

Unlocking Entrepreneurial Potential: Connection to Creation through a Visualizing Method for Enhancing Women's Business Networks in Tourism

Nozomi Saito ^{*}, Makoto Yamasaki ^{*},
Seiko Shirasaka ^{*}

Abstract

This study proposes a novel descriptive method, “Entrepreneurial Networks – Stakeholder Value Creation Mapping” (EN-SVCM) to support women entrepreneurs in the tourism sector of developing countries. Although business networks are widely acknowledged as critical to entrepreneurial success, many women face persistent social and structural challenges in accessing and leveraging such networks. The EN-SVCM method delineated in this paper integrates existing frameworks and tools to visualize current business networks, identify value exchanges, and strategically expand stakeholder connections. A pilot workshop in Uzbekistan was conducted with six women entrepreneurs to validate the method. Participants visualized their networks, conceptualized new experiential tourism services, and refined ideas through peer learning. Findings support the method's effectiveness and potential to strengthen entrepreneurial capabilities, enhance network awareness and expansion, uncovering growth opportunities, and enhancing network-based ideation. The EN-SVCM method offers a practical, adaptable tool for empowering women entrepreneurs by improving networks, stakeholder engagement and fostering inclusive, sustainable entrepreneurship in tourism.

Keywords: Tourism, Women Entrepreneurs, Networks, Stakeholder Value Creation

1 Introduction

In recent years, the number of entrepreneurs worldwide has steadily increased, reflecting a global shift toward innovation-driven economies and self-employment [1]. The Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM) 2022/2023 Global Report estimates that 594 million individuals were engaged in entrepreneurial activities globally in 2023, up from 582 million in 2020 [2]. Notably, this includes approximately 252 million women starting new businesses and another 153 million running established firms [3]. This rise in women's entrepreneurship is particularly significant in developing countries, where entrepreneurship often serves as a critical mechanism for advancing gender equality and enhancing women's economic participation in local and national contexts [3].

In these contexts, entrepreneurship in developing countries offers transformative benefits for women, such as enhancing economic independence, improving social inclusion, and empowerment [4]. However, women entrepreneurs continue to face persistent barriers, including limited access to capital, resources, and supportive networks, often shaped by restrictive cultural and

^{*} Keio University, Kanagawa, Japan

societal norms [5]. Among the many factors influencing business success, networks have been consistently highlighted as a key enabler, positively impacting firm performance [6][7].

Tourism, a major global industry, is a notable example of a sector that relies on networking to sustain a sophisticated and dynamic system, which fosters a more competitive and diversified environment [8]. This dynamic environment underscores the importance of business networks in tourism destinations, especially from a management perspective [9]. Another equally important, adjoined emerging field of research emphasizes the need to integrate gender perspectives into research on entrepreneurial networks [10], as men and women form and use networks differently [11]. Despite growing recognition of their importance, limited research has focused on how these networks can be visualized or how practical tools can be developed to support women entrepreneurs in navigating them [12]. Scarcer still, are investigations into approaches to network building and expansion for women entrepreneurs working in the tourism industry.

In addressing this gap, the purpose of this study is to design and propose a descriptive visualization method to map and analyze business networks for women entrepreneurs. This method offers intuitive visual tools that help women entrepreneurs identify key stakeholders, strategic linkages, and opportunities for stakeholder-centered value creation. By making these structures visible and actionable, the study aims to empower women entrepreneurs to better mobilize resources, expand alliances, and navigate the challenges embedded in their business environments.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Unpacking Entrepreneurial Networks and Gendered Challenges

The concept of entrepreneurial networks encompasses the formal and informal relationships that entrepreneurs establish with various individuals and organizations [13]. Networking functions as a mechanism for acquiring resources and support, while simultaneously facilitating the generation and exchange of entrepreneurial ideas [14]. In this context, networks are often conceptualized as collaborative arrangements [15] that play a critical role in fostering business sustainability and expansion [16].

In tourism research, there is growing interest in networks due to the sector's interdependent nature. Tourism networks are increasingly seen as complex, dynamic systems that evolve with changing organizational and environmental conditions [17]. These networks include diverse relational structures that support cooperation, innovation, and resilience within tourism ecosystems [18]. While many studies highlight the value of networks for entrepreneurs [7], a significant gap remains regarding the specific experiences and configurations of women entrepreneurs' networks, particularly in tourism [19]. Empirical research focusing on women entrepreneurs in developing countries is limited and remain largely unexplored.

Gender adds an additional layer of complexity to entrepreneurial networking. Research highlights the need to consider gender in studies of entrepreneurship and networking [10], as the networks of men and women entrepreneurs differ significantly [11]. One critical factor is the composition of an entrepreneur's network. Women's networks are often shaped by gender norms that limit their connections to family and close acquaintances, unlike the broader and more diverse networks typically formed by men [20]. This constraint can reduce access to essential resources such as capital, education, and information, affecting women's business outcomes.

Another impact on women's networks is that social and cultural expectations further restrict women's networking. Women are often expected to fulfill "triple roles" (reproductive, domestic, and productive) [21], leaving them with less time and freedom to network, especially in patriarchal societies [16]. While men often prioritize networking [22], women face structural barriers that hinder similar engagement. As a result, a lack of robust and expanding networks is seen as a key reason for the lower success rates among women entrepreneurs [23].

2.2 Visualizing Connections: Frameworks and Tools in Network Mapping

To address the complexity of networks as outlined above, visualizing business networks is a powerful method for simplifying complex relationships and understanding the structure, dynamics, and potential of entrepreneurial ecosystems [18]. As interest in collaborative and sustainable entrepreneurship grows, a range of conceptual frameworks and tools has emerged.

First, considering as a whole picture, the Business Ecosystem (BE) framework introduced by Moore [24] provides a foundational lens for analyzing interdependent relationships among firms and stakeholders. In this model, businesses co-evolve by developing capabilities around shared innovations and adapting continuously to external and internal dynamics. Building on this, the Tourism Business Ecosystem (TBE) concept applies BE to the tourism sector, where diverse actors operate within a shared environment [25]. Alternatively, a more specific application is the Smart Industrial Heritage Tourism Business Ecosystem (SIHTBE) proposed by Perfetto and Vargas-Sánchez [26], which incorporates Moore's model along with the principles of self-organization and stakeholder interaction.

Another approach involves leveraging the Value Mapping Tools developed by Bocken et al. [27][28], which provide a practical method for visualizing how each value is created, destroyed, missed, or co-created across stakeholder networks using concentric circles. These tools facilitate the analysis of value mapping and enhance the sustainability dimension of business model innovation. In addition, firms can gain a deeper understanding of stakeholder interactions and redesign them to better align with goals. Building on Bocken's framework, the Stakeholder Value Creation model for Business Model Analysis, introduced by Freudenreich et al. [29], further structures stakeholder relationships along five dimensions of a company's business model [29]. These dimensions help identify core value creation activities and categorize their general relationship to business operations [29].

Finally, the Customer Value Chain Analysis (CVCA), proposed by Donaldson et al. [30], presents a methodological tool to map and assess value exchanges among customers and stakeholders within existing or proposed social systems. CVCA visualizes flows of resources, such as goods, services, information, and money, making explicit who provides value, whose benefits, and how individually with details [30]. This tool helps identify key value relationships and clarifies stakeholder roles and needs [30].

While various conceptual frameworks have been proposed, there remains a lack of an integrated visualization method that offers a comprehensive, bird's-eye perspective of entrepreneurial networks, one that simultaneously maps stakeholder relationships, value exchanges, and mechanisms of value creation. Moreover, existing tools do not adequately incorporate potential stakeholders or account for the dynamic nature of entrepreneurial ecosystems. As a result, current approaches tend to examine these components in isolation, thereby limiting their capacity to

generate a systemic understanding. Without a holistic view, opportunities for collaboration, access to critical resources, and innovation pathways may remain obscured.

2.3 A Gendered Lens: Tourism Development and Entrepreneurship in Uzbekistan

The Republic of Uzbekistan is a prime location to investigate women entrepreneurs' ability to effectively establish networks in tourism because since 2016, Uzbekistan's tourism sector has undergone profound transformation, driven by government-led efforts to diversify the economy and integrate more fully into global markets [31]. For instance, the enactment of the Law on Tourism (3PY-549) in 2019 introduced strategic measures including visa liberalization, infrastructure development, and institutional strengthening [32]. These reforms led to rapid sectoral growth, with international tourist arrivals increasing from 2.7 million in 2017 to 6.7 million in 2019 [31]. In 2022, tourism contributed UZS 9,750.6 billion (1.2% of GDP), with projections indicating further growth to 1.5% of GDP by 2033 [33].

Moreover, alongside tourism expansion, the number of women entrepreneurs has gained visibility within Uzbekistan's socio-economic reform agenda. Initiatives by organizations such as the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and the US Embassy in Tashkent have promoted skills training and market access for women [34]. Despite these efforts, entrepreneurship remains predominantly male-dominated, and women continue to encounter systemic barriers in developing countries [35]. However, by transforming their mindset, female entrepreneurs may begin to recognize new possibilities for overcoming existing challenges.

3 Research Methodology

A review of the existing literature reveals that most studies on women entrepreneurs have predominantly adhered to a positivist paradigm [36]. However, much of this empirical work has focused on gender-based comparisons between male and female entrepreneurs, offering limited insights into sector-specific dynamics and sampling methodologies [37]. This underscores a significant gap in the literature, suggesting the need for inductive, qualitative approaches to more comprehensively explore entrepreneurship as a gendered phenomenon [38].

In response, qualitative research design has been adopted, as it is increasingly recognized as particularly valuable in entrepreneurship studies, providing nuanced insights into the complex psychosocial dimensions of women's entrepreneurial experiences [39]. Specifically, this study employed a descriptive qualitative methodology, which is especially well-suited to the examination of complex social phenomena. Building on this methodological foundation, the study applied an inductive approach to analyze participant discussions and workshop activities, enabling the emergence of empirically grounded insights and offering a comprehensive and richly contextualized portrayal of the entrepreneurial landscape within the tourism sector.

3.1 Theoretical Foundation and Structure of the EN-SVCM Method

To address the need for an enhanced visualization tool identified by the literature review, a novel descriptive method for the "Entrepreneurial Networks – Stakeholder Value Creation Mapping (EN-SVCM)" was proposed. This method was developed based on an amalgamation of insights from existing literature and combining two frameworks with one guiding tool.

To visualize the existing business networks for entrepreneurs, a framework titled “Existing Tourism Business Networks Mapping” was designed (Figure 1). Underpinning these are concepts from existing visualizing theoretical frameworks such as Smart Industrial Heritage Tourism Business Ecosystem (SIHTBE) [26], Value Mapping Tools [27][28], and Stakeholder Value Creation Framework for Business Model Analysis [29]. To capture comprehensive coverage of stakeholders for the tourism industry, eight categories were synthesized.

To address the challenges of detailing diverse stakeholder examples and illustrating value changes within networks [18], a guiding tool called the “Reference Materials” was developed, containing samples and prompts. It includes four headings (Category, Example of Stakeholders, Value gaining from, and Value given to) across eight categories based on the “Existing Tourism Business Networks Mapping”.

The second framework of this descriptive method is titled “Expanding Tourism Business Networks Mapping” (Figure 2). It draws on existing visualizing theoretical frameworks such as Value Mapping Tools [27][28]. Referring the existing business networks and their value propositions, this framework focuses on expanding the networks effectively and considering solutions for challenges women entrepreneurs have faced. To ensure a comprehensive understanding of networks structures and realizing these potentials, the framework incorporated three distinct network layers. For instance, it should map *who* is connected to *whom*, and reveal *who* holds potential influence, *what resources* are exchanged, and *where* opportunities for new value creation exist. In doing so, it should offer a powerful resource for entrepreneurs seeking to expand their networks strategically, overcome barriers, and drive sustainable growth.

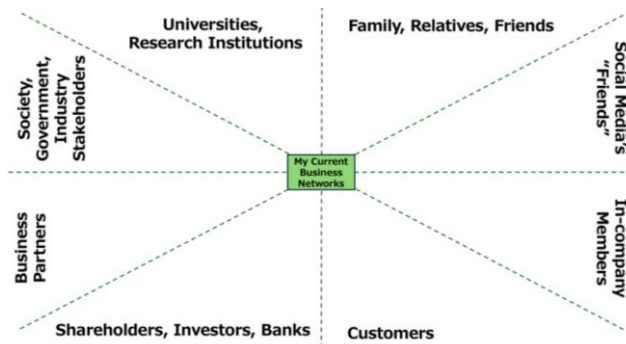


Figure 1: The Framework of the “Existing Tourism Business Networks Mapping”

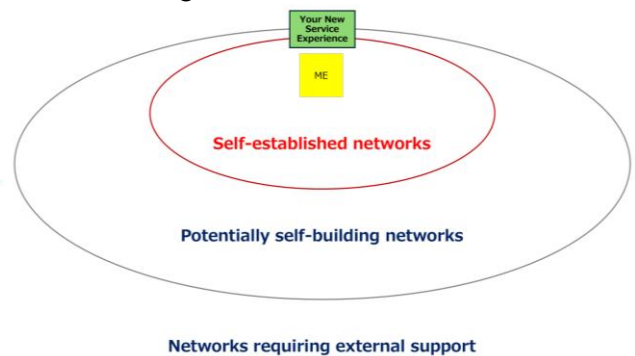


Figure 2: The Framework of the “Expanding Tourism Business Networks Mapping”

3.2 Step-by-Step Guide and Practical Application of the EN-SVCM Method

This study developed and proposed a novel descriptive method to visualize the EN-SVCM through a structured workshop conducted with women entrepreneurs in the tourism industry in Uzbekistan. This method consists of three steps, outlined below.

Step 1: Visualization of existing business networks (individual work): In Step 1, participants individually visualized their current business networks using the “Existing Tourism Business Networks Mapping” (Figure 1).

Task 1 - Creation of the “Existing Tourism Business Networks Mapping”: Participants were instructed to create their own “Existing Tourism Business Networks Mapping”. Each stakeholder

was recorded, and participants identified and documented key stakeholders and strong connections within their current business networks.

Task 2 - Identification and listing of stakeholders: In the second task, participants further identified and listed existing stakeholders by referring to the “Reference Materials”. Participants then expanded their stakeholder maps created in Task 1 by consulting the “Reference Materials”.

Task 3 - Illustration of existing value exchanges: In the final task, participants depicted existing value exchanges among stakeholders by again reconsidering the “Reference Materials”. The CVCA tool was utilized to help participants capture value concepts and clarify the flow of value among stakeholders within their networks [38]; a process which we coined “Value Exchanging Mapping”. The example of a result of “Value Exchanging Mapping” was shown and explained before diagrams were drawn by participants. Figure 3 depicts samples of those created by participant, based on the above-described method.

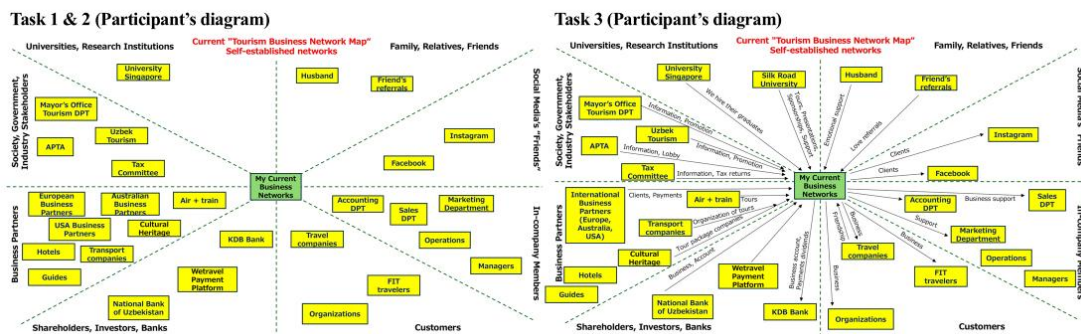


Figure 3: Illustration of Step 1 - Participant's Diagram

Step 2: Leveraging business networks to develop a new experiential tourism service (individual work): In Step 2, participants individually conceptualized new services, products, or ideas by leveraging their existing business networks through the process of “Expanding Tourism Business Networks Mapping” following the template provided (Figure 2).

Task 1 - Concrete planning of new services and experiences: Participants were asked to consider a new service, product, or idea that could be developed using their existing business networks. They recorded each idea, externalizing their initial concepts for further development.

Task 2 - Organizing necessary resources: Participants then identified the key resources required to realize the service, product, or idea conceptualized in Task 1. These resources included human resources, materials, locations, and other critical assets. Participants were encouraged to refer to the "Reference Materials" for ideas. All identified resources were recorded on a worksheet to visualize the necessary components for implementation.

Subsequently, participants categorized the listed stakeholders and resources into two groups to identify those already accessible within their existing networks (yellow), and those currently outside their networks and requiring new connections (pink). This process allowed participants to systematically assess both internal and external network assets.

Task 3 – Extending the network to realize new services, products, or ideas: In the final task, participants positioned both types of notes within the appropriate locations of the three network layers defined in the framework. They then illustrated the anticipated value exchanges between

stakeholders using “Value Exchanging Mapping”. To further enhance planning, participants identified value exchanges that were currently missing but necessary for the realization of their new service, product, or idea. These missing value elements were written in green to highlight potential gaps and areas requiring solutions. In cases where participants were unsure of how to address these gaps, they marked the uncertainties with red question marks.

This exercise encouraged participants to think strategically about how to extend and strengthen their networks to turn their new service concepts into reality, while identifying critical unknown resource needs. An example diagram created by one of the participants based on the above-described method and guidelines showing as examples, was presented to illustrate these processes (Figure 4).

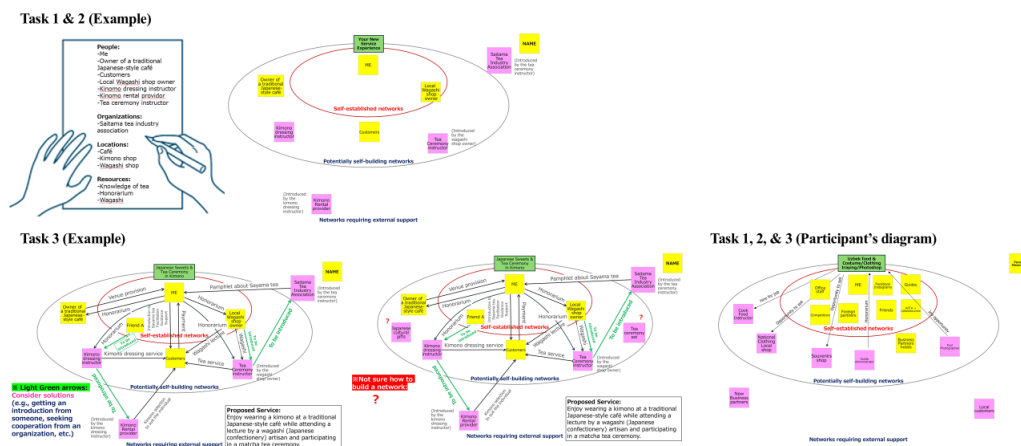


Figure 4: Illustration of Step 2 - Example and Participant's Diagram

Step 3: Refining business ideas and networks (peer learning): In Step 3, participants engaged in group work to refine and strengthen their EN-SVCMs developed during Steps 1 and 2. Participants were divided into two groups of three members. Within each group, individuals took turns presenting their visualized EN-SVCMs as their outputs.

During each presentation, group members provided feedback by recording their suggestions in blue. Feedback focused on ways to enhance the presenter's business networks, support the proposed ideas, and offer strategies for network expansion. Following the presentation, the presenter received and provided feedback to group members and then relevant suggestions were integrated into each individual's EN-SVCM diagram.

This collaborative step facilitated peer learning and enabled participants to improve their business ideas through constructive dialogue and network-based insights. The process allowed participants to systematically assess both internal and external network assets necessary for the development of new experiential tourism services. Figure 5 presents an example diagram created by one of the participants based on the previously described method and guidelines.

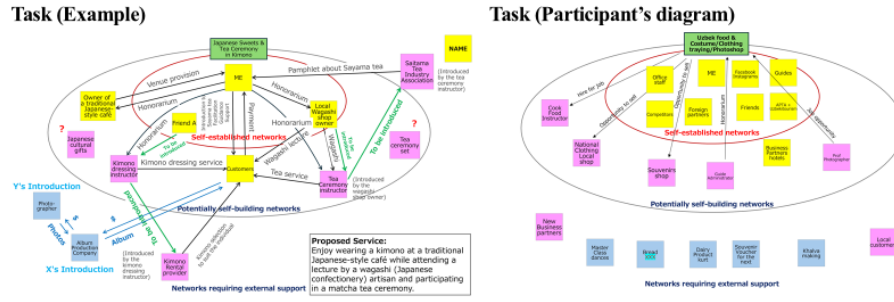


Figure 5: Illustration of Step 3 - Example and Participant's Diagram

3.3 Verification of the EN-SVCM Descriptive Method

The workshops were designed with three primary objectives: (1) to assess the participant's ability to visualize their business networks through this descriptive method, (2) to evaluate the efficacy of the proposed EN-SVCM method through a pilot workshop, and (3) to assess its effectiveness of peer learning for women entrepreneurs in the tourism industry.

To meet these objectives a workshop was conducted in March 2025 in Tashkent, Uzbekistan. Tashkent was selected due to its prominence as the capital city and its relatively higher concentration of women entrepreneurs in the tourism sector. The workshop spanned one day, consisting of a four-hour session. Instructions were primarily delivered in English and supplemented with real-time Russian translation to ensure the participants' understanding.

A purposive sampling strategy was employed to recruit participants actively engaged in tourism entrepreneurship. Potential participants were identified through online sources such as websites and Telegram groups linked to tourism-related businesses and networks. Research team members directly contacted individuals who had expressed interest in tourism business development via social media platforms. The final participants consisted of a small group of women entrepreneurs (six participants) who met the study criteria (Table 1).

Table 1: Workshop Participant Profile

Participants	Age	Marital status	Highest level of Education	Business Structure	Position in your business	Number of employees	Years in Business	Primary source(s) of business financing
P1	20-29 years old	Married	Bachelor's degree	Solo Proprietorship	Solo owner	18	3	Personal savings
P2	40-49 years old	Married	Bachelor's degree	Family-owned business	Co-owner (partnership)	35	22	Other
P3	40-49 years old	Divorced/Separated	College (secondary vocational education)	Solo Proprietorship	Solo owner	6	9	Personal savings
P4	50-59 years old	Divorced/Separated	Master's degree	Family-owned business	Solo owner	7	17	Personal savings
P5	40-49 years old	Married	Master's degree	Other	CEO/Managing Director	7	9	Personal savings
P6	40-49 years old	Divorced/Separated	Bachelor's degree	Solo Proprietorship	Founder	3	18	Personal savings

3.4 Overview of Data Collection Methods

Three primary data collection methods were utilized: online questionnaires, participant-generated workshop outputs, and observations. First, the pre-workshop questionnaire collected demographic data and assessed participants' initial perceptions of their business networks using a seven-point Likert scale. The post-workshop questionnaire re-evaluated these perceptions, measured the effectiveness of the EN-SVCM method, and gathered feedback. Second, participant-generated outputs included handwritten worksheets completed in English or Russian (or a combination), which were subsequently digitized and translated into English for analysis. These

materials provided critical qualitative data for assessing the proposed method's effectiveness. Third, observational data was also collected through direct observations and video recordings during the workshop. These records provided supplementary insights into participant engagement, interaction dynamics, and practical challenges encountered during the activities. This multi-method data collection strategy ensured a comprehensive evaluation of the EN-SVCM method.

4 Results and Discussion

4.1 Assessing Participants' Network Visualization via the ET-SVCM Method

To assess the viability of the "Existing Tourism Business Networks Mapping" tool, outputs from all participants were systematically analyzed. Most participants were able to follow each step of the network mapping process with ease, utilizing the provided "Reference Materials". The activity was perceived as valuable, with comments such as "Connections are very important" (P1) and "New opportunities and advancement in business" (P3), emphasizing the perceived value of the activity. The method proved user-friendly across participants, regardless of educational background or prior professional experience.

In evaluating the efficiency of "Value Exchanging Mapping", further insights emerged. While several participants successfully depicted value exchanges within their networks, others encountered challenges articulating both value received *from*, and value provided *to* different stakeholders. Participants were generally more confident in mapping value exchanges in categories such as "Family, Relatives, Friends" and "Business Partners." However, some participants experienced difficulty mapping exchanges in less familiar or more formal categories, such as "Shareholders, Investors, Banks" and "Society, Government, Industry Stakeholders."

Participant reflections further highlighted the tool's potential to generate introspection and reflection. One participant noted, "I'm more of a giver" (P5), while another observed, "I'm more of a taker" (P2). Such statements suggest that the process facilitated greater self-awareness regarding the nature of their stakeholder relationships. Moreover, the activity stimulated recognition of the need to strengthen and diversify participants' networks, as illustrated by one participant's realization: "Business ties need to be expanded" (P2).

Overall, the ET-SVCM method effectively helped participants visualize their business networks. The process illuminated existing stakeholder relationships and catalyzed reflection on strategic network development. The incorporation of the "Value Exchanging Mapping" revealed a need for refinement, particularly in aiding participants to more clearly identify and articulate mutual value exchanges, especially in the more complex stakeholder categories. Further planned improvements will consider additional support materials or guided facilitation to enhance participants' understanding of value creation and exchange with formal and institutional stakeholders.

4.2 Pilot Workshop to Evaluate the Efficacy of the Proposed ET-SVCM Method

The results of the pilot workshop utilizing the proposed the ET-SVCM method demonstrate its potential as a tool for enabling women entrepreneurs to better visualize their current business networks and identify opportunities for strategic expansion involving diverse stakeholders. To evaluate the effectiveness of the ET-SVCM method, both the participants' workshop outputs and

responses to pre- and post-workshop questionnaires were systematically analyzed.

Participants generally reported high satisfaction with the workshop, stating they gained valuable insights into the importance of multi-stakeholder networking. Several participants highlighted this in their feedback. For instance, Participant 1 stated, “Connections in business are critical to scaling,” while Participant 2 emphasized, “Business networking greatly helps in personal development, the perception of those around you as a representative, and contributes to business growth.” Participant 3 added, “I recognized and learned new ideas and approaches.”

Although all six participants initially expressed satisfaction with the size and quality of their current networks prior to the workshop, two participants revised this view after engaging with the ET-SVCM method. This suggests that the method was successful in prompting participants to recognize previously unconsidered opportunities for network expansion and value exchange with a wider range of stakeholders. Furthermore, three participants reported an increased awareness of the challenges involved in expanding networks, once they became more cognizant of additional potential connections. For example, Participant 3 remarked, “It was very informative and helped me identify my weaknesses in running my business.”

Critically, the method also encouraged entrepreneurial reflection and action. One participant shared, “I had been thinking about a new business idea for about two years, but I couldn’t decide if I really needed it—until the workshop” (P1). This feedback underscores the method’s capacity to unlock dormant ideas and catalyze entrepreneurial decision-making.

Overall, participants evaluated the ET-SVCM method positively across several dimensions: its usefulness in generating insights on network expansion, inspiring new ideas and services, motivating network building actions, and identifying opportunities and challenges in stakeholder engagement. As a result, the pilot application of the ET-SVCM method effectively supported women entrepreneurs in the tourism industry by increasing their awareness of current and potential networks, fostering new business ideas, and promoting proactive stakeholder engagement.

4.3 Evaluating Peer Learning for Women Entrepreneurs in Tourism

A subsequent evaluation of the peer learning process revealed its effectiveness in fostering network expansion and enhancing stakeholder engagement among women entrepreneurs in the tourism sector. To assess the outcomes, a systematic analysis was conducted of the participants’ workshop outputs (including video recordings) and responses to a post-workshop questionnaire.

The majority of participants reported that the advice and comments received from peers were both helpful and practically applicable to their own contexts. Significantly, half of participants actively contributed by offering constructive feedback on their peers’ visualized network maps, thereby strengthening the collaborative learning environment. Furthermore, participants expressed that observing the visual presentations of others’ networks and stakeholder strategies served as a source of inspiration. This peer exchange encouraged them to reconsider their own stakeholder relationships, expand their networks, and refine their business ideas accordingly.

5 Conclusion, Limitations, and Future Research

This study proposed and validated the EN-SVCM method as a novel, practical approach to visualizing and enhancing the business networks of women entrepreneurs in the tourism sector for

developing countries. Findings from a pilot workshop in Uzbekistan demonstrated the method's effectiveness in helping participants understand their current networks, identify overlooked stakeholder relationships, and develop strategies for network expansion. By combining individual reflection with peer learning, the workshop design fostered both self-awareness and entrepreneurial ideation, highlighting EN-SVCM's potential to generate actionable insights and support women in overcoming structural barriers.

Despite these promising results, the study also identified areas for improvement. Participants sometimes struggled to identify value exchanges with formal stakeholders, suggesting a need for clearer guidance and illustrative examples. Additionally, the small sample size and context-specific nature of the workshop limits the generalizability of the findings. Future research should replicate the EN-SVCM method across diverse cultural and geographic contexts, while assessing its long-term impact on business growth, innovation, and network resilience.

In future, further enhancements such as integrating digital tools and developing capacity-building modules, could increase usability and scalability. Ultimately, this study contributes to the growing body of research on gendered entrepreneurial ecosystems and offers a practical, adaptable framework for promoting inclusive, stakeholder-driven entrepreneurship in developing regions.

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