepreneurial contexts is often shaped by tensions between social expectations and professional aspirations (Van Merriënboer, Verver and Radu-Lefebvre, 2025). However, this essay extends existing work by showing that identity is not simply present within identity-based support hubs as a background characteristic. Instead, it is embedded within learning processes, shaping what counts as relevant knowledge, credible advice, and realistic entrepreneurial aspiration.

This challenges dominant assumptions in entrepreneurship research that treat learning as context-neutral. The findings show that learning within identity-based support hubs is socially situated and culturally embedded, emerging from participants lived realities. Women described these spaces as enabling open engagement with entrepreneurial learning and networking, where cultural difference was not positioned as a barrier to overcome but as an integral part of the entrepreneurial context. This contrasts with mainstream settings, where identity is often managed through silence or self-suppression. This finding connects to the belonging literature developed in Chapter 2 (May, 2011; Stead, 2017; Stoker, Cruz-Garcia and Wakkee, 2025b) by showing that belonging within support hubs is not a passive experience but an active achievement built through recognition, trust, and relational engagement.

While prior studies emphasise psychological safety as a key feature of identity-based spaces (Merino and Duchemin, 2022; Schou, Bucher and Waldkirch, 2022; Arshed, Martin and Knox, 2023), this essay extends this literature by demonstrating how such safety translates into practically relevant and actionable learning. Participants were able to openly discuss family responsibilities, religious values, and community expectations, allowing learning to be directly aligned with their lived constraints. Importantly, engagement with identity-based support hubs was not incidental but strategic. Participants deliberately selected identity-based spaces where shared backgrounds made learning more accessible and meaningful. Relationships formed within these spaces often extended beyond formal programmes, contributing to long-term entrepreneurial development (Maharjan, Nazir and Roomi, 2025). Identity-based hubs functioned as learning infrastructures that integrated cultural context into mentoring, networking, and peer interaction.

Relational mechanisms for building belonging: The findings show that belonging within identity-based support hubs is not incidental but actively constructed through identifiable relational mechanisms that shape how women learn, interact, and sustain engagement.

A first key mechanism is cultural alignment. Participants emphasised that learning became more meaningful when cultural norms, religious values, and family expectations were recognised as part of the entrepreneurial context rather than dismissed as irrelevant. This recognition fostered trust and reduced the need for participants to explain or justify their identities. In this way, cultural alignment acted as a foundation for belonging, enabling participants to engage more openly and with greater confidence.

Existing research establishes that identity-based spaces reduce pressure to conform to dominant norms and support more open participation for ethnic minority women (Harrison, Leitch and McAdam, 2020; Merino and Duchemin, 2022), and that women strategically seek spaces where their identities are recognised as relevant (Stoker, Cruz-Garcia and Wakkee, 2025b). However, this literature identifies outcomes such as greater confidence and participation without explaining the mechanism through which belonging is produced. This essay extends existing understanding by identifying cultural alignment as that mechanism, showing that recognition of cultural norms, religious values, and family expectations as valid entrepreneurial context produces trust, reduces identity justification work, and enables belonging.

A second mechanism is ethnoculturally aligned mentoring, which strengthened both belonging and confidence. Participants described mentors' advice as more relevant and credible when grounded in shared cultural and generational experiences. This finding responds to calls for intersectional approaches to mentoring (Maharjan, Nazir and Roomi, 2025; Veiga et al., 2025), extending existing research by showing that mentoring is not only about knowledge transfer but about recognition and validation of lived experience. Mentors who understood cultural constraints were seen as more credible, which in turn strengthened participants' own confidence as intersectional entrepreneurs.

Third, relational identification operated as a confidence-building mechanism. Participants were inspired by role models and peers not because they were exceptional, but because they were relatable women navigating similar constraints. This reduced psychological distance and enabled participants to see entrepreneurship as attainable for "someone like me." Through this process, confidence was not handed to them from outside. It grew through identification and comparison.

Existing research on role modelling establishes that seeing others succeed increases self-efficacy and entrepreneurial aspiration, particularly among underrepresented groups (Woodwark, Wood and Schnarr, 2021; Elliott, Mavriplis and Anis, 2020). Research on homophily similarly shows that shared identity facilitates trust and reduces social distance within networks (Gompers et al., 2017). However, this literature focuses primarily on access to role models as a resource rather than examining how identification operates as an internal confidence-building process. This essay extends this understanding by showing that relational identification works not through exceptionalism but through relatability. When participants could identify with a role model, entrepreneurial identity felt more attainable. It was this sense of similarity, rather than success alone, that narrowed the gap between how they saw themselves and how they imagined an entrepreneur.

Finally, peer learning and reciprocal exchange sustained belonging over time. Participants described ongoing knowledge sharing, mutual support, and collective learning within networks, contributing to the development of identity-based social capital. These interactions enabled women to navigate uncertainty, evaluate opportunities, and maintain engagement. This extends existing work on homophily

and peer learning (Rocha, Paço and Alves, 2024) by demonstrating how peer relationships act as relational mechanisms that build confidence, producing belonging that is durable rather than momentary.

Belonging is not an outcome of participation but a relational process through which confidence is continuously built. Identity-based hubs therefore function as environments where confidence, recognition, and credibility emerge through ongoing interaction rather than formal inclusion. The findings of this essay show the conditions that produce belonging within support hubs, and how belonging in turn helps build confidence. In this sense, belonging is not incidental to entrepreneurial development but foundational to it.

Without the conditions that make belonging possible, namely cultural alignment, relational identification, and peer exchange, access to entrepreneurial spaces produces neither confidence nor credibility. This positions belonging as the missing mechanism in existing accounts of entrepreneurial inclusion, which have focused primarily on access and resources while leaving unexplained why formal participation so often fails to produce meaningful engagement for intersectional entrepreneurs (Neumeyer et al., 2019).

Importantly, participants often spoke about how first-generation experiences, their parents' migration histories and community expectations influenced their own identities. In identity-based spaces, where most participants and mentors were from similar second-generation backgrounds, these intergenerational dynamics could be openly discussed and collectively processed. These spaces therefore provided not only entrepreneurial support but opportunities to reflect on and make sense of their unique positionality as second-generation women navigating both South Asian and British expectations. Identity-based networks functioned as spaces of collective sense-making as well as practical support, a dimension that has received limited attention in the existing literature on entrepreneurial intermediaries.

5.5.1 Contributions to Theory

This essay makes a theoretical and empirical contribution by showing that belonging functions as a mechanism through which participation in entrepreneurial support hubs is produced, rather than emerging as an emotional outcome of inclusion. Existing accounts treat belonging principally as a felt state, characterised by ease, acceptance, and comfort within a social setting (May, 2011; Stead, 2017). However, the findings suggest that belonging also shapes how women participate in entrepreneurial spaces. Participants who felt a sense of belonging were more likely to seek advice, share challenges, build relationships, and engage confidently with others. In contrast, those who felt less connected often participated more cautiously and gained less from these spaces. Belonging therefore influenced not only how participants felt but also how they engaged with entrepreneurial opportunities and support.

At the same time, participants recognised that belonging within identity-based networks had its limits. These spaces provided valuable support, confidence, and connections, but they did not always offer access to wider markets, sectors, or professional networks. As their businesses grew, some women sought opportunities beyond these spaces to expand their reach.

Much of the existing literature assumes that providing access to programmes, resources, and networks will automatically encourage participation (Neumeyer et al., 2019; Harrison, Leitch and McAdam, 2020). However, the experiences of participants in this study suggest that access alone is not enough. While women could attend events and join networks, meaningful participation depended on whether they felt accepted, understood, and able to engage with others. Participants who experienced belonging were more likely to build relationships, seek support, and contribute actively, whereas those who lacked a sense of belonging often remained on the margins. These findings suggest that access creates opportunities for participation, but belonging shapes whether those opportunities are fully utilised.

The essay also specifies how belonging is produced, since showing that belonging enables participation requires an account of the mechanisms that build it. Belonging emerged through everyday relational practices including cultural alignment, identity-aligned mentoring, relational identification, peer exchange, and the identity-based social capital these relationships generate, rather than arising automatically from shared category membership. This provides empirical grounding for the concept of constructed belonging, introduced in Chapter 1 and developed theoretically in Chapter 2, and demonstrates that belonging is actively built rather than passively received.

Taken together, these claims extend belonging theory in two ways. First, belonging is actively produced through relationships rather than arising from shared identity alone. Second, belonging does more than accompany participation, learning, and confidence building; it helps make them possible. In this sense, the findings extend May's (2011) view of belonging as ease and acceptance by showing that, in entrepreneurial settings, belonging also functions as a resource that provides capabilities beyond those offered by formal access alone.

Focusing on second-generation South Asian women as intersectional entrepreneurs, the essay extends ethnic minority entrepreneurship research beyond external constraints to highlight the role of internalised cultural expectations and generational experiences in shaping entrepreneurial identity and participation. In contrast to earlier work that emphasises adaptation and concealment, this essay demonstrates how identity-based support hubs enable the inclusion of cultural context in learning processes, enabling forms of recognition that are limited in mainstream settings (Neumeyer et al., 2019; Stoker, Cruz-Garcia and Wakkee, 2025b).

A key contribution lies in demonstrating that identity-based support hubs act as relational infrastructures for building belonging and confidence. Rather than being marginal or alternative spaces, they function as central sites where belonging, learning, and opportunity are co-produced. This challenges

assumptions that such spaces are compensatory or niche, instead positioning them as critical parts of the wider entrepreneurial ecosystem, particularly important for intersectional entrepreneurs who often feel they do not fully belong in mainstream environments.

The findings also contribute to the literature on entrepreneurial agency by showing how participants engage strategically with these spaces under conditions of structural constraint. Drawing on trusted networks and peer recommendations, women assessed where to invest resources and effort, demonstrating agency within constrained environments (Stoker et al., 2025a). These choices were shaped by earlier experiences of partial inclusion in mainstream spaces (Mehra, Kilduff and Brass, 1998; Neumeyer et al., 2019), reinforcing the role of identity-based hubs as intentional responses to inequality rather than expressions of preference alone.

This essay shows that belonging is built through relationships rather than granted by formal participation, and that it gives women the confidence to keep going. By tracing the mechanisms through which identity-aligned mentoring, peer learning, and social capital operate, the essay offers a process-based understanding of how intersectional entrepreneurs navigate and reshape entrepreneurial ecosystems. These contributions lay the groundwork for Essay 3, which examines how legitimacy continues to be negotiated not within support spaces but across the full range of market, family, and community contexts that intersectional entrepreneurs encounter after establishing their businesses.

5.6 Conclusion

This essay aimed to understand how the intersecting identities of second-generation South Asian women shape their experiences within entrepreneurial support hubs, and how belonging in these spaces supports their entrepreneurial journeys. The findings show that while mainstream entrepreneurial spaces provide access, they do not always support meaningful participation. Women were often able to enter these spaces but still felt on the margins. Their ability to be recognised, build influence, and access important networks remained limited. Many participants described feeling that they had to adjust their behaviour or hide parts of their identity to fit in. This shows that access alone is not enough; what matters is whether individuals feel recognised, included, and able to participate fully. This extends the thesis's central argument: that formal inclusion, whether in organisations (Essay 1) or entrepreneurial support hubs (Essay 2), did not deliver belonging for these participants without a relational foundation that recognises rather than manages identity.

In contrast, identity-based entrepreneurial spaces offered a different experience. In these environments, participants felt understood and accepted. They were able to talk openly about challenges linked to culture, family expectations, and gender roles, without needing to explain themselves. This made it easier to engage, ask for support, and learn in ways that felt relevant to their lives. These spaces also helped participants in practical ways, supporting confidence, providing useful knowledge, and helping women build strong networks. Through shared experiences, participants were able to learn from others,

reduce uncertainty, and find opportunities that might not have been accessible elsewhere. Belonging shaped learning, decision-making, and business development, not only how women felt.

An important contribution of this essay is showing that belonging is something actively created through relationships. It does not happen automatically when people are formally included. Instead, it develops through shared understanding, trust, and ongoing interaction. Through these processes, intersectional entrepreneurs begin to see themselves as capable, credible, and confident in their role. This essay also highlights how second-generation South Asian women navigate complex expectations shaped both by structural barriers and by cultural and family influences. Instead of simply adapting, they actively decide where to invest their time and energy, typically selecting spaces where they feel recognised, valued, and supported.

Overall, the findings show that entrepreneurial engagement is shaped not just by access to opportunities but by whether individuals feel they belong. When intersectional entrepreneurs experience belonging, they are more likely to learn, participate, and grow their businesses. When belonging is constructed within identity-aligned spaces, they can recalibrate their professional identities, rebuild confidence, and position themselves as credible entrepreneurs. This is not simply an individual achievement; it is a collective and relational one, built through shared experience, mutual recognition, and trust. The essay also shows where this support reaches its limit. Identity-based spaces build belonging effectively, but belonging and market reach are different resources, and some participants moved outwards to mixed-gender networks and paid mentoring as their businesses developed. The following essay examines what happens next: how these women take the confidence built within these spaces into the wider arena of entrepreneurial practice and what challenges they encounter there.

5.6.1 Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the essay focuses on South Asian women entrepreneurs, and the findings therefore reflect the experiences of women from a South Asian sub-continental context and may not be directly transferable to other ethnic minority entrepreneurial groups. Second, the essay is based on qualitative interviews with 15 participants. While this approach enabled detailed insights into lived experiences, it does not allow for statistical generalisation.

Third, participants were recruited from and through identity-based entrepreneurial hubs, which means the sample may be weighted towards women who had already found value in these spaces. Women who had wholly negative experiences of identity-based support hubs, or who had never engaged with them, are not represented. Future research could adopt a longitudinal design comparing intersectional entrepreneurs participating in identity-based hubs with those in mainstream hubs, examining how belonging develops over time and across different settings. Finally, most participants had established their businesses within the last five years. Experiences of belonging and identity negotiation may vary across different stages of the entrepreneurial journey as businesses grow and mature.

This essay focuses on identity-based entrepreneurial spaces and therefore provides limited insight into participants' experiences beyond them. The accounts of DP and SA suggest that many women expand their networks as their businesses develop, seeking resources and opportunities outside identity-based provision. Future research could follow entrepreneurs across both identity-based and mainstream spaces to better understand how belonging, support, and opportunities change over time.

5.6.2 Implications for Policy and Practice

These findings carry important implications for policymakers and organisations aiming to build more inclusive entrepreneurial ecosystems. Existing diversity initiatives often focus on improving access to mainstream programmes, operating on the assumption that participation automatically results in inclusion. However, this essay shows that access alone is not sufficient: it does not necessarily lead to meaningful engagement, recognition, or sustained business development for second-generation South Asian women.

Policy interventions need to move beyond access-based models and recognise identity-based support hubs as valuable and necessary spaces, rather than temporary or compensatory solutions. Supporting the development and funding of identity-aligned support hubs can enhance participation, entrepreneurial confidence, and access to opportunities for intersectional entrepreneurs. Specifically, enterprise support funders and local government bodies should recognise identity-based support hubs in their commissioning frameworks not as supplementary provision for minority groups, but as core infrastructure for inclusive ecosystem development. Metrics of success for entrepreneurial support programmes should include measures of belonging and sustained engagement, not only access and participation rates.

Policymakers should also acknowledge that learning and support are not neutral processes. Programmes that integrate cultural understanding, identity-aligned mentoring, and peer-based learning are more likely to be effective for diverse entrepreneurs. This requires designing initiatives that are responsive to lived experiences, rather than expecting individuals to adapt to standardised models.

Finally, these findings suggest that building inclusive ecosystems requires attention to relational forms of support, including trust, recognition, and peer validation. Policies that strengthen community-based networks, mentorship, and culturally relevant training can sustain engagement and reduce structural inequality.

Chapter 6: Essay 3

Intersectional Constraints and Entrepreneurial Legitimacy: Identity Work Among Second-Generation South Asian Women

This essay examines how second-generation South Asian women entrepreneurs in the UK negotiate entrepreneurial legitimacy across intersecting market, family, and community contexts. Drawing on an intersectional lens, the essay shows that legitimacy is not shaped by a single factor but emerges through the interaction of multiple social positions. Using qualitative interviews with 17 women, the findings highlight how participants navigate legitimacy across different arenas, where expectations from family, community, and markets overlap and sometimes conflict. The essay shows that women actively use identity work to manage these expectations, aligning, adjusting, and at times challenging dominant norms. However, this agency remains bounded, as structural constraints continue to shape what and who is considered legitimate. The essay contributes to research on intersectionality and entrepreneurship by showing how second-generation South Asian women, as intersectional entrepreneurs, negotiate legitimacy within ongoing structures of inequality rather than fully overcoming them, introducing bounded legitimacy negotiation as a concept that captures this process.

6.1 Introduction

Entrepreneurs do not operate within a single legitimacy arena. Instead, they must navigate multiple and often competing audiences, including markets, families, communities, and institutions, each applying distinct evaluative criteria (James, Xiong and Anderson, 2022; Ojediran, Discua Cruz and Anderson, 2022). Existing research, however, has tended to examine these arenas separately. This is also reflected in Imiren et al. (2026), who show how women digital entrepreneurs in Nigeria navigate overlapping contexts through eclectic legitimation work. This essay examines how second-generation South Asian women entrepreneurs negotiate legitimacy across market, family, and community contexts at the same time, showing how demands from different arenas overlap, conflict, and shape identity work in ways that single-arena analyses cannot capture.

This essay introduces bounded legitimacy negotiation as its central theoretical contribution. It shows how intersectional entrepreneurs continually negotiate recognition across different contexts, where legitimacy achieved in one setting may not be recognised in another and where identity choices are constrained by intersecting inequalities. This concept builds on existing accounts of bounded agency (Cederberg and Villares-Varela, 2019; Xheneti, Karki and Madden, 2019) but extends them by demonstrating that the bounds of agency for intersectional entrepreneurs are not only institutional but intimately social, located within family relationships, community obligations, and the ongoing need to maintain respectability across intersecting legitimacy regimes.

Entrepreneurship has long been framed as a domain of individual agency and opportunity, emphasising autonomy, initiative, and personal achievement (Carter et al., 2015). However, a growing body of scholarship challenges this view by demonstrating that entrepreneurial action is deeply shaped by unequal legitimacy regimes that privilege some actors while constraining others (Ahl and Marlow, 2021; Radu-Lefebvre et al., 2021; Giazitzoglu and Korede, 2023). Entrepreneurship is increasingly understood as more than an economic activity, since it is also a site where questions of identity, legitimacy, and inequality emerge and are negotiated through social interaction and evaluation (James, Xiong and Anderson, 2022; Imiren et al., 2024; Essers, McAdam and Ossenkop, 2025). Entrepreneurial participation and recognition are therefore shaped by gendered, racialised, and classed power relations embedded within markets and institutions and within families and communities.

Scholars have shown that entrepreneurial norms are not neutral but are often grounded in masculine, white, and Western expectations, resulting in uneven opportunities for recognition and legitimacy (Ahl and Marlow, 2021). Within such contexts, marginalised and ethnic minority entrepreneurs are often required to undertake additional legitimacy work to be recognised as credible actors (Radu-Lefebvre et al., 2021). Such expectations are rooted in broader beliefs about who looks, behaves, and belongs as an entrepreneur, defining certain identities as more readily recognised than others. Legitimacy must be negotiated in relation to audience expectations shaped by wider power relations, not earned through business competence alone (Essers et al., 2023; Giazitzoglu and Korede, 2023).

Within these unequal legitimacy contexts, identity work becomes central to entrepreneurial participation. Entrepreneurs engage in identity work as a situated response to audience evaluations, adapting how they present themselves as they move across social contexts (Ojediran, Discua Cruz and Anderson, 2022; Kelly and McAdam, 2023). Such identity work involves emphasising professionalism, moderating visibility, or selectively aligning with dominant entrepreneurial ideals to secure recognition and credibility (Swail and Marlow, 2018; Giazitzoglu and Korede, 2023).

Identity work has frequently been viewed as a means of navigating exclusion. However, emerging studies highlight its limitations and contradictions (Giazitzoglu and Korede, 2023; Stoker et al., 2024). While it may mitigate exclusion and enhance recognition in specific contexts, it rarely dismantles the underlying structures that produce inequality. Instead, it often requires alignment with dominant norms, thereby reinforcing the very legitimacy regimes that marginalise certain groups. This highlights the limits of individual agency and points to the importance of understanding how agency is exercised, negotiated, and constrained within gendered, racialised, and institutional hierarchies (Cederberg and Villares-Varela, 2019).

Building on this literature, this essay adopts bounded agency as a critical perspective for understanding entrepreneurial legitimacy and identity work under conditions of structural inequality. This concept recognises that entrepreneurs are capable of action while remaining embedded within social, cultural,

and institutional constraints that shape what forms of legitimacy are possible and rewarded (Cederberg and Villares-Varela, 2019). Entrepreneurial success does not necessarily translate into empowerment. Although individuals may achieve economic or professional gains, wider systems of racism, gender inequality, and class-based disadvantage often remain intact (Xheneti, Karki and Madden, 2019; Stoker et al., 2024).

This essay is further informed by an intersectional lens, which understands inequality as produced through the simultaneous interaction of gender, race, religion, and social position rather than through single, isolated categories (Crenshaw, 1997; Ahl and Marlow, 2021). Intersectionality is particularly relevant to entrepreneurship research because legitimacy and recognition are shaped by how multiple

Intersectional constraints define the structural conditions within which identity work occurs, while identity work becomes the mechanism through which partial forms of empowerment are pursued. In this essay, empowerment is not treated as a straightforward or achieved outcome of entrepreneurship. Instead, it is understood as partial, conditional, and context-dependent, shaped through ongoing identity work within persistent systems of inequality (Verduijn and Essers, 2013; Thielemann and Atagan, 2025).

Despite growing attention to legitimacy and identity work, limited research has examined how second-generation South Asian women negotiate entrepreneurial legitimacy across family, community, and market arenas simultaneously. This essay addresses this gap by examining how legitimacy is actively constructed, negotiated, and maintained through identity work under intersecting constraints. The essay advances understanding of intersectionality, legitimacy, identity work, and bounded agency, highlighting how intersectional entrepreneurs navigate exclusion through entrepreneurship without fully transcending the structural conditions that produce it.

The research question guiding this essay is RQ3: How do second-generation South Asian women entrepreneurs negotiate entrepreneurial legitimacy across intersecting market, family, and community contexts?

The essay is based on a qualitative, inductive research design drawing on in-depth interviews with 17 British-born South Asian women entrepreneurs in the UK. The research adopts an interpretive approach, with data analysed using IPA and Gioia-style data structuring to capture how participants make sense of entrepreneurial legitimacy and identity within their everyday contexts. The following section provides the literature review, followed by the methodology, findings, discussion, and conclusion.

6.2 Literature Review

6.2.1 Intersectionality, Legitimacy, and Identity Work in Entrepreneurship

Intersectionality provides a critical lens for examining how entrepreneurial legitimacy is produced, negotiated, and questioned through the simultaneous interaction of gender, race, ethnicity, religion, and family position, rather than through any single axis of difference (Crenshaw, 1997). Within entrepreneurship research, an intersectional perspective moves beyond additive views of disadvantage by examining how overlapping social positions shape access to entrepreneurial legitimacy and recognition (Ahl and Marlow, 2021).

Studies of entrepreneurial legitimacy increasingly show that recognition is not neutral or universal, but structured through intersecting norms of professionalism, respectability, and credibility that privilege some identities over others (Suchman, 1995; Giazitzoglu and Korede, 2023). Legitimacy challenges experienced by women entrepreneurs cannot be explained by gender alone; they emerge at the intersection of gendered expectations, racialised assumptions, classed markers of competence, and moral evaluations tied to family and community contexts (Ojediran, Discua Cruz and Anderson, 2022). This helps explain why women from racialised and migrant backgrounds often face heightened and persistent legitimacy thresholds across entrepreneurial arenas.

Identity work holds a central position within this intersectional understanding of legitimacy. Research shows that identity work is not the source of legitimacy but a response to legitimacy demands already structured by intersecting power relations (Marlow and McAdam, 2015; Stead, 2017; Xheneti, Karki and Madden, 2019; Essers et al., 2023). Entrepreneurs engage in identity work to manage how they are perceived across audiences, adjusting performances of professionalism, femininity, ethnicity, or respectability depending on context (Swail and Marlow, 2018).

Importantly, an intersectional approach also draws attention to the limits of identity work. Identity work can support participation and reduce barriers to inclusion, yet it rarely challenges the deeper gendered and racialised norms that shape entrepreneurial legitimacy (Ahl and Marlow, 2021; Stoker et al., 2024). In some cases, aligning with dominant norms may even reinforce existing hierarchies, reproducing the masculine foundations of entrepreneurship (Essers, McAdam and Ossenkop, 2025). Intersectionality therefore strengthens bounded agency accounts by showing how agency operates within multiple, mutually reinforcing constraints rather than along a single dimension. It enables legitimacy to be seen as multiple and uneven, shaped by the interaction of different social positions. This is essential for understanding why identity work may enable recognition in some contexts while leaving structural inequalities intact.

6.2.2 Legitimacy, Recognition, and Evaluation in Entrepreneurship

Legitimacy as a Relational Concept: Legitimacy refers to whether an individual or activity is viewed as appropriate, acceptable, and desirable within wider social norms and values (Suchman, 1995). Suchman (1995) identifies three forms: cognitive legitimacy, where something becomes accepted as normal or taken for granted; moral legitimacy, where actions are judged against social values; and pragmatic legitimacy, where legitimacy depends on meeting the interests of others. A key argument in this work is that legitimacy is relational and conditional: it must be continually negotiated rather than assumed. It is not something people naturally possess but something granted by different audiences, meaning it must be continually maintained (Radu-Lefebvre et al., 2021).

Moral acceptance and regional social legitimacy shape entrepreneurial intentions and start-up behaviour in the early stage (Kibler, Kautonen and Fink, 2014; Kibler and Kautonen, 2016). Other studies show that legitimacy within entrepreneurial ecosystems is shaped by context and built through processes such as networking, assimilation, increasing visibility, and using entrepreneurial missions strategically to gain resources and support (Lechner, Delanoë-Gueguen and Gueguen, 2022; Toepler and Velamuri, 2025). In entrepreneurial contexts, legitimacy is not inherent but socially constructed through external evaluation by organisations, networks, and markets (Deephouse et al., 2017).

In this essay, legitimacy is explored through the experiences of second-generation South Asian women entrepreneurs across different audiences, including customers, family members, and community networks. Each group applied its own expectations about what counted as appropriate and respectable behaviour.

Gendered and Racialised Legitimacy Thresholds: Entrepreneurial legitimacy is frequently grounded in dominant norms of professionalism, respectability, and appropriate femininity that privilege certain bodies, behaviours, and social positions (Heizmann and Liu, 2022; Giazitzoglu and Korede, 2023). Research shows that entrepreneurial legitimacy is not based on performance alone but is shaped by racialised, gendered, and embodied expectations about who counts as a credible entrepreneur (Giazitzoglu and Korede, 2023; Van Merriënboer, Verver and Radu-Lefebvre, 2025). Studies indicate that legitimacy is unevenly distributed, with women and racialised minorities often facing higher and more persistent thresholds of acceptance (Ogbolu, Singh and Wilbon, 2015; Van Merriënboer, Verver and Radu-Lefebvre, 2025). Such legitimacy constraints often reduce access to trust, finance, and recognition (James, Xiong and Anderson, 2022).

For instance, refugee and racialised women entrepreneurs require continual negotiation of visibility and invisibility across institutional contexts (Ranabahu, de Vries and Basharati, 2025). This demonstrates that legitimacy is frequently sustained through ongoing affective, cognitive, and relational labour that keeps entrepreneurs legible within dominant norms, while leaving underlying hierarchies intact (Moodley, April and Erbil, 2026).

The literature highlights how women are often expected to adopt masculine-coded behaviours while downplaying femininity to align with the dominant image of the entrepreneur, creating tensions between entrepreneurial identity and other gendered identity commitments (Swail and Marlow, 2018; Stead, 2017). However, recent research questions the idea that legitimacy is always achieved through masculine conformity. Some customer-focused studies suggest that qualities such as empathy, enthusiasm, and attentiveness can also enhance perceived legitimacy, particularly where customers respond positively (Javadian et al., 2021). These studies position entrepreneurial legitimacy as a relational, contested, and unevenly distributed achievement shaped by structural inequalities and navigated through identity work.

Multi-Arena Legitimacy: Market, Family, and Community: Entrepreneurship research has traditionally examined legitimacy in relation to market actors such as customers, investors, and formal institutions. More recent scholarship argues that entrepreneurial legitimacy is also negotiated within families, communities, and local social environments (Anderson and Jack, 2002; Gherardi, 2015). Research demonstrates that women and minority entrepreneurs are assessed through business performance, moral conduct, caregiving responsibilities, and alignment with community expectations (Xheneti, Karki and Madden, 2019; James, Xiong and Anderson, 2022).

Refugee women entrepreneurs often find that legitimacy must be renegotiated repeatedly as they move across institutional, community, and familial spaces, with recognition remaining conditional and reversible (Ranabahu, de Vries and Basharati, 2025). Floris and Palmas (2025) show that migrant women entrepreneurs in family businesses experience identity at the intersection of ethnicity, gender, and generation, shaping entrepreneurial trajectories in ways that cannot be captured through single-axis frameworks. Legitimacy is therefore relational and context-dependent, produced through ongoing interaction across multiple social arenas rather than formal markets alone.

Recent studies extend this literature by showing that women, particularly ethnic minority women, may experience conflicting forms of legitimacy. For example, research on Black women entrepreneurs, migrant entrepreneurs, and refugee women entrepreneurs shows that market legitimacy can coexist with limited acceptance within families or communities (Ojediran, Discua Cruz and Anderson, 2022; Ranabahu, de Vries and Basharati, 2025). Even where economic success is achieved, it may sit uneasily alongside dominant expectations around gender, respectability, and family roles (Stead, 2017; Swail and Marlow, 2018). This literature conceptualises entrepreneurial legitimacy as multi-arena, relational, and unequally distributed not a one-time achievement but an ongoing process of negotiating recognition across intersecting social contexts and power relations (James, Xiong and Anderson, 2022; Stoker et al., 2024).

6.2.3 Identity Work in Entrepreneurship

***Negotiating Legitimacy through Identity Work*:** Recent scholars move beyond documenting inequalities to examine how entrepreneurs actively respond to legitimacy challenges through identity work to secure recognition and participation (Giazitzoglu and Korede, 2023). Where legitimacy is unevenly distributed and contingent on audience recognition, identity work becomes a necessary mechanism through which entrepreneurs attempt to negotiate credibility across different social arenas (Essers et al., 2023; Ojediran, Discua Cruz and Anderson, 2022). Entrepreneurs often engage in relational and performative processes by strategically aligning with dominant norms rather than simply resisting or escaping them (Stead, 2017). To achieve recognition and be perceived as credible and professional, women may perform identities that reduce stigma and fit prevailing evaluative expectations (Giazitzoglu and Korede, 2023).

Van Merriënboer, Verver and Radu-Lefebvre (2025) show that racialised and gendered embodiment itself becomes a site of struggle, as entrepreneurs' bodies are read through dominant assumptions about who can legitimately occupy the entrepreneurial role. When embodied identities conflict with normative entrepreneurial ideals, entrepreneurs may respond through strategies of diffusion, minimisation, or selective assertion to reduce visibility or deflect scrutiny. Similar dynamics are observed among Black African immigrant entrepreneurs, where legitimacy is contingent on navigating cultural norms aligned with whiteness through compensatory performances that mitigate stigma without dismantling underlying hierarchies (Giazitzoglu and Korede, 2023).

Across these studies, identity work is shown to involve managing visibility as much as asserting identity. Entrepreneurs may alternately emphasise or downplay aspects of ethnicity, culture, or migration status depending on audience and setting (Giazitzoglu and Korede, 2023; Ranabahu, de Vries and Basharati, 2025). In some situations, invisibility functions as a protective strategy to avoid stigma or sanction, while in others, selective visibility is mobilised to access community trust, moral legitimacy, or relational support. This suggests that identity work involves a continuous process of calibration, adjusting identity performances, managing visibility, and selectively aligning with dominant expectations depending on the audience being addressed.

Strategic Identity Work and the Management of Legitimacy: Recent entrepreneurship research shows that, rather than being passive recipients of exclusion, marginalised entrepreneurs actively leverage their social positionality and lived experience as resources for engaging in entrepreneurship (Hussain, Vershinina and Carey, 2025). One prominent strategy involves mobilising ethnic identity as a source of market knowledge and relational advantage (Elo et al., 2024). Research shows that entrepreneurs draw on insider understandings of ethnic products, services, and customer needs to generate business opportunities, often by serving co-ethnic markets (Orozco, 2022). Haq et al. (2024) conceptualise this as operating within the "contingencies of ethnic culture," where cultural familiarity becomes a means

of achieving recognition and trust. In these cases, ethnic identity was strategically activated rather than passively inherited.

Entrepreneurs often draw on informal or culturally embedded skills and reframe them as assets to gain legitimacy in niche or mainstream markets (Cederberg and Villares-Varela, 2019). Identity management research can be extended beyond first-generation migrant entrepreneurs to include second-generation entrepreneurs, who often navigate both mainstream market expectations and community-based audiences. For example, Tao, Essers and Pijpers (2021) show how second-generation Chinese-origin entrepreneurs in the Netherlands negotiate intersecting ethnic, gendered, generational, and family roles, shaping distinct entrepreneurial pathways. The present essay builds on this by examining how second-generation South Asian women manage dual identities within British contexts a group that has received limited attention in the existing literature.

Bounded Agency, Identity Work, and the Limits of Legitimacy: Across the entrepreneurship literature, there is growing agreement that neither purely structural explanations nor culturalist accounts are sufficient to explain how marginalised entrepreneurs navigate legitimacy. Instead, recent work converges on a more nuanced position: entrepreneurs are active agents, but their agency is exercised within tightly bounded social, racialised, and institutional constraints (Cederberg and Villares-Varela, 2019). While performing legitimacy may grant access to resources and recognition, it can also reinforce masculine entrepreneurial norms, thereby reproducing the gendered foundations of entrepreneurship rather than transforming them (Ahl and Marlow, 2021; Essers, McAdam and Ossenkop, 2025).

Identity work is widely understood as a key mechanism through which bounded agency is enacted. Research shows that entrepreneurs engage in compensatory identity work through selective disclosure, strategic conformity, or resistance to reduce exclusion and gain recognition across different audiences (Essers et al., 2023). While such practices may reduce stigma and enable participation over time, they do not necessarily challenge the structural conditions that produce marginalisation (Xheneti, Karki and Madden, 2019; Giazitzoglu and Korede, 2023; Stoker et al., 2024).

This is particularly relevant to the present essay, as it highlights how second-generation women negotiate entrepreneurial identity within family and community settings that are often dynamic and relational. Such contexts may subtly reshape patriarchal norms while remaining grounded in them (Selamat and Endut, 2020). This process has been described as strategic (dis)obedience, where women navigate constraints by pushing boundaries without directly opposing dominant socio-cultural structures (Barragán et al., 2018). Similarly, the notion of "patriarchy in transition" highlights how women can simultaneously challenge and reproduce gender norms (Naguib and Jamali, 2015).

Existing literature recognises that legitimacy is shaped by gender, race, class, and family expectations, but these dimensions are often examined in isolation. Less is therefore known about how legitimacy and identity work are negotiated simultaneously as intersectional entrepreneurs move across market,

family, and community contexts. This gap is particularly significant for second-generation South Asian women, a group that is already institutionally integrated but continues to face legitimacy demands across multiple intersecting arenas. This essay directly addresses this gap.

6.3 Methodology

This essay adopts a qualitative approach, using semi-structured interviews to explore participants' lived experiences of negotiating entrepreneurial legitimacy across market, family, and community contexts. A detailed discussion of the overall research design, data collection, and analytical approach is provided in Chapter 3. This essay focuses specifically on how participants actively navigate and respond to structural constraints, particularly in relation to family expectations, market experiences, and entrepreneurial agency. Rather than examining exclusion alone, the analysis highlights how participants interpret and manage these constraints, revealing forms of bounded and relational agency within intersectional contexts.

Data from 17 participants were drawn on for this essay, as all had direct experience of negotiating entrepreneurial legitimacy across the contexts examined here. Data were analysed using an inductive and interpretive approach, combining case-level Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) with Gioia-style data structuring to organise emerging themes. Each interview was first analysed individually through repeated readings and manual coding to capture participants' meanings before any comparison across cases.

The analytical process followed three stages. In the first stage, each of the 17 transcripts was read multiple times with particular attention to how participants described legitimacy demands, identity work strategies, and the contexts- market, family, and community- in which these unfolded. Initial interpretive notes were made at the case level. For example, one participant stated: *"I still ask permission from my husband… It's part of our culture."* This was initially coded as cultural expectations shaping identity and was then interpretively developed into the theme of internalised intersectional scripts, showing how gender and cultural norms shaped entrepreneurial agency below the level of conscious decision-making, not simply as a rational strategy but as something absorbed through upbringing and socialisation.

In the second stage, emergent themes were developed at the individual case level, staying close to participants' own language. In the third stage, cross-case patterns were identified and organised using Gioia-style data structuring into first-order categories, second-order themes, and aggregate dimensions. The Gioia table for this essay was developed specifically in relation to RQ3's focus on legitimacy negotiation across market, family, and community contexts. Further examples showing how themes were interpreted and developed for Essay 3 are presented in Appendix D.

6.4 Findings

As shown in Table 6.1, the findings are organised around four key dimensions that capture how intersectional constraints are experienced and negotiated by participants. The first dimension focuses on how women's businesses are questioned and scrutinised in market settings, reflecting racialised and gendered expectations. The second highlights the role of family and community, where entrepreneurial activities are shaped by cultural, gendered, and religious norms. The third dimension shows how these expectations become internalised, influencing how women organise their time, roles, and responsibilities. The fourth dimension explores how participants respond by drawing on their identities in strategic ways, although their agency remains shaped by ongoing structural constraints.

Table 6.1: Gioia Data Structure (Entrepreneurial Legitimacy Negotiation)

Interview Quotes	1st Order Codes (Informant-Centred)	2nd Order Themes	Aggregate Dimensions
"Customer is being racist" (SL)	• Customer being racist	**Differential Evaluation by Market Audiences**	**Intersecting Axes of Illegitimacy: Market and Community as Sites of Racialised-Gendered Exclusion**
"Customers leave bad reviews for very small mistakes" (JR)	• Negative reviews for small mistakes		
"English people don't approach Asian businesses." (JR)	• English people do not approach Asian businesses		
"I haven't got any white people… approaching and helped me." (NB)	• No white people approached or helped her		
"Customers do not take you seriously… complain more… ask for refunds… people take advantage when they see you are an Asian woman… this happens in the market and online." (NJ)	• Customers do not take you seriously • More complaints and more refund requests • People take advantage when they see you are an Asian woman		
"it's not only white customers; sometimes it's our own community as well." (JR)	• Not only white customers, sometimes her own community too		
"My parents… refused and said it's a man's job." (RP)	• Parents said it is a man's job	**Differential Evaluation by Family and Community Audiences**	
"Being a videographer was quite a taboo career…" (SM)	• Videography seen as a taboo career		
"Stop dancing, it doesn't suit us as a family." (NB)	• Told that dancing does not suit the family		
"They thought yoga was a Hindu practice…" (DP)	• Parents thought yoga was a Hindu practice		
"Men… don't have to worry about housework…" (JR)	• Men do not have to worry about housework		
"I had to ask for permission to travel abroad" (RP)	• Needing permission to travel for work		
"Women are not taught to be financially independent…" (SB)	• Women not taught to be financially independent		
"Being a daughter in law… it's all on me." (DP)	• As a daughter-in-law, it is all on me		
"My mother used to tell me… every woman does this." (SZ)	• Told by her mother that every woman does this		

"I still ask permission from my husband. I don't even know why exactly, but I just feel like I have to, you know, it's our culture" (RP)	• Still asking her husband's permission because it is our culture	**Internalised Evaluative Standards: Judging Oneself by Familial Criteria**	**The Familial Moral Economy**
"At eight o'clock at night, when my son is asleep, so I've been doing them in the evening time once everything is done." (TK)	• Working in the evening once her son is asleep		
"To manage everything, I adjusted by leaving early in the morning" (DP)	• Leaving early in the morning to manage everything		
"Business is the best option for me. I can manage my family; I can be a housewife and a mother and also work its win-win." (RA)	• Being a housewife and a mother and also working		
"Everyone is happy… I am managing everything well, no one is compromising. I have to ..." (SL)	• Managing everything so that no one else has to compromise		
"I know my responsibilities. And obviously, my responsibility is my family above all." (TS)	• My responsibility is my family above all		
"Nobody really acknowledges how successful my business has become." (SA)	• Nobody acknowledges how successful the business has become	**Renegotiating Entrepreneurial Legitimacy through Gendered Family Role Performance**	
"People appreciated me for being a good housewife, never as a business success." (SA)	• Appreciated for being a good housewife, never for business success		
"I still think that a cultural shift needs to happen because even today…" (SB)	• A cultural shift needs to happen		
"No one cares how tired you are." (SD)	• No one cares how tired you are		
"My husband asks me not to bring such worries into the home." (SD)	• Asked not to bring work worries into the home		
"I need to create something of my own, something that embraces both Western meditations and Asian rituals." (HK)	• Creating something that combines Western meditation and Asian rituals	**Dual Identity as a Legitimacy Resource: Recognition Granted on Cultural Grounds**	**Intersectional Position as Market Resource**
I can speak Urdu and Punjabi quite fluently, so I provide therapy and assessments in those languages as well (TK)	• Providing therapy and assessments in Urdu and Punjabi		

"I helped minorities stay safe by creating PPE specifically designed for individuals with long beards and turbans." (SD)	• Designing PPE for people with long beards and turbans		
"I provide religion- and Sikh culturally based designer art and pieces nationwide… promoting my religion and heritage in my work." (SB)	• Promoting her religion and heritage through her designs		
"Most of my customers are Asian brides, but now I receive orders from white brides. I make changes to meet their needs…" (TS)	• Making changes so white brides can order too		
"Created safe space for Muslim women." (SZ)	• Creating a safe space for Muslim women		
"Mix and match fashion brand that blends Indian and Western styles" (SA) / "It's nashta café… a fusion of British and Asian taste." (JR)	• Blending Indian and Western styles • A fusion of British and Asian food		
"I understand what South Asian customers are looking for: their traditions, the colours they like, the themes. I know the culture, the ceremonies and the celebrations." (SN)	• Knowing what South Asian customers want • Knowing the traditions, the colours and the themes	**Audience-Bounded Legitimacy: Recognition Granted and Withheld on the Same Grounds**	
"Other nationalities just assume I can only be an expert in Asian events. In fact I am an expert in both. But yes, it is difficult to gain trust from other nationalities." (SN)	• Assumed to only be an expert in Asian events • Saying she is an expert in both • Hard to gain trust from other nationalities		
"I'm proving people wrong. I absolutely love it. It's not only my business. It's opening doors for other Asian women." (SM)	• Proving people wrong • Opening doors for other Asian women	**Bounded Intersectional Agency**	**Bounded Empowerment**
"I can explain it now, and I can proudly say that yoga brings you closer to your faith." (DP)	• Able to say that yoga brings you closer to your faith		
"Whereas now there's less of it being laughable…" (JN)	• Less of it being laughable, more respect		

"If …customer is being racist, …I do not want to work with anyone who does not respect me. That is my rule." (SL)	• Not working with anyone who does not respect her • That is my rule		
"Now they're happy about my success." (RP)	• Now they are happy about her success		
"My life isn't just about my husband anymore. I have so much more to achieve." (SZ)	• Life is not just about my husband anymore		
"I'm glad I'm coming out of my shell and allowing myself to shine." (SB)	• Coming out of her shell and allowing herself to shine		
"…If they (male cousins) could do it, then I can." (SL)	• If male cousins could do it, then she can		
"On a personal and financial level, I honestly feel like being a businesswoman has really helped me thrive." (DP)	• Being a businesswoman has helped her thrive		
"I am earning handsome; I hired a cleaner, so I could spend some time with the kids." (SA)	• Earning well and hiring a cleaner to spend time with the children		
"I win award last year in British Asian business… Community and family celebrate me… felt proud." (TK)	• Winning a British Asian business award • Family and community celebrating her	**Relational and Collective Empowerment**	
"Now they recognize me on the streets… I am inspiration, role model for others…" (NJ)	• Recognised on the streets • Seen as an inspiration and a role model		
"I'm able to support women who have gone through postpartum depression. Volunteering my time for it is something I do." (RA)	• Supporting women who have gone through postpartum depression • Volunteering her time		
"I offer free advice, like how to build your website using basic free tools… there are free resources for women who want to learn." (JN)	• Offering free advice on building a website • Free resources for women		
"I'm very much open to empowering women… I do a lot of campaigns that empower women as well." (TS)	• Running campaigns to empower women		
"I'm just on the mission to make women believe that you have to look up to	• On a mission to make women believe in themselves		

yourself so that you can look after others around you." (SZ)			
"Now, people know me, women recognize my work… feels amazing. I've achieved so much." (JN)	• Women recognise her work • Feeling she has achieved so much		
"I aim to inspire, influence, and motivate others to believe in themselves." (SD)	• Aiming to inspire and motivate others to believe in themselves		

6.4.1 Intersecting Axes of Illegitimacy: Market and Community as Sites of Racialised-Gendered Exclusion

As discussed in Essay 1, participants reflected on how gendered and racialised norms shaped their experiences in employment and career contexts. Building on this, their narratives in this essay further illustrate how these constraints intersect and, in some cases, become more pronounced in entrepreneurial settings. Gendered and racialised constraints do not simply disappear in entrepreneurship; instead, entrepreneurship becomes another site where legitimacy is continuously negotiated and contested, reinforcing the thesis's argument that conditional inclusion follows intersectional entrepreneurs across professional domains.

Differential Evaluation by Market Audiences: Performance Judged Against a Higher Standard

Participants described these constraints as layered and intersecting, particularly as they started their ventures. They highlighted the need to negotiate legitimacy on several levels at once: as small businesses, as women, and as Asian women in the market. Several participants described feeling illegitimate because of their Asian identities and continued to experience pressure to appear credible and acceptable to customers. JR explained that she was judged both for being a small business owner and for being an Asian woman:

"I experience people judging you more harshly. Customers leave bad reviews for very small mistakes, things they would not expect from big companies, even though I am providing good quality food. And it's not only white customers; sometimes it's our own community as well." (JR)

This last observation is particularly significant. Existing literature on ethnic minority entrepreneurship has tended to treat ethnic communities primarily as sources of support, providing trust, social capital, and co-ethnic networks (Xheneti, Karki and Madden, 2019). The data here suggest something more complex: for intersectional entrepreneurs, the community is simultaneously a resource and a legitimacy regime, providing social capital on one hand while enforcing gendered and cultural norms of respectability on the other. Women navigated racialised challenges in mainstream markets while simultaneously experiencing a distinct layer of scrutiny as women running businesses within their own community contexts:

"Running a small Asian business as a woman often means that customers do not take you seriously. I know difficult customers exist everywhere; I experience more complaints and more requests for refunds… people take advantage when they see you are an Asian woman, both in the marketplace and in online spaces." (NJ)

JR and NJ both felt that they were held to higher standards by customers. While they were able to attract clients, they perceived that mistakes resulted in stronger reactions, more complaints, and greater

demands for refunds. This was not a question of competence but of how their work was evaluated once customers had already engaged with their businesses.

These experiences had consequences that extended beyond participants' personal feelings. Negative reviews could affect a business's reputation, visibility, and ability to attract future customers, while refund requests created direct financial costs. As a result, the pressures NJ described influenced not only how she experienced entrepreneurship but also how her business performed. Importantly, these challenges did not take the form of explicit discrimination. Instead, participants felt they were judged more critically and given less room for error.

Similar patterns appeared in physical business spaces and online, in comments, reviews, and other digital interactions. HK, who combined Western wellbeing practices with Indian yoga, continued to face questioning from customers in online comments and experienced criticism from within her own community for how she expressed herself and presented her work.

These experiences show that legitimacy deficits are not confined to mainstream white markets. They are reproduced within South Asian community spaces too, albeit through different evaluative criteria: moral respectability and cultural alignment rather than racial difference. Entrepreneurial adaptation alone does not resolve underlying inequalities. Instead, participants remained evaluated through gendered and racialised assumptions, both as women and as South Asian entrepreneurs, requiring continuous identity work across multiple arenas simultaneously.

Differential Evaluation by Family and Community Audiences: Occupation Judged Against Moral Standards

While participants reflected on legitimacy within mainstream market settings, family and community emerged as another important arena in which legitimacy was negotiated. Here, entrepreneurial choices were often evaluated through cultural, religious, and gendered expectations rather than economic performance. These expectations shaped how family members and the wider community assessed women's entrepreneurial activities, creating standards that sometimes conflicted with those operating in the market.

Participants described how entrepreneurship was not always viewed as an equally legitimate option for women. Within some South Asian family contexts, women were positioned as secondary earners and expected to remain financially dependent on male relatives. SB reflected on how these assumptions influenced women's confidence and sense of possibility:

"Women are not taught to be financially independent. We're trained to rely on the men in our family… your father, your brother, or your husband. We're disempowered from believing that we can earn like men." (SB)

SB's account highlights how gendered expectations shaped beliefs about financial independence before women entered entrepreneurship. Rather than describing direct restrictions, she emphasised how dependence on male family members was normalised, influencing how women viewed their own economic potential.

These expectations intersected with wider cultural, religious, and community norms. Participants often felt that the legitimacy of their entrepreneurial activities was judged not only by business outcomes but also by whether the occupation itself aligned with community expectations. NB described this in relation to dance:

"My grandparents used to hate me dancing. When I chose dancing, they would ask, 'Why are you dancing? You know this is not right.' My uncle used to say, 'Stop dancing, it doesn't suit us as a family.'" (NB)

NB's experience illustrates how entrepreneurial legitimacy was shaped by ideas of respectability. Relatives were less concerned with the quality or success of her work than with whether dancing was considered an appropriate occupation for a woman from her background. Similar concerns were raised by participants working in areas such as beauty, yoga, and dance, where legitimacy was often negotiated through cultural expectations around femininity and respectable work.

Religious identity introduced another set of expectations that were separate from both business success and cultural respectability. For some participants, the issue was not whether the business was profitable or socially acceptable, but whether it aligned with religious beliefs and practices. DP, for example, described how her parents opposed her learning yoga because they associated it with Hinduism:

"My parents weren't too happy for me learning yoga because they thought I was going to convert to Hinduism, and they believed yoga was a Hindu practice." (DP)

The objection here was about religion rather than occupational status. DP's parents were not asking whether teaching yoga was a respectable job. They were asking whether a Muslim woman could practise it without compromising her faith. The legitimacy at stake was religious, and it was withheld on grounds that no business result could address. The same structure appears in Section 6.4.2, where DP later describes yoga as bringing her closer to her faith. That reframing worked because it answered the objection on its own terms.

SM's experience highlights that what changed was not the individual but the occupation itself. Although her skills and qualifications remained constant, community perceptions shifted once she moved into a different type of work.

"I am from the Sikh religion, and being a videographer was quite a taboo career. Going from being a trainee lawyer, which is a highly encouraged career, to something completely different… it was a shock for my community and family." (SM)

SM's experience highlights how legitimacy was attached to certain occupations rather than individual capability. Although she remained equally qualified and ambitious, moving from law to videography disrupted community expectations about what was considered a respectable career. The reaction she described reflected expectations about which professions were seen as desirable, prestigious, and appropriate.

Taken together, the accounts of NB, DP, and SM demonstrate that community legitimacy was evaluated through multiple standards, including respectability, religious permissibility, and occupational status. These standards were applied by different but overlapping audiences, such as parents, grandparents, in-laws, and the wider community. Unlike market evaluations, which were often linked to performance and business outcomes, community evaluations were shaped by moral, cultural, and religious expectations. As a result, participants navigated several systems of judgement simultaneously, with recognition in one context not necessarily translating into recognition in another.

Alongside these broader community expectations, close family relationships also shaped entrepreneurial experiences. Participants frequently described the influence of parents and in-laws, particularly within joint family arrangements, where women's entrepreneurial work was often assessed alongside expectations regarding domestic responsibilities. DP explained:

"Being a daughter-in-law comes with its own pressures. When I return from work, I'm still expected to handle everything in the kitchen, cooking, serving, washing up, and cleaning. It's all on me. Meanwhile, my husband, who also worked all day, is seen as having had a harder time, as my in-laws would say, 'Poor guy worked all day." (DP)

DP's experience shows that family expectations prioritised her role as a daughter-in-law over her role as a business owner. Despite working the same hours as her husband, her labour received less recognition because she continued to be judged primarily against domestic responsibilities rather than entrepreneurial achievement. Participants also compared their experiences with husbands who run their own businesses, describing how they managed both business and domestic responsibilities while their husbands did not face the same pressures or guilt. JR noted:

"I think men have less pressure at home, and they don't get the 'mum guilt'. With men, they don't really worry in the same way." (JR)

JR's observation points to the emotional dimensions of these expectations. The issue was not simply workload, but the internalised responsibility women felt towards family and caregiving roles. This contributed to an ongoing negotiation between entrepreneurial aspirations and family expectations. This

reflects a similar process to that discussed in Section 6.4.2, where participants often evaluated themselves against family expectations that had become deeply internalised over time.

Overall, participants' accounts demonstrate that family and community were not neutral contexts but active sites in which entrepreneurial legitimacy was constructed, challenged, and negotiated. Gendered, cultural, and religious expectations shaped how entrepreneurial activities were understood and evaluated, creating additional demands that extended beyond business performance alone.

6.4.2 Navigating the Intersectional Moral Economy of Family

The findings reveal that family operated as a legitimacy-conferring audience, applying a standard distinct from those used by markets and communities. Family members judged participants first as daughters, wives, mothers and daughters-in-law, and only second as entrepreneurs, and where the two standards conflicted, the first prevailed. Recognition was therefore available, but it was granted for the successful performance of familial roles rather than for business achievement. Gaining it involved continuous negotiation and emotional effort. This identity work shaped not only how others evaluated participants but how they evaluated themselves, as familial criteria became part of how they judged their own success.

Internalised Evaluative Standards: Judging Oneself by Familial Criteria

A key pattern emerging from the data is how deeply participants had internalised expectations about what it means to be a "good woman" and a "good mother." These expectations were not always experienced as direct restrictions. Instead, they were learned through family life and everyday experiences, gradually becoming part of how women understood their roles and responsibilities. SZ reflected on how these beliefs were passed from one generation to the next:

"My mother used to tell me, 'You are not the only one. Every woman does this, so just do it. Why make a scene out of small things?'" (SZ)

This highlights an important intergenerational dimension to second-generation women's entrepreneurial experiences, one that distinguishes them from first-generation migrants and that the existing literature has rarely examined in depth. Expectations, constraints and, in some cases, trauma are transmitted across generations, shaping not only what these women believe about their own capabilities, but what they feel entitled to pursue. Women described growing up in environments where gender roles were clearly defined. Norms were shaped through their parents' experiences of migration, settlement, and community belonging that had been passed down and internalised as part of everyday family life. Identity work for second-generation intersectional entrepreneurs is therefore shaped not only by present structural conditions but by inherited social expectations that have become part of how they understand themselves, setting limits on confidence, ambition, and perceived entitlement that operate well before any external audience evaluates them.

NJ captured this clearly:

"She just gets it, you know? The way we've grown up as South Asian women; it's not just our own experiences, it comes from what our parents went through as well. A lot of that gets passed down, and it really affects your confidence. She understands that whole generational side of things, even stuff like being picked on at school because of how we look." (NJ)

As discussed in Essay 2, these dynamics were also evident within networking spaces, where women openly discussed similar struggles and recognised these influences in each other's experiences, suggesting that intergenerational transmission of expectations is a shared and widely recognised feature of second-generation South Asian women's lives, not simply an individual experience.

Participants' narratives also show how entrepreneurship was framed as compatible with family responsibilities. For many, starting a business was seen as a practical way to balance work and home roles, particularly after becoming mothers. Rather than directly challenging these expectations, women shaped their entrepreneurial choices around family priorities, placing these responsibilities at the centre of decision-making. As TS explained:

"I know my responsibilities. And obviously, my responsibility is my family above all." (TS)

TS frames family responsibilities as an unquestioned priority rather than a personal choice. This suggests that family expectations had become internalised over time, influencing how she understood her role and responsibilities. As a result, these norms continued to shape decisions even when they were not being actively enforced by others. This was evident in how participants organised their time around caregiving responsibilities:

"At eight o'clock at night, when my son is asleep, I've been doing them in the evening time, once everything is done." (TK)

This reflects how participants had internalised the expectation that women should manage multiple roles without complaint. Maintaining family harmony and fulfilling domestic responsibilities becomes central to how women evaluate their own success, even while running a business. As SL expressed:

"Everyone is happy: my kids because I'm there for them, my husband because I manage the kids, home, and his family. I am not complaining and am happy doing all things, but I also believe that as a woman, you must manage a lot." (SL)

SL's reflection suggests that family legitimacy was closely linked to meeting the needs of others. She evaluates her success through the happiness of her children, husband, and in-laws, reflecting how care and family responsibilities were prioritised. By describing these expectations as something women "must" manage, she presents them as normalised obligations rather than externally imposed demands.

Across these accounts, entrepreneurship was legitimated to the family audience by demonstrating that it did not displace the familial role. Women remained "good" wives, mothers, and daughters, rather than being framed primarily as a source of individual fulfilment. This dynamic is particularly visible in practices of permission-seeking. Several participants described seeking approval from husbands or in-laws before making business-related decisions. RP explained:

"You know, every time I travel for a client makeup booking, usually my clients are in Dubai, India, Saudi. I still ask permission from my husband. I don't even know why exactly, but I just feel like I have to, you know, it's our culture." (RP)

RP's description suggests that family expectations continued to influence entrepreneurial decisions despite her business success. Although she regularly travelled abroad for work, she still felt responsible for seeking her husband's approval. The fact that she could not fully explain this practice, beyond describing it as part of her culture, indicates how deeply these expectations had become embedded. This highlights how legitimacy within the family was maintained not only through entrepreneurial success but also through adherence to relational and gendered norms.

Interestingly, these practices were not always described as restrictive. Instead, many participants framed them as expressions of respect and cultural responsibility. For many, the ideal of the "good woman" shapes how they acted, but also the obligations they felt and the limits they placed on themselves. Entrepreneurial identity was therefore not constructed in opposition to these expectations but negotiated alongside them.

Renegotiating Entrepreneurial Legitimacy through Gendered Family Role Performance

Although participants remained shaped by traditional gendered expectations, their accounts also show an ongoing process of reflection and renegotiation. Women increasingly questioned the idea that entrepreneurial success alone was enough for recognition. Instead, their experiences show that their success continued to be judged through how well they managed family roles alongside their businesses. SA reflected on how her success was understood within her community, despite earning more than her husband:

"I earn more than my husband, but whenever they mention me, it's always about how I balance everything or manage the family side of things. Nobody really acknowledges how successful my business has become." (SA)

SA's experience illustrates how entrepreneurial success was often reframed through family expectations. Although her business achievements were visible and significant, recognition centred on how well she balanced family responsibilities rather than on her accomplishments as an entrepreneur. This suggests that legitimacy within the family continued to be tied to gendered roles, even when women achieved considerable business success.

Similarly, participants described how their achievements were evaluated less in terms of business success and more in terms of their ability to manage childcare, household responsibilities, and family expectations. Financial success alone was not enough to gain recognition. Women continued to be assessed through gendered roles within the family, illustrating how legitimacy in community contexts operates through a different evaluative logic than market legitimacy. However, some women openly questioned these expectations while still navigating them in practice. SB expressed frustration with the continued expectation that women should prioritise domestic roles:

"I still think that a cultural shift needs to happen because even today, there are still expectations for women to just be homemakers." (SB)

SB's reflection highlights that these expectations were viewed as cultural rather than personal. While she recognised and questioned the idea that women should be homemakers, she also acknowledged the persistence of these norms. This suggests that awareness alone was not enough to change how women were evaluated, as broader cultural expectations continued to shape perceptions of women's roles and entrepreneurial ambitions. Even when questioning these norms, many women continued to perform expected family roles in everyday life. As SD explained:

"When you are at home, you have to be a wife and a mother. No one cares how tired you are. I just forget about my business. My husband asks me not to bring such worries into the home." (SD)

SD's experience suggests that entrepreneurship was not always recognised as an important part of her identity within the family. When she returned home, her responsibilities as a wife and mother took priority, while business concerns were expected to remain separate from family life. This created a clear boundary between her entrepreneurial and family roles. Unlike the market, where participants were evaluated on their business performance, family recognition was tied more closely to fulfilling relational and caregiving responsibilities

This reflects how participants negotiated their roles rather than fully rejecting them. Maintaining family harmony often required women to continue fulfilling domestic expectations, even when they recognised them as unequal or limiting. In cases where participants challenged these norms, consequences followed. SM's decision to pursue videography strained her relationships with family and community, showing how family relationships could operate as mechanisms of social control that limited the extent to which women could depart from established gender roles.

These findings are reinforced by public accounts in which women described learning from an early age not to be too visible, outspoken, or attention-seeking (Appendix B3). The similarity between these accounts and the interview data suggests that constraints on confidence and self-presentation were often embedded through socialisation processes that come before entrepreneurial or professional experiences.

Furthermore, participants described the personal cost of managing these competing demands. Several women spoke about feeling emotionally, physically, and mentally exhausted as they balanced business demands alongside childcare and household labour. Yet these pressures were frequently normalised and framed as an expected aspect of womanhood and family life. Participants did not simply comply with gendered expectations; they renegotiated them. They constructed entrepreneurial identities that stayed socially legitimate within family and community.

These experiences show that family and business were evaluated according to different standards. Within families, recognition was often linked to care, responsibility, and the fulfilment of gendered roles, whereas entrepreneurial settings emphasised business performance and achievement. Because these forms of recognition were not easily transferable, participants were required to negotiate their legitimacy across multiple contexts, each with its own expectations and measures of success.

6.4.3 Strategic Mobilisation of Intersectional Position as Market Resource

This dimension examines how market audiences shaped entrepreneurial legitimacy. Participants' ethnic and racial identities created opportunities in some market contexts while creating challenges in others, often at the same time. As a result, women made careful decisions about how they presented different aspects of their identity to different audiences. In some situations, shared ethnic identities helped build trust, credibility, and customer relationships. In others, the same identity markers led to assumptions about competence or professionalism. The key issue was therefore not simply gaining customers, but how recognition was granted or withheld across different market audiences. Participants were required to continually navigate these contrasting expectations, adjusting how they presented themselves in response to different forms of evaluation.

Dual Identity as a Legitimacy Resource: Recognition Granted on Cultural Grounds

A recurrent theme concerned how participants mobilised their British-South Asian identities to establish legitimacy in entrepreneurial contexts. For many women, aspects of identity that had been questioned, overlooked, or undervalued in organisational settings became sources of credibility, expertise, and market recognition within their businesses. HK, for example, reflected on being asked to keep cultural practices outside professional settings. Rather than abandoning these aspects of herself, she described how this experience motivated her to establish a business where she could express her identity on her own terms:

"I tried to work with what some Western institutions were saying, and so I did leave some stuff out. But that gave me even more fuel to think, 'I need to create something of my own', something that embraces both Western meditations and Asian rituals." (HK)

Similarly, TK described how her multilingual skills and cultural knowledge were undervalued within healthcare settings. In response, she established her own business offering services in multiple languages:

"I'm a multi-level speech therapist. I can speak Urdu and Punjabi quite fluently, so I provide therapy and assessments in those languages as well." (TK)

Other participants described building ventures that explicitly blended cultural styles. SA explained that her fashion business was intentionally designed as a fusion of Indian and Western aesthetics, positioning cultural hybridity as a defining feature of her brand:

"The business I own is called Segrahi, and it's a mix-and-match fashion brand that blends Indian and Western styles." (SA)

Across these accounts, entrepreneurship provided a setting in which forms of knowledge and identity that had previously received limited recognition became sources of legitimacy. Rather than setting these aspects of themselves aside, participants incorporated them directly into their businesses. What had been marginal within organisational settings became part of the value proposition through which they established credibility with customers and communities.

For some participants, legitimacy was built through addressing needs they understood because of their own cultural and religious experiences. Drawing on their knowledge of community practices and challenges, they identified opportunities that mainstream providers had often overlooked.

"I helped minorities stay safe by creating PPE specifically designed for individuals with long beards and turbans." (SD)

SD's account illustrates how cultural and community knowledge functioned as a source of entrepreneurial legitimacy. Because she understood the practical challenges faced by individuals with long beards and turbans, she recognised a need that had received limited attention elsewhere. Her credibility came not only from producing a solution but from understanding the community she was serving

A similar pattern was visible in public accounts, where entrepreneurs described building their cultural background directly into their products and services rather than setting it aside (Appendix B3). This suggests that the strategic mobilisation of identity documented here extends beyond this sample and reflects a broader entrepreneurial practice among South Asian women.

Participants also described using cultural knowledge as a form of expertise that generated legitimacy within specific market segments. SN explained how her understanding of South Asian traditions influenced customer perceptions of her event décor business

"I have both kinds of customers. But I understand what South Asian customers are looking for: their traditions, the colours they like, the themes. That is why South Asian customers come to me. I know the culture, the ceremonies and the celebrations." (SN)

SN's cultural knowledge became a source of market legitimacy. Customers viewed her as credible because she understood customs, expectations, and practices that were difficult to acquire through technical training alone. In this context, ethnicity functioned not simply as an identity marker but as evidence of relevant expertise. However, the same visibility that generated legitimacy with one audience could limit legitimacy with another:

"Because I do mostly South Asian business, and on my page, it is mostly South Asian work, other nationalities just assume I can only be an expert in Asian events. In fact, I am an expert in both. But yes, it is difficult to gain trust from other nationalities." (SN)

For SN, cultural visibility simultaneously created opportunities and constraints. The same identity markers that established trust among South Asian customers led some other customers to assume that her expertise was limited to a single market. Her competence was not questioned outright, but its scope was defined by assumptions attached to her background.

The experiences of TS, JR, and RA reflected a similar pattern. Cultural knowledge, transnational connections, and hybrid identities enabled participants to establish legitimacy with some customers while creating barriers with others. Recognition therefore depended not only on what participants could do, but also on who was evaluating them.

Taken together, these accounts demonstrate that entrepreneurial legitimacy was negotiated differently across market audiences. Cultural knowledge, multilingual ability, religious understanding, and transnational experience became valuable resources through which participants established trust and credibility. However, this legitimacy was audience-dependent. The same characteristics that generated recognition among some customers could restrict recognition among others. Participants therefore engaged in ongoing identity work, strategically deciding when to foreground, adapt, or downplay aspects of their identities in response to different audiences. Rather than producing stable legitimacy, the mobilisation of intersectional identities generated a form of legitimacy that was conditional and bounded by the expectations of those evaluating it.

6.4.4 Partial Empowerment Within Persistent Intersectional Structure: The Ongoing, Unresolved Identity Work

The final dimension focuses on what intersectional entrepreneurs believed they had gained through entrepreneurship and how these gains remained shaped by wider structural conditions. Entrepreneurial success was experienced as meaningful, yet its relationship with family, community, and gendered expectations remained complex and often contradictory. Empowerment and constraint did not exist

separately but operated simultaneously within women's entrepreneurial lives, consistent with the essay's conceptualisation of empowerment as partial, conditional, and context-dependent.

Bounded Intersectional Agency

Participants described how they exercised forms of agency within their businesses, even when facing racist or hostile customer interactions. While these women could not always avoid such experiences, they were able to maintain control over certain aspects of their business practices. Some chose not to engage with racist customers, limited their interaction with negative reviews, or disabled comment sections to protect themselves. SL described how she managed racialised customer behaviour by setting clear boundaries:

"If I feel that a customer is being racist, I simply avoid them. I do not work with them. I do not want to work with anyone who disrespects me. That is my rule." (SL)

SL's account shows how entrepreneurship provided greater autonomy in responding to discrimination. Rather than continuing relationships with customers she perceived as racist, she chose to withdraw from them. This enabled her to maintain personal boundaries and self-respect, but it also involved sacrificing potential business opportunities. Her experience highlights that agency was available, although exercising it could carry financial costs.

Participants identified economic, social, psychological, and emotional independence as key outcomes of their entrepreneurship. Financial empowerment carried significance beyond income alone: earning money provided legitimacy, visibility, and a sense of freedom in decision-making. SA described how her earnings enabled her to hire support for domestic tasks, creating space for time with her children:

"I am earning handsome, I hired a cleaner, so I could spend some time with the kids." (SA)

SA's experience shows that business income helped ease some domestic pressures, allowing her to outsource household tasks and spend more time with her children. Yet responsibility for managing the home still rested with her. Entrepreneurship therefore increased her flexibility, but it did not fully alter the gendered expectations that shaped family life. Participants also reflected on psychological shifts linked to entrepreneurship, including increased confidence and the ability to challenge personal and social limitations. SZ described how starting a business after her divorce reshaped her sense of self beyond marital identity:

"My life isn't just about my husband anymore. I have so much more to achieve." (SZ)

SZ's reflection illustrates a form of partial empowerment. Entrepreneurship did not remove family responsibilities or expectations, but it created an additional source of identity and achievement. Her account suggests that the change was not a rejection of existing roles, but a shift in how much space those roles occupied within her life and sense of self.

Participants also described using entrepreneurial success to challenge negative assumptions about their careers and business choices. However, recognition was often secured by demonstrating value in ways that family and community audiences already accepted, rather than by changing the standards against which they were judged. RP reflected on how her father's views changed as her business became successful:

"From my father's perspective, all makeup artists were male… now they're happy about my success." (RP)

In RP's case, business success helped overcome earlier concerns about the suitability of her work. Her father initially viewed makeup artistry as an inappropriate career for a woman, but commercial success provided evidence that was difficult to dismiss. Recognition followed, yet it remained dependent on a form of achievement that her family already valued. DP described a different process:

"I can explain it now, and I can proudly say that yoga brings you closer to your faith." (DP)

Rather than relying on business success alone, DP reframed her work in ways that aligned with religious values. By presenting yoga as something that supported rather than challenged faith, she was able to make her business more acceptable within her community. This illustrates how legitimacy could be negotiated through reinterpretation, allowing entrepreneurial activities to fit more closely with existing cultural and religious expectations.

Taken together, RP and DP demonstrate two ways in which participants gained recognition. Some achieved legitimacy through visible business success, while others reframed their work using cultural or religious language that resonated with community values. In both cases, recognition was achieved by engaging with existing standards rather than fundamentally challenging them. This helps explain why empowerment was often partial rather than complete. Women expanded what was possible for themselves, but the criteria through which their work was judged largely remained unchanged.

At the same time, participants varied in how they responded to these expectations. For some, entrepreneurial success created opportunities to challenge wider assumptions and open new possibilities for other women. SM explained:

"I'm proving people wrong. I absolutely love it. It's not only my business. It's opening doors for other Asian women." (SM)

SM framed her success as a challenge to existing expectations. Her account suggests that entrepreneurial achievement could have effects beyond individual recognition, providing visible examples of alternative career paths for other South Asian women.

Some participants described gradual shifts in family and community attitudes. Several women described a shift from being viewed as "laughable" to being treated with respect. Success operated as a communicative act, demonstrating a legitimacy that could not easily be asserted verbally:

"Whereas now there's less of it being laughable, but more of having a bit of respect." (JN)

Importantly, these forms of agency were not unbounded. Participants' accounts made it clear that entrepreneurial success did not dismantle the gendered and racialised norms that shaped their lives. Rather than transforming the conditions they navigated, these women navigated them strategically, achieving change in their own lives while remaining accountable to ongoing expectations. Empowerment was therefore not absolute but partial, negotiated, and continuously maintained.

Relational and Collective Empowerment

One significant theme is how intersectional entrepreneurs collectively and relationally support one another, rather than defining growth and success as purely individual achievement. Several participants defined success in terms of visibility, recognition from other women, and mutual support as well as economic outcomes.

Participants described collective engagement in several registers: role modelling, public visibility, the sharing of practical resources, and community care. What links these activities is that each converts individual standing into something that can be extended to others. Several women used social media platforms and public events to speak about their experiences, and several offered guidance and free resources to women starting. The more analytically revealing accounts, however, are those in which support was directed at experiences the women themselves had been through.

Beyond visibility and mentoring, some participants framed entrepreneurship as a form of community care. RA described supporting women facing emotional and psychological challenges:

"I'm able to support women who have gone through post-partum depression. So, I'm really attached to that charity. Volunteering my time for it is something I do." (RA)

RA's experience highlights that empowerment was not always expressed through independence from community expectations. Instead, entrepreneurship provided a platform from which she could support other women and bring attention to issues that were often marginalised or silenced. In this sense, empowerment involved gaining a recognised voice within the community and using that position to create support and awareness for others.

Over time, participants began to see themselves and be seen by others as role models. NB shared how recognition from the community made her feel proud and valued:

"Now people recognise me, even on the streets. They've seen me in magazines, and it makes me feel proud. I see myself as an inspiration and a role model for others, and people now invite me for interviews to share my story." (NB)

NB's account suggests that entrepreneurial success created a form of social recognition that extended beyond business performance. Through increased visibility and public recognition, she came to see herself as someone who could inspire and support others. This reflects a broader shift from being constrained by community expectations to becoming a visible example of what other women can achieve. In this sense, entrepreneurship provided not only economic opportunities but also a platform from which participants could influence how women's roles and aspirations were understood within their communities.

These findings further show that intersectional entrepreneurs actively used their entrepreneurial platforms to gain recognition and assert legitimacy. Through social media visibility, community engagement, and participation in events such as awards and media features, they were not only building businesses but also performing legitimacy in public spaces. It reinforces how legitimacy is not solely an individual achievement but is relational and collective, emerging through recognition within networks as well as broader entrepreneurial audiences.

This relational quality of empowerment was echoed in public accounts describing women in business as “lifting each other” rather than succeeding individually (Appendix B3), reinforcing the essay's argument that empowerment for these women is collective and relational rather than a purely individual outcome.

Taken together, these accounts describe empowerment that is real in its effects and limited in its reach. These women changed their financial circumstances, their standing in their families, and their visibility in public life. What they did not change were the standards by which they are judged. Recognition was earned by meeting existing expectations rather than by replacing them, which is why it had to be maintained and could not be assumed. Partial empowerment is therefore not a weaker form of empowerment but a different outcome, in which agency is exercised within a system of judgement that remains in place.

6.5 Discussion

This essay advances debates on entrepreneurship, gender, and identity by examining how second-generation South Asian women negotiate entrepreneurial legitimacy within intersecting racialised, gendered, family, and community-based structures. Rather than positioning entrepreneurship as a straightforward route to empowerment, the findings show that it functions as an additional site of intersectional identity work, where legitimacy must be continuously negotiated across multiple social

arenas. Entrepreneurship does not resolve existing inequalities. Instead, it reorganises how they are encountered, managed, and lived.

Each arena applies its own standard. The market judge's performance, but against a stricter threshold, and cultural knowledge that wins co-ethnic customers also limits how other customers read the same expertise. Family judges the performance of familial roles first, so business achievement counts only when it can be described in those terms. Community judges' respectability, religious permissibility, and occupational status, and does so before any performance has taken place. That's also why the process never settles, since recognition earned in one arena does not transfer to another. Inherited bounds sit over all three arenas because the expectations passed on by the first generation were already in place before any audience began to evaluate these women.

The outcome can therefore be understood as partial empowerment, where meaningful gains occur without fundamentally changing the standards through which inclusion and legitimacy are determined. Within organisational contexts, formal inclusion coexisted with continued exclusion from recognition and opportunities for progression. Similarly, within entrepreneurial support hubs, access did not always lead to a full sense of belonging. In entrepreneurship, business success did not remove these tensions, as women continued to be evaluated across market, family, and community contexts, each of which could impose different and sometimes conflicting expectations of legitimacy. Entrepreneurship, therefore, does not necessarily overcome conditional inclusion but shifts the contexts in which it is experienced and negotiated.

Intersectionality and the Structural Conditions of Legitimacy: Intersectional scholarship has long argued that gendered experiences of work and entrepreneurship cannot be understood independently of race, ethnicity, religion, and family positioning (Ozasir Kacar, Essers and Benschop, 2023; Onoshakpor, Cunningham and Gammie, 2025). The findings of this essay reinforce this perspective by demonstrating that legitimacy constraints persist across entrepreneurial contexts, even when women exit organisational employment and enter self-employment. Consistent with research on racialised legitimacy and entrepreneurial visibility (Ojediran, Discua Cruz and Anderson, 2022; Essers, McAdam and Ossenkop, 2025; Van Merriënboer, Verver and Radu-Lefebvre, 2025), markets did not function as neutral or meritocratic spaces. Instead, women encountered legitimacy constraints shaped by racialised market expectations, community norms, and family-structured gender roles.

This essay extends intersectional analyses by positioning family and community as legitimacy regimes, rather than treating them as passive background influences. Entrepreneurial legitimacy was not shaped solely through customer recognition or business performance, but also through family constructions of respectability and community expectations of what constitutes a "good woman" and an acceptable business. The analysis responds to calls for relational, culturally grounded approaches that treat context as an active site of evaluation (Baker and Welter, 2018; Welter, Baker and Wirsching, 2019). This is

also consistent with the thesis's argument developed across Essays 1 and 2, that conditional inclusion follows intersectional entrepreneurs across professional domains, taking new forms in new contexts while reproducing the same fundamental structure of partial recognition and ongoing identity work.

The intergenerational dimension of these findings is also significant. For second-generation South Asian women, legitimacy constraints are not only encountered in the present; they are also transmitted from first-generation parental experiences through socialisation, shaping confidence, perceived entitlement, and self-imposed limitations in ways that compound the structural constraints these women face as intersectional entrepreneurs. This suggests that legitimacy negotiation for this group begins earlier than existing literature acknowledges, before any market interaction or entrepreneurial decision, shaped by the inherited social expectations absorbed through upbringing.

Identity Work Across Competing Legitimacy Arenas: Building on these structural conditions, the findings suggest that entrepreneurial identity work unfolded across multiple, overlapping legitimacy arenas rather than a single domain. Rather than being a one-off achievement, legitimacy required ongoing negotiation across family, ethnic, and market contexts, where recognition in one arena could strengthen or undermine standing in another (Suchman, 1995).

One key form of identity work centred on family-based legitimacy, where participants framed entrepreneurship as compatible with caregiving roles and moral responsibility. Rather than rejecting traditional expectations, they reworked them, positioning their ventures as family-centred and ethically grounded. This reflects how agency operates through negotiation within constraint (Alkhaled and Berglund, 2018; Calás et al., 2009). A second form of identity work involved ethnic positioning and cultural visibility. Participants adjusted how their South Asian identity was presented depending on the audience; while cultural identity generated opportunities in co-ethnic markets, it also exposed them to stereotyping in mainstream spaces, requiring audience-specific identity work (Orozco, 2022; Haq et al., 2024).

Across these arenas, identity work involved continuous calibration. Participants drew on both South Asian and British identities to shape their entrepreneurial practices, often combining cultural knowledge with market demands. These findings demonstrate that legitimacy is relational and negotiated rather than fixed (Suchman, 1995; Radu-Lefebvre et al., 2021), and that identity work is audience-specific, continuous, and structurally conditioned rather than individually strategic.

It is also notable that even where legitimacy was partially achieved, in markets, in communities, through business success, belonging remained uncertain. The pattern identified in Essay 2 within entrepreneurial support hubs operated here across the full range of social arenas: intersectional entrepreneurs could be recognised as credible without feeling genuinely accepted. Legitimacy and belonging are therefore distinct but interconnected, and both must be actively constructed rather than assumed.

Entrepreneurship Beyond the Empowerment Narrative: Entrepreneurship is frequently framed as a route to independence and empowerment for women from minoritised backgrounds. The findings of this essay support a more cautious and contextually grounded reading. As defined in the introduction to this essay, empowerment here refers to partial, conditional, and context-dependent forms of agency, shaped through ongoing identity work within persistent systems of inequality (Stead, 2017; Thielemann and Atagan, 2025; Verduijn and Essers, 2013). Rather than providing a straightforward pathway to autonomy, entrepreneurship emerged as a space where intersectional entrepreneurs had to continuously negotiate legitimacy, reclaim professional value, and manage identity within enduring structural constraints.

Entrepreneurial success did not remove racialised or gendered scrutiny. Instead, it introduced new expectations and pressures, requiring women to continually demonstrate credibility, respectability, and moral alignment across different social settings. Agency remains conditional and constrained, often reinforcing existing power structures rather than transforming them. This essay conceptualises this process as bounded legitimacy negotiation, through which second-generation South Asian women managed recognition and respectability while remaining embedded within family expectations and community norms. The concept builds on existing accounts of bounded agency (Cederberg and Villares-Varela, 2019; Xheneti, Karki and Madden, 2019) by demonstrating that the bounds of agency for intersectional entrepreneurs are not only institutional but intimately social, shaped by family relationships, community obligations, and the ongoing need to maintain respectability across intersecting legitimacy regimes.

Bounded Agency and the Limits of Resistance: The findings move beyond binary framings of women's entrepreneurship as either resistance or compliance. Intersectional entrepreneurs exercised agency through entrepreneurship, generating income, setting boundaries, building confidence, and reclaiming aspects of cultural and racial identity. However, this agency remained shaped by persistent structural constraints. Rather than directly confronting dominant norms, participants navigated them through selective adaptation and ongoing identity work. In this context, accommodation functioned not as passivity but as a strategic response to inequality, supporting feminist perspectives that position negotiation as a form of agency (Baker and Welter, 2018).

A further complication requires acknowledgement. Participants did not uniformly experience these expectations as impositions. Several described practices such as seeking a husband's agreement before travelling for work as expressions of respect and cultural responsibility rather than as restrictions on their autonomy.

This complicates a straightforward understanding of constraint. When norms are experienced as personally meaningful values rather than external restrictions, agency is expressed through commitment to those values rather than resistance to them. The key question therefore becomes not whether women

resist or comply, but how they pursue their goals within commitments they actively embrace. Accounts of bounded agency, which often position constraints outside the individual, struggle to fully capture this dynamic

Participants developed hybrid identities that blended tradition with modernity and femininity with professional ambition, enabling them to navigate multiple and often conflicting expectations. Rather than contradiction, hybridity functioned as a strategic resource for maintaining legitimacy across contexts, echoing findings in collectivist settings (Ojediran, Discua Cruz and Anderson, 2022). Entrepreneurship thus emerges as a space of bounded agency, where participation is sustained through ongoing respectability management rather than full inclusion.

Relational and Collective Dimensions of Empowerment: A key contribution of this essay is the reconceptualisation of empowerment as a relational and collective process of legitimacy construction, rather than an individual outcome. Participants' entrepreneurial identities were formed through relationships of care, responsibility, and recognition within family and community contexts where practices such as mentoring, supporting other women, and sharing experiences were central to how legitimacy was established and sustained.

Legitimacy in this context therefore emerged collectively, through mutual recognition within networks rather than individual success alone (Suchman, 1995; Radu-Lefebvre et al., 2021). These relational processes were not neutral, however. Recognition remained conditional upon alignment with gendered and cultural expectations within South Asian community contexts (Tedmanson et al., 2012; Ng et al., 2022). As a result, empowerment is better understood as relational, partial, and negotiated, shaped through everyday interactions where identity and legitimacy are co-produced rather than individually achieved (Baker and Welter, 2018; Ameen et al., 2025).

Rather than breaking away from community, participants sustained legitimacy through ongoing negotiation within it, reinforcing the idea that entrepreneurial agency in collectivist contexts is socially embedded and continuously evaluated. Identity work is therefore audience-specific and relational, with entrepreneurial selves adjusted depending on whether intersectional entrepreneurs are being evaluated by markets, families, or communities. This extends identity work theory beyond organisational settings and reframes empowerment as negotiated, collective, and socially situated.

For entrepreneurship research, this means that entrepreneurship cannot be straightforwardly positioned as a route to empowerment or autonomy for intersectional entrepreneurs. Instead, it must be understood as a context in which inequality is reorganised rather than resolved, where women gain meaningful agency within persistent structural constraints rather than escaping those constraints altogether. This challenges dominant narratives in entrepreneurship scholarship that frame self-employment as liberation from organisational inequality (Bruni, Gherardi and Poggio, 2004; Carter et al., 2015) and

calls for more contextually grounded accounts of what entrepreneurship delivers for those whose participation is shaped by intersecting systems of inequality.

6.5.1 Contributions to Theory

This essay contributes to the existing entrepreneurship literature while extending it in several important ways. First, the essay invites a reframing of entrepreneurial legitimacy. While legitimacy has long been recognised as socially constructed and unevenly distributed, it has often been theorised within single domains, most notably markets or organisations. This essay suggests that legitimacy should instead be conceptualised as multi-arena, produced across overlapping sites of evaluation that operate simultaneously. This extends Suchman's (1995) original legitimacy framework, which focused primarily on institutional audiences, by showing that for intersectional entrepreneurs, legitimacy operates simultaneously across intimate social arenas including family and community, each with distinct and sometimes conflicting evaluative criteria.

Second, the essay extends intersectional approaches to entrepreneurship by foregrounding family and community as legitimacy regimes, rather than as cultural background. Intersectionality scholarship has been effective in demonstrating how gender, race, and class structure entrepreneurial opportunity, but has paid less attention to how moral evaluation and relational accountability operate within familiar social arenas (Xheneti, Karki and Madden, 2019; James, Xiong and Anderson, 2022). By theorising family and community as sites where entrepreneurial identities are actively judged and endorsed, this essay broadens intersectional analysis beyond access and resources to include legitimacy and recognition as central mechanisms of inequality reproduction.

Third, the essay contributes to identity work theory by repositioning identity work as structural labour rather than individual strategy. Existing accounts often frame identity work as something entrepreneurs choose to deploy in response to challenges (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Brown, 2015; Leitch and Harrison, 2016). The analysis here suggests that under conditions of intersecting legitimacy demands, identity work is not optional but required to legitimate the entrepreneurial actor, shifting identity work towards a more processual understanding of identity as continuously negotiated across audiences with competing expectations.

Finally, the essay refines the concept of bounded agency by demonstrating that agency is constrained by moral obligations embedded within family and community relations as well as by formal institutions and markets (Cederberg and Villares-Varela, 2019; Xheneti, Karki and Madden, 2019). Entrepreneurship theory therefore needs to move beyond institutional accounts of constraint and account for care, responsibility, and relational accountability. Bounded legitimacy negotiation captures how these constraints interact to shape what recognition is possible.

6.6 Conclusion

This essay examined how second-generation South Asian women entrepreneurs in the United Kingdom negotiate entrepreneurial legitimacy within their everyday lives. The analysis shows that legitimacy is not established solely through business performance or market participation, but is continually shaped through interactions across family, community, and broader social contexts. These arenas are deeply gendered and racialised, and they place overlapping and sometimes conflicting demands on intersectional entrepreneurs' identities.

The findings demonstrate that entrepreneurship did generate tangible benefits for participants, including increased autonomy, confidence, and financial stability. However, these outcomes did not represent a straightforward or unproblematic route to empowerment. Instead, entrepreneurship involved sustained effort to secure and maintain recognition as a legitimate entrepreneur across multiple social settings. Legitimacy achieved in one context, such as the market, did not necessarily translate into acceptance within family or community spheres. As a result, legitimacy remained uneven and context-dependent, rather than cumulative or stable.

A central contribution of this essay lies in showing that entrepreneurial legitimacy is negotiated across multiple social arenas simultaneously through bounded legitimacy negotiation. Intersectional entrepreneurs were required to balance commercial expectations with moral responsibilities, care obligations, and community norms. This reveals legitimacy as an ongoing process rather than a one-time achievement, extending existing legitimacy literature by demonstrating that recognition is fragmented and non-transferable, particularly for women positioned at the intersection of gender, ethnicity, and family life.

The essay also advances understanding of identity work within entrepreneurship. Rather than treating identity work as a strategic or episodic response to exclusion, the findings show that it constitutes continuous and necessary labour. Participants adjusted how visible they were as entrepreneurs, how ambition was expressed, and how professional identities were presented depending on the audience they were engaging with. These adjustments responded to embedded social expectations and relational accountability within intimate social worlds.

The essay refines bounded agency by showing that entrepreneurial agency is constrained by moral expectations, family relationships, and community obligations as well as by markets and institutions. Agency is exercised within clear social limits, where gains are meaningful but contingent. Together with Essays 1 and 2, this essay completes the thesis's core argument: that intersectionality defines the conditions, identity work is the mechanism, and legitimacy is the outcome that is always being sought, always contested, and never finally secured for second-generation South Asian women as intersectional entrepreneurs.

6.6.1 Limitations and Future Research

This essay has several limitations that shape the scope of its claims. The research focused on second-generation South Asian women entrepreneurs in the United Kingdom, and the findings therefore reflect a specific generational, cultural, and national context. While the conceptual contributions, including bounded legitimacy negotiation, audience-specific identity work, and multi-arena legitimacy demands, are intended to have broader theoretical relevance, their applicability to other contexts should be examined empirically rather than assumed.

The essay prioritised depth over breadth using in-depth interviews with 17 participants. This approach enabled a detailed and contextualised understanding of participants' experiences, but the findings should not be read as representative of all second-generation South Asian women entrepreneurs. This group is internally diverse in terms of religion, class, sector, family structure, and migration histories. Future research could examine how legitimacy negotiation varies across these dimensions, as well as across different types of businesses and scales of entrepreneurial activity.

Two further limitations follow from the design. Participants described family and community judgement retrospectively and in a single interview, so the accounts reflect how these experiences were understood at the point of speaking rather than as they unfolded. Accounts of family are also likely to be shaped by what participants were willing to say about relatives to whom they remain closely tied, and by the researcher's own position as a South Asian woman, which may have made some disclosures easier and others more difficult. The analysis therefore captures how legitimacy demands were narrated rather than as they were enacted, and the accounts of family members themselves were not collected.

An additional and important area for future research concerns the intergenerational dimension. The findings show that intergenerational transmission of expectations, including cultural norms, family pressures, and experiences of racialisation passed down from first-generation parents, continues to shape second-generation women's entrepreneurial identities and sense of possibility in ways that existing literature has rarely examined systematically. Further studies could trace how processes of legitimacy negotiation differ across first-, second-, and third-generation women entrepreneurs, and how shifts in migration history, social positioning, and community expectations shape these dynamics over time. Longitudinal research would also be valuable in examining how legitimacy negotiation changes across the life course of the entrepreneur and the development of the business, and whether the forms of bounded legitimacy negotiation documented here shift as businesses grow, as family structures change, and as community attitudes evolve.

6.6.2 Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings have clear implications for enterprise policy aimed at minority women entrepreneurs. Much existing enterprise support is based on an individualised understanding of entrepreneurship,

placing strong emphasis on skills development, access to finance, and market preparation. These forms of support are important, but they do not fully reflect the experiences of intersectional entrepreneurs.

Participants described entrepreneurship as involving more than business development alone. A significant part of their work involved managing legitimacy in different areas of their lives, including interactions with customers, negotiations within families, and expectations within community settings. This work was ongoing and often emotionally demanding, closely linked to participants' sense of self and identity. However, this form of labour is rarely recognised within mainstream enterprise policy frameworks, meaning participants often internalised legitimacy struggles as personal weaknesses rather than as structurally produced challenges.

The findings suggest that entrepreneurship should be understood as a socially embedded process. For the intersectional entrepreneurs in this essay, business decisions were often made in relation to family responsibilities and community expectations. Enterprise support programmes rarely acknowledge these pressures. Participants frequently relied on peer support, informal mentoring, and trusted network relationships that played a central role in sustaining their entrepreneurial activity. Such forms of support should be recognised as integral to entrepreneurial practice, not informal or secondary.

The findings also highlight the importance of the community context in minority women's entrepreneurship. Participants did not describe their businesses as individual projects detached from social ties; entrepreneurship was embedded within family obligations, community norms, and shared expectations. Supporting entrepreneurship in these contexts therefore requires engagement with community organisations and diaspora networks. Recognising community-based knowledge, trust, and relational labour as legitimate forms of entrepreneurial capital would allow enterprise policy to better reflect how intersectional entrepreneurs build and sustain their businesses.

Specifically, enterprise support programmes should offer mentoring and peer support explicitly designed for second-generation intersectional entrepreneurs, including support for navigating family expectations and community pressures alongside business development. Addressing legitimacy across multiple arenas, rather than focusing solely on market performance, would better reflect the lived realities of this group and would help reduce the emotional and identity labour that currently falls invisibly on intersectional entrepreneurs themselves.

Chapter 7: Discussion and Conclusion

7.1 From Access to Legitimacy: Reframing the Problem of Inclusion

This chapter brings together the findings from the three empirical essays by conceptualising second-generation South Asian women as intersectional entrepreneurs whose experiences are shaped by the interaction of gendered, racialised, cultural, and family expectations across multiple contexts. Rather than viewing organisations, entrepreneurial support hubs, and markets as separate domains, the chapter approaches them as interconnected sites in which legitimacy, belonging, and identity are continuously negotiated over time.

Across all three essays, a consistent pattern emerges. Intersectional entrepreneurs are often able to access organisations, entrepreneurial ecosystems, and learning environments. However, access alone does not translate into recognition, belonging, or sustained career progression. Instead, inclusion remains conditional, requiring ongoing effort to demonstrate competence, credibility, and professional legitimacy. This aligns with findings from the empirical chapters, where participants described being "recruited for diversity" but excluded in practice, highlighting how inclusion often operates alongside unequal recognition (Ahmed, 2012; Adamson et al., 2021).

While existing research tends to focus on exclusion and barriers to entry, the findings of this thesis suggest that inequality is more commonly experienced through conditional inclusion rather than outright exclusion. Intersectional entrepreneurs were frequently welcomed into organisations and entrepreneurial spaces, yet their participation remained dependent on alignment with dominant norms of behaviour, professionalism, and identity presentation. This extends critiques of diversity initiatives as performative (Ahmed, 2012; Adamson et al., 2021) by demonstrating how inclusion itself can function as a mechanism through which inequality is reproduced over time and across contexts, not as an exceptional failure but as a structural pattern.

A key insight is that legitimacy does not operate as a stable or transferable outcome. Recognition achieved in one context does not guarantee acceptance in others. Success within entrepreneurial spaces did not always result in legitimacy within family or community settings, where women's roles continued to be evaluated through cultural and gendered expectations (Suchman, 1995; Radu-Lefebvre et al., 2021). As a result, intersectional entrepreneurs must continuously adjust how they present themselves across organisational, entrepreneurial, and social arenas, reinforcing the relational and context-dependent nature of legitimacy, and the ongoing character of identity work as a form of structural labour rather than an individual strategy (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Brown, 2015).

Importantly, identity work in this thesis is not understood as an individual strategy alone, but as a process shaped by intersectional structures of power. Intersectionality defines the conditions within which women are evaluated, while identity work captures how they actively negotiate these conditions

to achieve legitimacy. However, this process reflects bounded agency. Women's efforts remain constrained by persistent structural inequalities rather than fully overcoming them (Cederberg and Villares-Varela, 2019; Xheneti, Karki and Madden, 2019).

The thesis advances a process-based, intersectional account of second-generation South Asian women's working lives built around two contributions, each with two parts. Conditional inclusion is the structural condition that runs across all three contexts examined in this thesis. It is the formal opening of professional and entrepreneurial spaces to intersectional entrepreneurs alongside persistent informal exclusion from recognition, influence, and stable belonging. Accumulated identity strain is what conditional inclusion produces when it persists over time within organisations: a gradual erosion of belonging, confidence, and career attachment that makes continued participation increasingly difficult to sustain, eventually shaping exit from employment into entrepreneurship.

Constructed belonging refers to the process through which intersectional entrepreneurs create a sense of connection and recognition within identity-aligned entrepreneurial spaces. It emerges through cultural alignment, mentoring, and peer learning rather than through participation alone. Bounded legitimacy negotiation captures the continuing work of maintaining legitimacy across multiple social worlds. Entrepreneurs must navigate the expectations of markets, families, and communities, while recognising that legitimacy achieved in one context may not be recognised in another.

Together, these four concepts constitute this thesis's answer to the question it set out to address: how do second-generation South Asian women navigate work, networks, and entrepreneurship within the context of intersecting constraints? The findings suggest that women navigate conditions of inclusion and exclusion across the different domains they engage with. This process requires ongoing identity work, with the challenges and opportunities varying by context, while the underlying experience remains broadly consistent.

This thesis argues that access alone is insufficient. Inclusion operates as a process rather than an outcome, and inequality is reproduced through everyday practices of misrecognition, identity regulation, and conditional legitimacy across interconnected contexts. This perspective explains three things the access-focused view cannot: why organisational careers become difficult to sustain over time despite formal inclusion; why identity-based entrepreneurial spaces become important for rebuilding belonging; and why entrepreneurship emerges not as a complete solution to inequality but as a reconfiguration of the same ongoing challenges in a different setting.

7.2 Conditional Inclusion as a Cross-Context Mechanism

The findings show that conditional inclusion extends beyond organisational employment and operates across multiple contexts. Whether in organisations, entrepreneurial ecosystems, or support spaces, intersectional entrepreneurs were often able to participate but were not always fully recognised.

Inclusion did not necessarily lead to a sense of belonging, influence, or long-term security. Instead, legitimacy remained uncertain and dependent on continued alignment with dominant norms and expectations, showing a broader process in which inclusion is present but incomplete, requiring ongoing identity work to sustain participation.

In organisational settings, conditional inclusion took the form of symbolic diversity. Intersectional entrepreneurs were recruited and visible, yet access to progression, decision-making, and recognition remained limited (Tariq and Syed, 2017; Begum and Sobolewska, 2024). Participants described being valued for their presence or labour but not fully recognised as legitimate organisational members. This suggests that inclusion is often symbolic rather than substantive a surface-level arrangement that appears to address inequality while reproducing the conditions that generate it (Adamson et al., 2021; Fletcher, Dashper and Albert, 2023; Dobusch, 2021).

In entrepreneurial contexts, intersectional entrepreneurs could access mainstream hubs, but recognition remained uneven. Many were present but marginal, with limited access to influential networks and social capital. Inclusion depended on fitting Western norms of visibility and self-promotion, rather than recognising diverse entrepreneurial identities. This reinforces research suggesting that inclusion in entrepreneurial ecosystems does not guarantee legitimacy (Neumeyer et al., 2019), but the thesis extends this by demonstrating how these experiences are cumulatively shaped by prior encounters with conditional inclusion in organisational contexts, showing that conditional inclusion is not only repeated across domains but intensified by its history.

Importantly, intersectional entrepreneurs did not experience conditional inclusion as isolated events. Instead, they described how earlier experiences of exclusion and misrecognition shaped their expectations and behaviours in later contexts. Past experiences of workplace inequality influenced how women engaged with networking spaces, mentors, and entrepreneurial opportunities, often leading them to approach these spaces cautiously or selectively. This highlights the cumulative nature of conditional inclusion, where experiences across contexts build over time and shape future participation in ways that existing research has not fully theorised (Ghosh and Barber, 2021; Kossek, Su and Wu, 2017).

Conditional inclusion was not limited to work or entrepreneurship. Recognition gained in professional or business settings did not always lead to acceptance within family or community contexts. Intersectional entrepreneurs therefore had to balance their professional ambitions with expectations around respectability, morality, and gender roles. Inclusion in one arena could create tension in another, making legitimacy unstable across different parts of their lives and reinforcing the argument that legitimacy for intersectional entrepreneurs is always being sought but never finally secured.

7.3 Accumulated Identity Strain and Career Trajectories

The findings show that conditional inclusion shaped careers over time, not through single moments of exclusion but through gradual accumulation. Participants did not describe inequality as a one-off experience that led directly to career exit. Instead, they explained how repeated experiences of misrecognition, identity regulation, and blocked progression slowly built up across their working lives. This thesis refers to this process as accumulated identity strain, the second part of the thesis's first conceptual contribution.

Accumulated identity strain describes how belonging, legitimacy, and confidence slowly weaken over time. It develops through ongoing experiences of conditional inclusion, where intersectional entrepreneurs are formally included but never fully recognised. Unlike burnout, which is often linked to individual stress or workload, accumulated identity strain is shaped by structural conditions. It grows through everyday organisational practices that require women to manage their identity continuously without offering stable recognition or clear opportunities for progression (Ghosh and Barber, 2021; Kossek, Su and Wu, 2017).

Existing identity work scholarship has documented how women manage inequality at work (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Brown, 2015), and existing career research has shown that inequality shapes progression over time (Kossek, Su and Wu, 2017; Netto et al., 2020). This thesis brings these literatures together by theorising the cumulative process through which sustained identity work is continuously required but consistently fails to deliver stable recognition, gradually eroding belonging and career attachment. Accumulated identity strain is the mechanism that connects everyday organisational misrecognition to long-term career outcomes.

Participants described how hard work did not necessarily lead to career success or promotion. Their contributions were often overlooked, dismissed, or used without being properly recognised. In some cases, women were explicitly asked to set aside aspects of their ethnic identity in their work. Over time, these experiences reduced confidence that effort would be rewarded fairly, reinforcing the perception that recognition was conditional rather than merit-based. From an identity work perspective, when sustained efforts to align with dominant expectations fail to secure stable recognition, those efforts themselves become a source of strain, adding an emotional and cognitive burden to the structural inequalities that produce them.

These processes became particularly visible during key life transitions, especially motherhood. Participants described how caregiving responsibilities intersected with existing workplace inequalities, intensifying pressures and reducing flexibility. This reflects broader research on motherhood penalties (Cortés and Pan, 2023; Avram, Harkness and Popova, 2024) but demonstrates how these challenges intersect specifically with racialised and organisational expectations to further shape the trajectories of

intersectional entrepreneurs, adding a new dimension to the accumulation of strain that existing motherhood research does not address.

Importantly, intersectional entrepreneurs did not describe leaving organisational employment as a reactive or individual decision. Instead, these decisions emerged as a gradual response to accumulated strain, where continued participation became increasingly difficult to sustain. Women remained in employment for extended periods, often balancing competing demands, before reaching a point where the costs of ongoing identity regulation outweighed the perceived benefits. Transition into entrepreneurship should therefore not be framed simply as opportunity-driven. It is often a structured response to cumulative intersectional identity strain under conditions of conditional inclusion, representing a career outcome that is both agentive and structurally conditioned.

7.4 Identity-Based Support Hubs and the Reconstruction of Belonging

In response to experiences of conditional inclusion, the findings show that identity-based entrepreneurial spaces became important sites where intersectional entrepreneurs could reconstruct belonging and renegotiate legitimacy. These spaces were not simply supportive environments; they functioned as intersectional learning infrastructures where identity work could be performed under more enabling conditions than those found in mainstream entrepreneurial spaces.

Participants consistently contrasted identity-based support hubs with mainstream ones. In mainstream settings, inclusion often depended on alignment with dominant, Western norms of professionalism, visibility, and self-promotion. Intersectional entrepreneurs described needing to regulate their identities to fit in, often experiencing social distance and limited connection. As highlighted in Essay 2, many participants reported being present in these spaces but still feeling like “outsiders”, indicating that access did not translate into meaningful participation or belonging (Neumeyer et al., 2019; Haq et al., 2024).

In contrast, identity-based hubs created environments where intersectional identities were recognised rather than managed. Within these spaces, cultural, religious, and family experiences were understood as central to entrepreneurial life rather than peripheral. This significantly reduced the need for identity suppression and allowed women to engage more openly. Participants described how shared cultural reference points enabled them to participate without having to justify or explain their experiences, transforming how identity work was carried out (Merino and Duchemin, 2022; Schou, Bucher and Waldkirch, 2022).

This thesis introduces constructed belonging to describe the process through which this transformation occurred. Constructed belonging refers to the active, relational achievement of recognition and trust within identity-aligned spaces produced through specific mechanisms including cultural alignment, identity-aligned mentoring, relational identification, and peer learning, rather than following

automatically from formal participation (May, 2011; Stead, 2017; Stoker, Cruz-Garcia and Wakkee, 2025b). This advances existing belonging theory (May, 2011) in two ways: first, by showing that belonging is produced through identifiable relational mechanisms; second, it shows that belonging functions as a mechanism through which confidence, learning, and legitimacy construction are produced, in ways that access alone cannot deliver.

This shift is important from an identity work perspective. In organisational and mainstream entrepreneurial contexts, identity work often involved alignment with dominant norms to achieve legitimacy. In identity-based spaces, identity work became relational and affirming, allowing intersectional entrepreneurs to build belonging and confidence through recognition rather than adaptation. Mentors and peers with shared backgrounds were perceived as more credible because they understood the intersectional challenges participants faced, including family expectations, cultural norms, and religious constraints. This made learning more relevant and actionable, reinforcing both confidence and entrepreneurial identity (Maharjan, Nazir and Roomi, 2025). The thesis therefore supports wider calls for more intersectional approaches to mentoring within entrepreneurial support hubs while extending them by showing how these relational processes operate as mechanisms of belonging construction rather than simply knowledge transfer.

Peer learning also played a central role. Participants described how knowledge, resources, and support were exchanged through informal and trust-based interactions. These relationships created a sense of psychological safety, enabling women to discuss challenges openly without fear of judgement. Over time, this led to the development of identity-based social capital, which supported both learning and access to opportunities, aligning with research on how homophily and peer learning facilitate open knowledge exchange and collective confidence (Hidegh et al., 2023; Rocha, Paço and Alves, 2024).

Moreover, intersectional entrepreneurs actively chose these spaces based on prior experiences of conditional inclusion in organisations and mainstream support hubs. Women selectively invested in environments where recognition was more attainable rather than withdrawing. Identity work is therefore shaped by strategic agency as well as structural constraint (Stoker et al., 2025a; Anand, Attri and Sahasranamam, 2025).

These findings show that identity-based entrepreneurial hubs function as sites where identity work becomes more sustainable and effective. While these spaces do not remove structural inequalities, they enable intersectional entrepreneurs to align identity and legitimacy in ways that are difficult to achieve in mainstream professional, family, and community contexts, playing a crucial role in supporting belonging, confidence, and entrepreneurial development.

7.5 Entrepreneurship as Bounded Legitimacy Negotiation

The findings show that for second-generation South Asian women, entrepreneurship does not represent a complete break from inequality. Instead, it marks a shift in how inequality is experienced and managed. This thesis conceptualises these women as intersectional entrepreneurs whose entrepreneurial activities are shaped by the simultaneous interaction of gendered, racialised, cultural, and familial expectations across multiple arenas. Within this context, entrepreneurship emerges not as a space of unrestricted autonomy but as a process of bounded legitimacy negotiation.

Bounded legitimacy negotiation refers to the ongoing, audience-specific, and context-dependent process through which intersectional entrepreneurs seek recognition across multiple social arenas (markets, families, and communities) within persistent structural constraints that limit the range of available identity positions and ensure that legitimacy once achieved in one context cannot be assumed in another. This concept builds on existing accounts of bounded agency (Cederberg and Villares-Varela, 2019; Xheneti, Karki and Madden, 2019) but extends them in a specific way: it demonstrates that for intersectional entrepreneurs the bounds of agency are not only institutional but intimately social, located within family relationships, community obligations, and the ongoing need to maintain respectability across intersecting legitimacy regimes simultaneously.

Participants' narratives demonstrate how experiences of exclusion within organisations did not disappear after entering entrepreneurship. Instead, they reappeared in different forms within markets, entrepreneurial ecosystems, and social contexts. Legitimacy was not only determined by business performance but by how intersectional entrepreneurs were perceived by customers, peers, families, and communities. This reinforces existing work that conceptualises legitimacy as relational and socially constructed (Ojediran, Discua Cruz and Anderson, 2022; Essers, McAdam and Ossenkop, 2025) while extending it by showing how these dynamics continue across transitions from employment to entrepreneurship rather than being confined to any single domain.

From an identity work perspective, entrepreneurship was characterised by continuous adjustment rather than stable identity formation. Intersectional entrepreneurs actively adapted how they presented themselves depending on the audience and context. In some cases, cultural identity became a resource that supported legitimacy, particularly in co-ethnic markets. In other contexts, the same identity exposed them to scrutiny, marginalisation, or reduced credibility. Identity work therefore involved ongoing adjustment rather than a fixed strategy, requiring intersectional entrepreneurs to balance authenticity with recognition across different settings (Giazitzoglu and Korede, 2023; Ranabahu, de Vries and Basharati, 2025).

This multi-arena negotiation highlights the central role of intersectionality in shaping entrepreneurial experience. Intersectional entrepreneurs were not only navigating a single set of expectations but multiple and often competing structures of evaluation. Gender norms, cultural expectations, religious

values, and professional standards intersected to shape what was considered appropriate, credible, and legitimate behaviour. Identity work became the mechanism through which women negotiated these intersecting demands, but always within bounds that constrained what forms of recognition were available and sustainable.

These findings challenge dominant narratives that position entrepreneurship as straightforwardly empowering. Instead, they show that entrepreneurship represents a negotiated and context-specific response to inequality (Stead, 2017; Thielemann and Atagan, 2025). Empowerment, as this thesis has argued throughout, is partial, conditional, and context-dependent, meaningful but always shaped by the persistent structural constraints that intersectional entrepreneurs navigate across their working lives. The concept of bounded legitimacy negotiation captures this reality precisely: it is not a failure of empowerment, but an accurate description of what empowerment looks like under conditions of intersecting structural inequality.

7.6 Family and Community as Legitimacy Regimes

The findings suggest that family and community strongly shaped whether intersectional entrepreneurs were seen as legitimate. These settings were not passive backgrounds; they actively shaped how women's actions, goals, and business decisions were judged. Family and community determine which forms of work count as acceptable and how success is judged. This establishes that legitimacy is not achieved only through market performance but is negotiated through ongoing interactions within family, community, and cultural contexts (Xheneti, Karki and Madden, 2019; James, Xiong and Anderson, 2022).

Participants explained that family expectations shaped which forms of entrepreneurship were considered acceptable. Ideas about being a "good woman" or "good mother" influenced how women approached their businesses. Instead of pushing these expectations aside, many worked within them, positioning their entrepreneurship as family-focused, responsible, and morally appropriate, and presenting their entrepreneurial activities in ways that aligned with family responsibilities and gendered and cultural norms. This reflects how identity work operates as a relational process, where intersectional entrepreneurs actively negotiate legitimacy by aligning their entrepreneurial identity with socially valued roles (Alkhaled and Berglund, 2018; Calás et al., 2009).

From an intersectional perspective, these findings highlight how multiple axes of identity interact to shape entrepreneurial legitimacy. While entrepreneurial success could enhance professional recognition, it did not automatically translate into acceptance within family or community settings. In some cases, visible success created tension, particularly when entrepreneurial activity challenged traditional gender roles or expectations around modesty. Identity work mediates these competing demands. It requires intersectional entrepreneurs to engage in ongoing adjustments to how they present

themselves, framing their entrepreneurship as responsible, family-oriented, and culturally appropriate while gradually expanding the boundaries of acceptable entrepreneurial activity.

An important intergenerational dimension runs through these findings. For second-generation South Asian women, legitimacy constraints are not only encountered in the present; they are also transmitted from first-generation parental experiences through socialisation, shaping confidence, perceived entitlement, and self-imposed limitations in ways that compound the structural constraints these women face as intersectional entrepreneurs. Expectations around women's roles, appropriate careers, and public visibility that were shaped by parents' experiences of migration and settlement continue to influence how second-generation women understand themselves as entrepreneurs, setting limits that operate below the level of explicit constraint.

These findings extend existing research by showing that family and community act as structured sites of evaluation and recognition, not only as sources of constraint or social capital. By conceptualising these contexts as legitimacy regimes, the thesis highlights that entrepreneurial participation is deeply socially embedded and cannot be understood through market logics alone (Baker and Welter, 2018; Welter, Baker and Wirsching, 2019). Legitimacy is produced across several domains in which moral, cultural, and relational judgements operate, and where entrepreneurs must demonstrate social respectability alongside business competence.

7.7 Beyond First-Generation Narratives: Distinct Patterns in Second-Generation Women's Experiences

This thesis positions second-generation South Asian women as an analytically distinct group whose experiences cannot be fully explained through frameworks developed for first-generation migrants or through gender-only accounts of entrepreneurship. Born, educated, and professionally socialised within Britain, these women were formally integrated into British institutions, yet many continued to experience racialisation, exclusion, and conditional forms of recognition. Although they did not migrate themselves, the effects of migration shaped their lives through family histories, cultural expectations, and intergenerational experiences of settlement. Their experiences therefore emerged through a distinctive combination of institutional integration and continued positioning as culturally and racially different (Tao, Essers and Pijpers, 2021).

This argument challenges dominant assumptions within UK ethnic entrepreneurship research. Much of the literature has focused on first-generation experiences of structural disadvantage, sectoral concentration, blocked mobility, and reliance on co-ethnic resources (Ram and Jones, 2008; Ram, Jones and Villares-Varela, 2017). These explanations assume entrepreneurs entering an unfamiliar economy from different countries. By contrast, the women in this study were educated within British institutions, held British qualifications, and often entered entrepreneurship after careers in mainstream organisations.

Consequently, the key issue was not access but recognition. Participants had secured entry into professional employment and entrepreneurial support systems, yet they continued to encounter conditions that restricted how their identities were recognised and valued. The findings therefore point to a legitimacy problem rather than an access problem.

Previous studies have begun to identify elements of this experience. Dhaliwal and Kangis (2006) highlighted the importance of generation alongside gender, while Dhaliwal (2007) examined the experiences of Asian women entrepreneurs in Britain. Research has also shown that family functions as a site where entrepreneurial identities are negotiated rather than simply supported (Essers and Benschop, 2007; Essers and Tedmanson, 2014; Tao, Essers and Pijpers, 2021). This thesis extends that work by demonstrating how conditional inclusion and accumulated identity strain operate within the lives of second-generation women. Conditional inclusion captures the terms on which recognition is granted, while accumulated identity strain explains the long-term consequences of repeatedly negotiating those terms.

Participants frequently contrasted organisational employment with entrepreneurship. Within organisations, many felt pressure to conform to dominant norms and limit the expression of religious, ethnic, and cultural identities. Entrepreneurship offered greater scope to incorporate these identities into their professional activities. As demonstrated throughout the finding's chapters, cultural knowledge, multilingual skills, religious understanding, and community connections became sources of entrepreneurial legitimacy rather than liabilities. At the same time, family support was often conditional, extending to entrepreneurial activities that aligned with gendered and cultural expectations while being withdrawn when those expectations were challenged.

In response, participants often sought support from networks of other second-generation women. These spaces provided belonging, legitimacy, and opportunities to discuss experiences that were difficult to articulate elsewhere. Importantly, they were valued not only because some mainstream spaces produced conditional inclusion, but because participants wanted environments where the intergenerational dimensions of their identities were understood rather than overlooked. As Puwar (2001) argues, institutional inclusion does not necessarily remove perceptions of difference when dominant norms remain associated with whiteness and masculinity.

A further distinction concerns the timing of constraint. Existing accounts of bounded agency locate limits within institutional, market, or family environments that entrepreneurs encounter during their careers (Cederberg and Villares-Varela, 2019; Xheneti, Karki and Madden, 2019). The findings here indicate that some constraints emerged much earlier. Expectations regarding ambition, visibility, family responsibilities, and appropriate forms of work were often learned through upbringing and everyday socialisation before participants entered employment or entrepreneurship. Participants frequently

described these expectations as absorbed rather than explicitly imposed. Unlike conditional inclusion, which operates through present-day evaluations, inherited constraints shape what women see as possible before such evaluations take place.

This distinction has important implications. While barriers created by organisational practices or entrepreneurial support systems may be addressed through institutional reform, inherited constraints are less easily transformed. They persist beyond workplaces or programmes and are unlikely to be resolved through improved access alone. In this respect, frameworks developed for first-generation migrants do not fully capture the experiences of second-generation women whose challenges emerge not from migration itself but from the intergenerational legacies of migration.

These patterns were not experienced uniformly across the sample. Religion shaped experiences more strongly for some participants than for others, while exclusion within mainstream spaces often depended on the composition of specific environments rather than on mainstream provision itself. Participants also varied in how they responded. Identity-based spaces were highly valued, yet several women described moving beyond them as their businesses developed. Together, these findings suggest that conditional inclusion, accumulated identity strain, and identity-based support are important mechanisms for understanding second-generation women's entrepreneurial experiences, but their effects are contingent rather than universal. Specifying these boundaries helps identify the conditions under which the concepts developed in this thesis are most useful.

7.8 Contributions, Implications, and Future Directions

7.8.1 Theoretical Contributions

This thesis makes two theoretical contributions, each with two parts. The first is conditional inclusion, and the process it produces over time, accumulated identity strain. The second is bounded legitimacy negotiation, and the mechanism through which recognition is built within it, constructed belonging. Each part is developed empirically across one essay and the whole is integrated in this chapter. Together they constitute a process-based, intersectional account of how second-generation South Asian women navigate work and entrepreneurship, an account in which intersectionality defines the conditions, identity work is the mechanism, and legitimacy is the outcome that is always being sought, always contested, and never finally secured.

The first contribution is conditional inclusion as a dynamic cross-context mechanism of inequality. Existing research has critiqued diversity initiatives as performative and shown that access does not guarantee equality (Ahmed, 2012; Adamson et al., 2021). Conditional inclusion is an active mechanism through which inequality is reproduced over time, not simply a failure of diversity policy. Inclusion itself, the formal opening of organisational and entrepreneurial spaces to intersectional entrepreneurs, operates as a site of ongoing evaluation, requiring continuous identity work to maintain without

delivering stable recognition or progression. This reframes inclusion not as a binary state but as a dynamic process that reproduces the conditions for exclusion while appearing to address them.

The second part of this contribution is accumulated identity strain. It theorises what conditional inclusion produces when it persists: a gradual effect on long-term career trajectories. Existing identity work scholarship has documented the demands of ongoing identity regulation under unequal conditions (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Brown, 2015), and existing career research has shown that inequality shapes progression over time (Kossek, Su and Wu, 2017).

The second contribution is bounded legitimacy negotiation, and it also has two parts. The first is constructed belonging, developed in Essay 2 and extended throughout the thesis. Existing belonging theory has conceptualised belonging as a sense of ease and acceptance within social settings (May, 2011; Stead, 2017). This thesis advances belonging theory principally by establishing that belonging functions as a mechanism through which legitimacy is produced. For intersectional entrepreneurs, belonging operates as a condition of capability, enabling the participation, help-seeking, and self-presentation through which legitimacy is subsequently constructed. It follows that belonging cannot be assumed and must be actively built through specific relational mechanisms within identity-aligned spaces.

The essay identifies cultural alignment, identity-aligned mentoring, relational identification, peer learning, and identity-based social capital as the specific processes through which belonging is produced, confirming that belonging enables participation, confidence, and legitimacy construction in ways that formal access cannot deliver. This is particularly significant for entrepreneurship research, which has focused primarily on access and resources while paying limited attention to the relational conditions that determine whether access translates into meaningful engagement (Neumeyer et al., 2019; Harrison, Leitch and McAdam, 2020).

The second part is bounded legitimacy negotiation. Existing bounded agency accounts have shown that entrepreneurial agency is constrained by structural conditions (Cederberg and Villares-Varela, 2019; Xheneti, Karki and Madden, 2019). This thesis extends these accounts by demonstrating that for intersectional entrepreneurs, the bounds of agency are not only institutional but intimately social, shaped by family obligations, community expectations, and the ongoing need to maintain respectability across intersecting legitimacy regimes simultaneously.

Bounded legitimacy negotiation explains how recognition is negotiated across multiple arenas, where legitimacy achieved in one context does not automatically translate into another. It highlights that empowerment remains partial and that identity work is continuous because different audiences apply different standards of evaluation. The concept further extends bounded agency by recognising that some constraints are inherited rather than encountered. Participants described learning expectations about women's work, ambition, and visibility through family socialisation long before entering employment

or entrepreneurship. Consequently, legitimacy was negotiated not only against contemporary institutional and market expectations, but also against intergenerational norms that shaped what participants viewed as possible in the first place.

7.8.2 Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings have several implications for policy and practice that run across all three essays and are best understood in combination. For organisations, the findings show that surface-level diversity initiatives are insufficient and may be actively counterproductive if they create conditional inclusion without delivering genuine recognition. When inclusion remains contingent on ongoing identity alignment with dominant norms, diversity initiatives reproduce the very inequalities they claim to address. What the thesis adds at this level is that these practices are not separable problems. The same logic of conditional inclusion operates through evaluation, through informal networks, and through access to flexibility, so reforming any one of them in isolation leaves the mechanism intact. Cultural knowledge, language skills, and community expertise should be recognised as professional assets rather than managed as potential distractions.

For enterprise support policy, the findings show that access-based models are insufficient for intersectional entrepreneurs. Participation in entrepreneurial support hubs does not automatically produce belonging or sustained engagement, and support programmes that measure success only through participation rates will continue to miss this. The implications are set out in Section 5.6.2, where identity-based support hubs are recommended for recognition not as supplementary provision for minority groups but as core infrastructure for inclusive ecosystem development. Read across the three essays, the more fundamental point is that organisational diversity policy and enterprise support policy are addressing the same mechanism in different settings yet are currently designed as though they addressed unrelated problems. Programmes that integrate cultural understanding, identity-aligned mentoring, and peer-based learning are more likely to be effective for intersectional entrepreneurs than standardised models that expect participants to adapt to dominant norms.

More broadly, both organisational and enterprise policy should acknowledge that entrepreneurial activity for intersectional entrepreneurs is deeply socially embedded. Business decisions are made in relation to family responsibilities, community expectations, and moral obligations that operate across multiple arenas simultaneously. Support that does not recognise this social embeddedness will continue to treat legitimacy struggles as individual failings rather than structurally produced challenges. Specifically, enterprise support programmes should offer mentoring and peer support designed for second-generation intersectional entrepreneurs that addresses the family and community dimensions of legitimacy negotiation alongside business development. Bounded legitimacy negotiation is a structural condition, not a personal challenge to be managed.

7.8.3 Directions for Future Research

This thesis opens several specific and important directions for future research, directions that only this thesis could generate, because they flow from what the thesis found and from what it cannot claim.

First, and most importantly, the intergenerational dimension identified in this thesis deserves dedicated investigation. The finding that legitimacy constraints are transmitted across generations, shaping second-generation women's confidence, perceived entitlement, and self-imposed limits through the absorption of first-generation parental experiences suggests that bounded legitimacy negotiation extends backwards in time as well as outward across social contexts. Future research could examine how first-generation parental experiences shape second-generation entrepreneurial identities, and how third-generation women further removed from the direct experience of migration negotiate legitimacy differently. This would test whether the concept of bounded legitimacy negotiation changes across generations and would help identify which elements of the constraints documented in this thesis are specific to the second-generation position and which reflect enduring structural inequalities that persist regardless of generational distance from migration.

Second, longitudinal research would substantially extend the thesis's contributions. This thesis provides a cross-sectional account of how intersectional entrepreneurs navigate conditional inclusion, accumulated identity strain, constructed belonging, and bounded legitimacy negotiation at a particular point in their careers and lives. Longitudinal research could examine how these processes change over time, whether accumulated identity strain intensifies, stabilises, or diminishes as careers develop; whether belonging constructed within identity-based spaces remains durable as businesses grow; and whether bounded legitimacy negotiation becomes constrained as intersectional entrepreneurs gain visibility, economic success, and community recognition. Such research would also allow examination of whether and how the structural conditions documented here shift in response to changes in diversity policy, enterprise support provision, and community attitudes.

Third, comparative research would help clarify the scope of the thesis's conceptual contributions. Comparative research across different ethnic groups, generations, national contexts, and business sectors would help clarify which elements of the argument are specific to this group and context and which reflect broader dynamics of intersectional entrepreneurship. Comparisons with White women entrepreneurs would be particularly valuable for identifying where experiences align in terms of gender, and where ethnicity creates distinct challenges.

Fourth, future research could adopt multi-perspective designs that include family members, community leaders, and institutional actors alongside the entrepreneurs themselves. This thesis has foregrounded the perspectives of intersectional entrepreneurs. This was appropriate given its focus on lived experience and identity work. However, understanding how legitimacy is granted, contested, and withheld from multiple positions would deepen insight into the relational and structural processes

identified here. Family members and community leaders may understand their evaluative role very differently from how participants experienced it, and examining these different perspectives would advance understanding of how legitimacy regimes operate as social systems rather than individual impositions.

Finally, future research should examine whether, and how, the structural conditions that make continuous identity work necessary for intersectional entrepreneurs can themselves be changed. This thesis has documented the costs, in terms of confidence, career attachment, emotional labour, and professional recognition, of sustained identity work under conditions of conditional inclusion. The question of how these conditions might be transformed, rather than individually navigated, is ultimately a question for organisational research, policy research, and critical entrepreneurship scholarship together.

7.9 Conclusion

This thesis set out to examine how second-generation South Asian women navigate work, networks, and entrepreneurship within the context of intersecting gendered, racialised, cultural, and family constraints. Across three interconnected essays, the thesis has shown that these women, as intersectional entrepreneurs do not experience a linear progression from exclusion to inclusion, or from inequality to empowerment. Instead, they navigate a complex and recurring set of conditions in which inclusion is always conditional, legitimacy is always contested, and identity work is always required.

In Essay 1, the thesis showed how conditional inclusion within organisations produces accumulated identity strain, a gradual erosion of belonging, confidence, and career attachment that eventually shapes decisions to exit employment and pursue entrepreneurship. In Essay 2, it showed how belonging within entrepreneurial support hubs must be actively constructed through relational processes, and that this constructed belonging functions as a mechanism through which confidence and learning are produced, in ways that formal access alone cannot deliver. In Essay 3, it showed how entrepreneurship does not resolve the conditions that drove women from organisations. Instead, legitimacy must be continuously negotiated across market, family, and community arenas through bounded legitimacy negotiation, within structural constraints that remain persistent even as individual circumstances change.

This research shows that the problem is not individual. Intersectional entrepreneurs face continuous demands to prove themselves across multiple arenas, manage identity under conditions of misrecognition, construct belonging where mainstream spaces fail to provide it, and negotiate legitimacy across competing audiences. The findings suggest that these are structural rather than individual demands, arising from unequal systems of recognition that offer no guarantee of stable legitimacy. They reflect the persistence of intersecting systems of inequality that diversity initiatives, enterprise support programmes, and entrepreneurship narratives have not yet adequately addressed.

Addressing these challenges requires more than targeted support for intersectional entrepreneurs. It demands a fundamental reconsideration of how inclusion, legitimacy, and belonging are produced, who they are produced for, and whose experiences remain marginalised. The experiences of second-generation South Asian women are not exceptional cases at the edges of entrepreneurship. Instead, they expose the unequal conditions through which recognition is granted and withheld across professional and entrepreneurial life. Meaningful change therefore depends on addressing these underlying structures rather than treating their consequences as individual barriers to overcome.

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Appendix

References Statement

Grammarly and QuillBot were used to support proofreading, including grammar checking, sentence structure, and editing. These tools were not used for content generation but only to improve clarity and readability.

Appendix A: Interview Guide

Background and Career Journey

1. Can you tell me a little about yourself and what you're currently doing?
2. What were you doing before starting your business? Work experiences?
3. Can you share your educational and career background?
4. What inspired you to start your business?
5. Who or what influenced your decision to become self-employed?

Experiences of Work and Identity

1. How do you describe your identity, and how does it influence your work or business?
2. Have your gender or ethnic background shaped your work experiences in any way?
3. What kinds of opportunities or challenges have you experienced as a woman in your field?
4. Have you encountered any situations related to gender or ethnicity in your work?
5. How did you respond to these experiences?

Learning, Training, and Networks

1. Have you taken part in any training, mentoring, or support programmes?
2. Can you describe your experience of these programmes?
3. How did you find or access these opportunities?
4. What made a trainer or mentor helpful or unhelpful for you?
5. Did shared background or identity matter in choosing these spaces?

Entrepreneurship and Lived Experience

1. What have been the biggest challenges in your business journey?
2. How have you managed or responded to these challenges?

3. How do you balance business with other responsibilities (e.g. family)?
4. What strategies have worked well for you?

Reflections and Future Plans

1. How do you see your future in business?
2. What changes would you like to see in your field or community?

Appendix B: Supplementary Digital Materials (Blogs / Discussions)

This appendix presents illustrative examples from blogs, podcasts, and online community discussions relating to South Asian women's organisational and entrepreneurial experiences. These materials were not treated as a primary dataset or formally analysed. Instead, they were used to provide context, enhance transparency, and support interpretation of the interview findings by highlighting recurring concerns, shared narratives, and common patterns across women's accounts.

Section B1: Organisational Experiences and Identity

Theme	**Example from blogs/posts (paraphrased)**	**Meaning, interpretation**
Self-doubt and internalisation	"I began to question myself… am I good enough?"	Organisational experiences shape internal confidence and identity
Underutilised potential	Highly skilled South Asian women not progressing in careers	Structural inequality affects career outcomes
Workplace exclusion	Being the only South Asian woman increased pressure to prove self	Conditional inclusion and lack of belonging
Microaggressions	Repeated subtle discrimination reduced confidence	Everyday exclusion accumulates over time
Toxic work culture	Fear of speaking up due to career consequences	Power structures silence marginalised voices

Section B2: Networking, Belonging, and Support Spaces

Theme	**Example from blogs/posts (paraphrased)**	**Meaning, interpretation**

Identity-based belonging	"In those spaces it was all brown women… we understood each other"	Shared identity creates immediate belonging
Cultural mentoring and healing	Programmes created to address "shared traumas"	Networks act as spaces of emotional and identity support
Peer learning and support	Women sharing experiences and supporting each other	Learning is relational and collective
Safe spaces	"You can be yourself… it's healing"	Psychological safety enables participation and openness
Role modelling	Seeing others succeed increases confidence	Representation supports identity and legitimacy
Community over transaction	Non-transactional support networks	Relationships matter more than formal systems

Section B3: Entrepreneurship, Family, and Agency

Theme	**Example from blogs/posts (paraphrased)**	**Interpretation**
Generational norms	"Don't be loud… don't stand out"	Upbringing shapes identity and confidence
Cultural conditioning	Beliefs about shame, reputation, and behaviour	Family and culture influence entrepreneurship
Gendered expectations	Pressure to prioritise family over career	Structural constraints on women's choices
Dual identity tension	Feeling "caught between two worlds"	Identity negotiation is ongoing
Entrepreneurship as identity expression	Using culture in business products/services	Identity becomes a resource
Boundary setting	Women labelled "troublemakers" for setting limits	Agency involves challenging norms

Collective empowerment	"Lifting each other up"	Legitimacy is relational and shared

Appendix C: Idiographic and Interpretive Analysis

Appendix C shows the coding structures for each essay, illustrating how themes were developed from participant data while maintaining an interpretive, IPA-led approach.

Appendix C1: Idiographic and Interpretive Analysis (Essay 1)

Participant	**Key lived experience (participant voice)**	**Interpretive meaning (IPA – case level)**	**Cross-case pattern**
TS	"Hired for diversity… must work twice as hard… both fired were Asian."	Experiencing recruitment as symbolic rather than substantive; legitimacy constantly questioned.	Recruited for diversity, excluded in practice
RP	"I quit… colleagues made me feel I was hired mainly for diversity."	Tokenism experienced as identity threat leading to withdrawal.	Recruited for diversity, excluded in practice
RA	"You notice who gets promoted… that's when you start questioning."	Growing awareness of racialised inequality through organisational outcomes.	Inclusion without equality
NB	"Good enough to do extra work but not good enough to get promotion."	Labour valued over identity; effort not translating into recognition.	Inclusion without equality
HK	"I must pretend to be the Western version of myself."	Identity regulation and emotional labour required to belong.	The burden of belonging
SL	"It wasn't just about doing your job well… how you dressed, spoke."	Belonging tied to conformity to dominant norms.	The burden of belonging
TK	"Everything added together… I reached a point where I was exhausted."	Accumulation of gendered and racialised pressures leading to exit.	Exiting under intersectional pressure

RP	"I left because of toxic gender attitudes."	Exit as self-preservation in hostile environments.	Exiting under intersectional pressure
SZ	"Muslim women feel seen in my business."	Entrepreneurship as identity affirmation and cultural safety.	Entrepreneurship as identity reclamation
NB	"My community now sees me as a professional."	Enterprise as a route to recognition and legitimacy.	Entrepreneurship as identity reclamation

Appendix C2: Idiographic and Interpretive Analysis (Identity-Based Networking and Belonging)

Participant (Case)	**Key lived experience (participant voice)**	**Interpretive meaning (IPA – case level)**	**Cross-case pattern**
SA	"White women prefer to collaborate with whites only… I was the only Asian there."	Experiencing presence without belonging; inclusion felt symbolic rather than relational.	Partial inclusion in white-dominated spaces
RA	"You're in the room, but you're still an outsider."	Feeling simultaneously included and excluded; belonging experienced as conditional.	Partial inclusion in white-dominated spaces
NJ	"Mostly white women… it does feel harder to connect."	Difficulty forming authentic connections in mainstream spaces.	Partial inclusion in white-dominated spaces
NB	"Asian community mostly supports Asians."	Belonging understood as collective and culturally grounded.	Identity-based hubs and legitimate belonging
RA	"Heading toward people within my ethnic group."	Active movement towards culturally familiar spaces to feel understood.	Identity-based hubs and legitimate belonging

SZ	"My religion is important… loans are haram."	Religious values shaping how legitimacy is understood in business contexts.	Cultural congruence and shared identity
SB	"She understands my religion… encourages ideas without compromising values."	Feeling validated when faith and business are aligned.	Cultural congruence and shared identity
NJ	"She understands childhood issues… being picked on."	Shared racialised upbringing creating trust and emotional safety.	Cultural congruence and shared identity
HK	"A classical business coach will not address specifics for us."	Mainstream support perceived as culturally inadequate.	Identity-based hubs and legitimate belonging
DP	"She understood the pressures of being a woman in our community."	Gendered and cultural understanding enabling participation.	Belonging through relational identification
TK	"If she can do it, so can I."	Identification with role models enabling confidence.	Belonging through relational identification
JR	"Seeing other women confident… inspired me."	Confidence emerging through vicarious success.	Belonging through relational identification
SB	"The network of women I met was valuable."	Networks experienced as emotionally and practically supportive.	Peer-based learning and network support
JN	"We share information… ideas… tools."	Learning and legitimacy developed through peer exchange.	Peer-based learning and network support
SL	"Clients handed to you on a plate."	Co-ethnic networks providing tangible economic advantage.	Co-ethnic peer networks as support

SM	"You're not alone… others faced similar challenges."	Shared struggle reducing isolation and sustaining motivation.	Co-ethnic peer networks as support
TS	"Word of mouth and positive feedback."	Trust built through relational endorsement rather than formal credentials.	Co-ethnic peer recommendations
DP	"A close friend attended her course… then I decided."	Decision-making shaped by trusted social ties.	Co-ethnic peer recommendations
SA	"I watched other women… making good money."	Legitimacy assessed through visible success of similar others.	Co-ethnic peer recommendations

Appendix C3: Idiographic and Interpretive Analysis

(Entrepreneurship, Family, Market, and Intersectional Agency)

Participant (Case)	**Key lived experience (participant voice)**	**Interpretive meaning (IPA – case level)**	**Cross-case pattern (developed later)**
SL	"Customer is being racist."	Experiencing the market as a racialised and gendered site of illegitimacy.	Market and community as sites of racialised-gendered exclusion
JR	"English people don't approach Asian businesses."	Perceiving exclusion as normalised market behaviour rather than isolated incidents.	Market and community as sites of racialised-gendered exclusion
NJ	"Customers do not take you seriously… complain more."	Legitimacy constantly questioned due to intersecting gender and ethnicity.	Market and community as sites of racialised-gendered exclusion
RP	"My parents… said it's a man's job."	Family acting as a moral authority restricting entrepreneurial identity.	Family and community as sites of moral regulation

SM	"Being a videographer was quite a taboo career."	Career choices framed as cultural transgression.	Family and community as sites of moral regulation
DP	"They thought yoga was a Hindu practice."	Religious norms shaping boundaries of acceptable work.	Family and community as sites of moral regulation
RP	"I still ask permission from my husband."	Internalisation of gendered cultural scripts shaping agency.	Internalised intersectional scripts
SZ	"Every woman does this."	Normalisation of unequal gender expectations.	Internalised intersectional scripts
TK	"At night, when my son is asleep, I work."	Time-shifting as a strategy to reconcile entrepreneurship and care.	Navigating the intersectional moral economy of family
RA	"Business is the best option… win-win."	Entrepreneurship reframed as culturally acceptable flexibility.	Navigating the intersectional moral economy of family
SA	"People appreciate me as a housewife, not business success."	Recognition tied to domestic role rather than economic achievement.	Entrepreneurial legitimacy through gendered family role performance
SD	"No one cares how tired you are."	Emotional labour rendered invisible within family structures.	Entrepreneurial legitimacy through gendered family role performance
HK	"I need to create something that embraces both Western and Asian rituals."	Entrepreneurship as a space to integrate fragmented identities.	Strategic mobilisation of intersectional position
TK	"I provide therapy in Urdu and Punjabi."	Cultural and linguistic identity transformed into market resource.	Strategic mobilisation of intersectional position

SB	"Promoting my religion and heritage in my work."	Business as cultural affirmation and resistance.	Strategic mobilisation of intersectional position
SL	"If customer is racist, I refuse to work with them."	Boundary-setting as an assertion of dignity and agency.	Bounded intersectional agency
RP	"Now they're happy with my success."	Family approval achieved through economic legitimacy.	Bounded intersectional agency
SB	"I'm glad I'm coming out of my shell."	Entrepreneurship enabling self-expression and confidence.	Bounded intersectional agency
TK	"I won an award… family celebrated me."	Recognition transforming family and community positioning.	Relational and collective empowerment
NJ	"People recognise me as a role model."	Success reframed as collective inspiration.	Relational and collective empowerment
SD	"I want to inspire and motivate others."	Agency extending beyond the self to other women.	Relational and collective empowerment

Appendix D: IPA Analytic Examples

Appendix D presents illustrative IPA analytic traces, showing how individual participant accounts were interpreted and developed into case-level meanings before identifying broader patterns.

Example 1: Participant TK (Organisational Exit)

Stage	**Illustration**
Raw quote	"It wasn't one big thing… everything added together… I reached a point where I was completely exhausted."
Initial interpretive note	Experience framed as cumulative rather than event-based; exhaustion described as emotional, moral, and identity-related rather than physical alone.
Case-level theme	Accumulated intersectional strain

Reflexive check	Both early and later readings focused on accumulation and endurance, not one clear cause.
Cross-case link	Similar cumulative strain described by DP and SD, contributing to the broader pattern of exiting under intersectional pressure.

Example 2: Participant HK (Identity Regulation at Work)

Stage	**Illustration**
Raw quote	"I must pretend to be the Western version of myself."
Initial interpretive note	Belonging experienced as conditional on suppressing ethnic and cultural identity; emotional labour implicit in 'pretending'.
Case-level theme	Identity regulation and emotional labour
Reflexive check	Re-reading shows that identity needs to be carefully managed, with participants feeling the need to pretend, adjust, and conform to Western ways of presenting themselves.
Cross-case link	Resonates with SL, SB and SD's accounts of conforming to dominant norms, informing the pattern labelled The burden of belonging.

Example 3: Participant SA (Networking and Belonging)

Stage	**Illustration**
Raw quote	"You're in the room, but you're still an outsider."
Initial interpretive note	Physical inclusion without relational or emotional belonging; exclusion experienced subtly rather than overtly.
Case-level theme	Presence without belonging
Reflexive check	Later readings reinforced the relational nature of exclusion; meaning remained centred on partial inclusion rather than rejection.
Cross-case link	Similar experiences described by NJ and RA, shaping the cross-case pattern of partial inclusion in white-dominated spaces.

Example 4: Participant SZ (Cultural Congruence in Support Spaces)

Stage	**Illustration**
Raw quote	"For me, my religion is important… loans are haram."

Initial interpretive note	Business legitimacy evaluated through religious values; mainstream entrepreneurial norms perceived as misaligned.
Case-level theme	Cultural congruence as legitimacy
Reflexive check	Interpretation remained consistent across readings; emphasis stayed on values rather than practical barriers.
Cross-case link	Aligns with SB and NJ's accounts, contributing to the pattern of identity-based hubs as sites of legitimate belonging.

Example 5: Participant RP (Family and Gender Norms)

Stage	**Illustration**
Raw quote	"I still ask permission from my husband… I don't know why, but I feel like I have to."
Initial interpretive note	Internalised gendered cultural expectations shaping agency; constraint experienced as normative rather than imposed.
Case-level theme	Internalised intersectional scripts
Reflexive check	Re-reading confirmed the focus is on internalisation rather than coercion.
Cross-case link	Echoed in SZ and DP's accounts, forming the broader pattern of navigating the intersectional moral economy of family.

Example 6: Participant TK (Entrepreneurship and Recognition)

Stage	**Illustration**
Raw quote	"I won an award… my family celebrated me… I felt proud."
Initial interpretive note	Recognition transforms family and community perceptions; legitimacy achieved retrospectively through success.
Case-level theme	Recognition as relational legitimacy
Reflexive check	Re-reading showed that legitimacy is relational and collective, often shaped through family recognition and celebration.
Cross-case link	Parallels NJ and SB's experiences, contributing to the pattern of relational and collective empowerment.

Example 7: Participant NB (Organisational Inclusion)

Stage	**Illustration**
Raw quote	"Good enough to do extra work but not good enough to get promotion."

Initial interpretive note	Effort and competence recognised instrumentally but not rewarded symbolically; value placed on labour rather than personhood.
Case-level theme	Inclusion without equality
Reflexive check	Re-reading confirmed emphasis on unequal recognition rather than skill deficit.
Cross-case link	Similar experiences described by RA and JR, contributing to the broader pattern of conditional inclusion in organisations.

Example 8: Participant RA (Identity-Based Networking)

Stage	**Illustration**
Raw quote	"I'm heading toward people who are within my ethnic group, knowing that they may understand my background."
Initial interpretive note	Movement towards co-ethnic spaces framed as a search for understanding rather than withdrawal from mainstream spaces.
Case-level theme	Seeking belonging through shared identity
Reflexive check	The meaning remained consistent: participants are making a conscious choice to move towards ethnic groups and spaces where people understand their cultural background and values.
Cross-case link	Aligns with NB and SZ's accounts, shaping the pattern of identity-based hubs as sites of legitimate belonging.

Example 9: Participant SL (Market and Agency)

Stage	**Illustration**
Raw quote	"If the customer is being racist, I do not want to work with anyone who does not respect me."
Initial interpretive note	Boundary-setting used as a moral and identity-affirming response to market racism.
Case-level theme	Bounded intersectional agency
Reflexive check	Re-analysis confirmed this as an assertion of dignity rather than retreat; meaning remained agentic across readings.
Cross-case link	Resonates with RP and SB's experiences, contributing to the pattern of partial empowerment within structural constraints.

Example 10: Participant JR (Promotion and Inequality)

Stage	Illustration
Raw quote	"English people always got promotions over Asians."
Initial interpretive note	Promotion outcomes interpreted as patterned and systemic rather than isolated incidents.
Case-level theme	Structural inequality in career progression
Reflexive check	Re-reading confirmed emphasis on repeated observation of unequal outcomes rather than a single experience.
Cross-case link	Similar patterns described by NB and RA, contributing to the broader theme of inclusion without equality.

Example 11: Participant NJ (Networking and Connection)

Stage	Illustration
Raw quote	"You sort of get the sense something's missing… I only connect with Black and brown."
Initial interpretive note	Difficulty forming connection framed as absence rather than exclusion; relational gap rather than direct rejection.
Case-level theme	Relational distance in mainstream networking spaces
Reflexive check	Later readings reinforced interpretation of emotional and cultural disconnection rather than structural exclusion alone.
Cross-case link	Aligns with SA and RA's accounts, contributing to the pattern of partial inclusion in mainstream entrepreneurial spaces.

Example 12: Participant DP (Cultural and Gender Norms)

Stage	Illustration
Raw quote	"Women understand the cultural layers that shape South Asian women."

Initial interpretive note	Cultural expectations understood as layered and complex, shaping identity and behaviour beyond surface-level norms.
Case-level theme	Cultural layers shaping gendered experience
Reflexive check	Re-analysis confirmed focus on layered understanding rather than isolated cultural expectations.
Cross-case link	Resonates with SZ and RP's accounts, contributing to the broader pattern of navigating the intersectional moral economy of family and culture.