Introduction

Regardless of the growth of female participation in entrepreneurial activities (Cardella et al., 2020), female entrepreneurship is still an under-researched area that received attention only recently. Many entrepreneurship studies have created identities of female entrepreneurs as subordinates and underperformers (Jayawarna et al., 2020; Marlow & McAdam, 2013) often linked with how women decisively do not expand or develop their businesses due to prioritized family responsibilities (Cardella et al., 2020). This identity often contradicts the neoclassical theory, which explains that entrepreneurs are active individuals who seek profitable opportunities rather than prioritize family responsibilities. In this setting, female entrepreneurship researchers have been made to re-evaluate dominant economic theories to show the strong relationship between gender structure and entrepreneurship (Ahl, 2006; Ahl & Marlow 2012; Ahl & Nelson, 2010; Hughes et al., 2012). Furthermore, knowledge related to the female entrepreneurship area is mainly constructed through quantitative studies (Ojong et al., 2021, Henry, Foss & Ahl, 2015; Henry, Foss, Fayolle, et al., 2015). There is little qualitative information about why the entrepreneur is involved or about what they add to the entrepreneurial venture. Thus, it is clear that these studies were affected negatively by methodological predispositions as many of them were quantitative and did not explore the real feelings, experiences, and behavior of research participants deeply.

This research aims to explore women’s experiences in constructing their identities. In this regard, researchers argue that quantitative techniques are, in general, less effective in understanding contexts and processes (Gummesson, 2000; Hammersley, 2008). As such, quantitative methods are not sufficient to explain the complexity of many essential aspects of people and communities such as Sri Lankan female entrepreneurs, identities, cultural norms, and the social elements that possibly impact these women’s entrepreneurial decisions. These concerns cannot be meaningfully reduced to numbers. Therefore, a qualitative approach is more suitable for this study. Furthermore, this study is based on how female entrepreneurs place themselves in their stories, attach themselves to specific issues, use and combine texts and materials to articulate and make themselves and their actions, including entrepreneurial activities, meaningful. Therefore, the narrative
would be the most appropriate research design for this study among other qualitative research based on its setting.

Researchers revealed that a narrative design is a proper epistemological stance for the contextualized knowledge that entrepreneurship research can use (Hjorth & Steyaert, 2004). In general, narrative research is perceived to be open to the readers who are capable of easily identifying the characters and partially recognizing their own experiences. The narrative provides the experiences of others which then can be compared to one’s own story or to be seen in a new light later on (Hjorth & Steyaert, 2004). It would be a more feasible methodological solution in the entrepreneurship research area as it allows translation possibilities between discourses and practices of inquiry (Belghiti-Mahut et al., 2020). There was plenty of evidence to support new knowledge gained in the field of entrepreneurship through narrative research. One example is Steyaert (1997), who studied high-tech entrepreneurs to examine the innovative strategies used to remain in the business and their experiences. The narrative analysis in the study is crucial when trying to view and understand the ways in which entrepreneurs’ history, experience, identity, and evaluation are organized in the stories, realized interactively against others through the development and use of a specific language (Steyaert, 1997). M. Lindgren and Packendorff (2008) studied female teachers who established their own businesses in the identity-building processes and examined the similarities they shared as well as the differences between them. Hytti (2003) explored how entrepreneurial identity relates to other aspects of their lives, such as mothers, daughters, and professionals in the field. Narrative researchers were able to uncover the hidden meaning through people’s stories. For example, Johansson (2004) argued that a narrative approach contributes to the literature by enriching the understanding of what motivates individual entrepreneurs and how their businesses are run.

Further, narrative research allows exploring individual experiences beyond a question-response interview and questionnaire, providing insights into entrepreneurial decisions (Wang, 2019). Listening and reproducing stories may enhance defining an entrepreneurial identity. In the literature, women are mainly considered wives or mothers, not as entrepreneurs in stories (Bek & Blanco, 2020). Thus, it can be clearly seen that narrative method-ology in female entrepreneurship has been highly limited. So far, in line with this situation, a minimal number of empirical studies have been conducted in developing countries. Therefore, there remains an opening for methodological and empirical research in the field of female entrepreneurship. Therefore, this paper aimed to fill the gap in the literature when applying a narrative design in female entrepreneurship. Furthermore, the study sought to resolve the central questions of how the narrative approach can be used in researching female entrepreneurship?

**Literature Review**

**Female Entrepreneurship**

Current data and statistics toward entrepreneurship show growth in female participation in entrepreneurial activities in many countries, but this research area has received limited attention (Brush & Cooper, 2012; Ojong et al., 2021) Brush and Cooper (2012) have revealed how vital women’s contribution to the economy is. However, few researchers focus on female entrepreneurship as a separate research area, representing less than 10% of entrepreneurship literature (Meyer, 2018). Financial and other traditional constraints, competing family and business, and trait differences in female and male entrepreneurs were dominant themes in female entrepreneurship literature (Cardella et al., 2020). In most cases, researchers reveal that entrepreneurial women play multiple roles, and they are complex individuals who challenge traditional gender roles, and women’s subordinate position is constantly emphasized (Cardella et al., 2020; Henry et al., 2021; Welter, 2004).

Furthermore, female entrepreneurs have a lower success rate in their businesses, which can not resemble under-performance, a well-known myth (Jayawarna et al., 2020; Marlow & McAdam, 2013). However, a powerful argument in female entrepreneurship literature shows that the percentage of success in female entrepreneurs is at a low level when compared to their male counterparts (Marlow & McAdam, 2013). This is frequently connected with the ways in which women purposefully keep their businesses small as a result of prioritising their family responsibilities.

According to statistics, women are generally under-represented in business, showing a wider path for female entre-preneurship development. In general, women’s businesses are usually smaller and low-growth and limited explicitly to specific low-value sectors, most usually in retail and service industries (Meyer, 2018). The article has further reviewed vital issues relating to gender differences discussed in the literature on female entrepreneurship. Women face gender discrimination when starting their ventures. These include reduced access to financial capital, lack of good high-level networks, societal expectations, pressure to follow female gender-stereotyped roles, and overcoming cultural barriers. Many researchers in the area of entrepreneurship consistently revealed the strong relationship between masculinity and entrepreneurship (Meyer, 2018). The women who wish to choose entrepreneurship as their career path should have masculine characteristics rather than feminine ideals such as caring and empathy (Brush, 2006). Further, some researchers discussed the weaknesses of comparing men’s and women’s entrepreneurial experiences and placing them in two separate categories (Brush & Cooper, 2012). Therefore, researchers should consider female entrepreneurship as a different research field and gender issues related to particular cultures and social structures due to their changing nature.
Discovering the Essentials of the Narrative Approach

Relativism, rather than absolute truth, is at the center of this qualitative method, and it recognizes the existence of more than one reality in line with social constructionist thinking. From a hermeneutical perspective, life and story are interrelated; they depend on each other (Riessman, 2002). Human life is a construed story interpreted by different people (Riessman, 2005), and narratives consist of human experience and action (Cruz et al., 2020). The narrative technique is more appropriate for studying culture, history, language and identity because of the importance of human involvement in building a story (Riessman, 2002; Wang, 2019). The narrative mirrors social life for sociologists, as culture expresses itself through a story (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Cruz et al., 2020). Researchers can evaluate the importance of culture and history through narratives (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The prime reason to drive someone into applying narrative inquiry is that humans are individuals creating their own stories. These people lead stories both individually and socially (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Riessman (2002) found that the main reason for narrative research is to recognize participants’ experiences, which relate to various events and actions encountered in their lives in chronological order. Narrative inquiry starts from experience as communicated in stories lived and retold. The narrative methods essentially contain experiential starting points that are told by and linked with theoretical literature. The theoretical literature notifies either the methodology or an understanding of the experiences with which the inquirer initiated (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Simply saying, narrative research is reconstructing someone’s experience in connection to both themselves and others in a specific social setting (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Researchers have explained that experience divides into three main parts: relational, temporal, and continuous (Bek & Blanco, 2020). Experience is relational as people always create and develop relationships with each other. These relationships are formed within their social contexts as relationships cannot exist in a vacuum (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Experience is also temporal because it constantly evolves and changes as it develops over time (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Nasheeda et al., 2019). Finally, experience is continuous since it emerges “from other experiences, these experiences lead to further new experiences and follow onto a series of continuous experiences” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Taking these ideas related to experience into account (an ontological concept), narrative researchers have accordingly created the belief that knowledge can be constructed by studying people through their experiences (an epistemological claim; J. Lindgren et al., 2020). Consequently, researchers argue that lived experience is an essential “source of important knowledge and understanding” (Clandinin & Connelly 2000). For narrative inquirers, such as Johansson (2004), “the regulative ideal for inquiry is to make a new relationship between a human being and their environment” by pursuing “to examine experience to identify new possibilities within that experience.” Accordingly, they have the true understanding of why lived experience is “the ultimate validation for knowledge” (Clandinin & Connelly 2000; J. Lindgren et al., 2020).

The narrative approach in entrepreneurship research. The narrative approach originated from the sociology area and has expanded into various fields such as entrepreneurship. However, the narrative approach in entrepreneurship research has been relatively limited in its use (Hytti, 2003; Mmbagaa et al., 2020; Wang, 2019). Researchers emphasize the value of context, culture, and identity when understanding entrepreneurial behavior. However, many researchers have examined the context in an overall way rather than regarding the differences in the distinct environment. Surprisingly context and cultural influences have been neglected areas in entrepreneurship research, where a context is needed to be understood well when taking appropriate decisions Henry et al., 2021. In response to these concerns, entrepreneurship scholars should focus on research dedicated especially to context using a narrative methodology (Radu-Lefebvre et al., 2021). However, given that context dominates entrepreneurial identity, there is still a broader path to go before understanding the essence and context relationship through stories.

Some exciting ideas were developed by using narrative research in entrepreneurship to understand human experience better. For example, Belghiti-Mahut et al. (2020) revealed how a woman's spouse attempted to influence female entrepreneurs businesses and women perceived that partners are the central character of their stories. Essers and Benschop (2007) explained how female ethnic minority entrepreneurs discuss their different identities work at crossing the barriers of gender, ethnicity, and entrepreneurship by corresponding with other communities they interact within. Each community has their own unique societal expectations and agendas that demand the entrepreneur, and they build diverse ideas of entrepreneurship, which individuals adapt to when engaging in various contexts (Essers & Benschop, 2007). Some researchers revealed that people create different identities through networking and by considering other discourses in particular spaces (Knox et al., 2021, McAdams, 2018). Rae (2005) have discovered that engagement with peers allows students to learn activities connected to entrepreneurial identity in an entrepreneurial education setting.

Individuals construct stories that define and give meaning to their collective entrepreneurial identities (Hytti, 2003; Rae, 2005). These stories explain group attributes which they belong to (“who we are”) and the primary practice (“what we do”). These stories about entrepreneurs can be communicated both verbally or in a written language and include subjects (focal actors), an object (goal), and a context (Czarniawska, 1995, 2000). Identity stories created by a small group of people would increase the validity of the research by designing
portraits with a logical value that creates groups in a way so that they are more perceivable to both internal and external audiences (Rae, 2005). Coherent identity narratives are dedicated to emphasize the similarities shared by the group members and to differentiating them from other group identities (Kar, 2020; Williams et al., 2020).

Furthermore, these unique group identities are positioned within places such as markets or industries that are places with a broader social context (Radu-Lefebvre et al., 2021). Most individuals have a clear idea of their identity and position in their local contexts (Williams et al., 2020). Yitshaki and Kropp (2016) have highlighted the contrast between passion and identity evolution in narratives based on the life story of high-tech and social entrepreneurs. The way of viewing this contrast adds context of industry-level to both the national and regional context, which can shape situated social identities differently.

Now focusing on the dark side of the narrative inquiry, common complaints are inherent subjectivity and over-focus on individuals rather than social context (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). However, narrative research justifies that individuals are part of the wider society (Birch, 2011). Further, narrative studies mainly depend on the participants’ storytelling abilities and readiness to share their experiences with others (Hytti, 2003). Finally, the division between seeing and doing is the problem in the narrative inquiry, as the researcher can only listen to the story (Hytti, 2003). So researchers can easily address the issues related to seining by using observations of entrepreneurs everyday life.

**Theoretical framework.** The theoretical framework constructed in the study is done based on identity theory (Stryker & Burke, 2000) and narrative theory (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Identity theory suggests that behavior is interlinked with the concept of yourself and socially (Stryker & Burke, 2000). Simply, identity is personalized but is also constructed through society. To understand identity, one must know how it is shaped and sustained through social relationships (Knox et al., 2021). Furthermore, an individual’s identity isn’t constant and evolves over time (McAdams, 2018). Individuals may have different identities and roles based on their experience and self-reflection, affecting their past, present, and future behavior (Hytti, 2003; Munoz & Cohen, 2018). Relating identity theory and entrepreneurship research is a critical aspect that has been acknowledged but is still under investigation (Hytti, 2003; Kar, 2020; Munoz & Cohen, 2018).

Researchers suggest that a connection between identity theory and entrepreneurship is vital to open up new avenues and theorize entrepreneurship (Radu-Lefebvre et al., 2021; Williams et al., 2020). Clandinin and Connelly (2000) provided a sound theoretical background for narrative research: focusing on a metaphorical “three-dimensional narrative inquiry space” (interaction, continuity, and situation or place). The interaction can be divided into two different categories, which are personal and social relationships. As Clandinin and Connelly (2000) observed, “People are always interacting with their situations in any experience.” Therefore, people feel their inner reflection in any experience through emotions, feelings, reactions, and ideas (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). People also experience external interactions in society (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Continuity refers to a person’s past, current, and future experience. The situation and place refer to experience’s third dimension (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Every occasion takes place specifically, physical and in a concrete place within its topological boundaries. At last, it can be concluded that the experience is a jigsaw puzzle to be solved through personal and social interaction concerning the past, present, and future (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

In this setting, the theoretical framework for the study is visualized in Figure 1.

**Methodology**

This study revolves around the social constructionist approach as the experiences and interpretations of female entrepreneurs will vary. Female entrepreneurs construct different meanings of individual situations and different identities, such as their diverse roles, activities, and influences within their businesses based on how they perceive reality. In this situation, multiple realities may be constructed. Theoretically, using narrative research design is encouraged by a criticism of the traditional question-response type of interviews (Bauer, 1996; Cruz et al., 2020). In addition, the narrative technique is more appropriate for studying culture, history, language, and identity because of the importance of human involvement in building a story (Riessman, 2002; Wang, 2019). Therefore, the narrative would be the most appropriate research design for this study among other qualitative research based on its setting.

Information-rich cases in the study were selected through the use of purposive sampling. Fourteen narrative interviews were conducted to get the female entrepreneurs’ voices. An extreme and maximum variation approach produced an initial potential sample, and the final selection made a combination approach. The extreme deviant case sampling approach selects unusual or exceptional cases in some way; such are too good or too imperfect (Patton, 2002). For example, the researcher chose one respondent as she was the best businessperson in the Southern Region in 2007 and the best businesswoman in 2008. The researcher was on the search for entrepreneurs of diverse backgrounds who had personalized stories to tell.

Regarding routes to entrepreneurship, the researcher sought to identify three individuals. The first who had recovered from unemployment, the second a university, and the last a previous employee of a company. One particular interest was one respondent who gave up the public sector job to
become an entrepreneur. In line with Hytti (2003), since female tourism entrepreneurs were the center of attention at the beginning of the 2000s, the researcher sought to introduce the new wave of entrepreneurs in this study. While most Sri Lankan entrepreneurs are currently middle-aged, entrepreneurs of all age groups were needed for this study. It was also vital to include women from rural areas, as urban-based women would probably be in different circumstances than those from rural areas. Moreover, the sample included both married and single women to understand their different experiences and back-and-forth concerning societal norms, attitudes, and identity. Although both groups have different experiences within their social context, some aspects of social life are not similar. These differences and uniqueness added value to the study by bringing complexity and quality. Overall, heterogeneity was a guiding principle when selecting respondents for the study to capture a wide range of perspectives. The researcher was able to find out participants for the study through the opportunistic sampling method. For example, the researcher heard about one respondent through another respondent during fieldwork; the researcher was told that her restaurant was the oldest in the area and decided to choose her as a participant in the study.

The narrative interviews were conducted over five phases (Mueller, 2019; Bauer, 1996; Birch, 2011), and some specific rules were applied in each phase (Boeijinga et al., 2017). In the first stage, the researcher became familiarized with the research field. This included initial investigations, informal chats, listening to rumors, and reading industry-related documents (Boeijinga et al., 2017). Based on the information through initial experiments, the researcher made exmanent questions. Exmanent questions display the researcher’s interests that come from researcher preparations and language to the topic of study (Bauer, 1996). The second stage was introducing the main topic and asking initial questions. The interviewer should introduce the subject of the interview in a way that the storytelling is generated. Therefore, the researcher introduced the initial topic because the informant was motivated to develop a story including a long sequence of past, present, and future events (Birch, 2011). The following critical phase was the main story. When the story began, the researcher did not disturb until there was a natural conclusion. The researcher does not provide any comments except non-verbal cues to show focused listening, for example, an occasional nod (mmm, yes) and motivation to tell the story (Sandelowski, 1991). While listening to the story, the interviewer wrote down the essential points that can be clarified later. Once the story was told, the researcher started to ask questions. This was the stage when good listening was fruitful (Bauer, 1996). The last stage of the narrative interview was the small talk or exit talk. After the show, the recorder was off, and both parties relaxed and comfortably talked to each other (Bauer, 1996; Birch, 2011). The additional information received in this stage was crucial for clarifying the data in the analysis stage. Fieldwork activities were carried out over 6 months between September to February 2019. All the interviews were held at the business places of women entrepreneurs. The average time of the discussion was around one and half hours.

There are many different methods by which qualitative data can be analyzed, one of which is narrative analysis. In exploring narratives, the researcher vigorously finds the participant’s voice in a particular place, setting, and time (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Next, the researcher sought to describe the female entrepreneurs’ stories, experiences, and feelings. Data reduction was the first step in data analysis, which involved transcribing interviews to a level that only produces information necessary for the research (Boeijinga et al., 2017; Nasheeda et al., 2019). The nature of detail
depends on the study’s objective and the extent to which the transcription includes elements beyond the simple words used (Bauer, 1996). Extracts were reduced where necessary to exclude repetition, examples, and other unnecessary information. Many researchers suggested a stepwise process of qualitative data reduction (Bauer, 1996; Birch, 2011). The next step involved identifying where the major themes of female entrepreneurs’ stories. Finally, researchers searched for similarities shared and differences between the stories.

Further, information was obtained from key informants in the study, and these key informants were mainly facilitated through the access of the research site and provided a general background of the area. For example, one respondent was suggested by the Junior Vice-President of Travel and Tour Agency in response to the researcher’s request to find an individual with a University background. Some strategies like member checking, data triangulation, audit trail, and thick description were used to increase the trustworthiness of the research. The ethical procedure was followed throughout the study.

**Major Findings**

Emergent themes related to the application of narrative research design with female entrepreneurs are presented in the following section.

**Interview Guide Has Little Value in Narrative Research**

The narrative provides an alternative way to organize interview conversations (Bruce et al., 2016; Hytti, 2003). Good questions are the roots of a long and complete story (1996). Warm-up, broad, and supplemental probe questions were used to collect the stories of female entrepreneurs. Among others, warm-up questions were the best to support storytellers to elicit the narration. The interviews with the participants began with some warm-up questions on exciting and timely important things such as weather, climate, cricket matches, and popular TV programs. Threatening questions such as the current political situation in the country were purposely avoided. There were two reasons for warm-up questions: first, ensuring that the participants were comfortable with the interview process, gaining their trust, and making them feel sufficiently confident to reveal their life stories. They were then told that the researcher would like to know more about their business and life stories and that they would be listened to without interruption and could make any clarifications later on.

The study found that it was not valuable to prepare an interview protocol including broad questions to understand the unique experiences of female entrepreneurs. The finding was not consistent with previous researchers as they highlighted the importance of interview protocols with around five to seven broad questions related to the research problem (Nasheeda et al., 2019; Riessman, 2002). For example, in this study, women were questioned about supporting institutions in Sri Lanka. However, they did not know how they would reply. They again went back to their stories relating to childhood, school life, and marriage, the details of how the business attained the level they are at is currently at past experiences, and the process of adaptation to the current business. The concept of continuity in the narrative theory complied with the findings of this research (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

The study also found that additional probing questions provided excellent support for understanding the storytellers’ thoughts and personal experiences, such as everyday life, feelings, and critical decisions in the business. Probing questions are an essential question type in narrative research. The researcher needed to get further explanation from research participants., “Can you tell me a little more?” and “Can I have an example?” are two examples of probing questions used in the study. When female entrepreneurs were asked what they learned from their role models, specifically former employers and their business experience related to particular situations, in this study, they elaborated in detail with examples. As the researcher used more probing questions in this study, participants gave answers with ease and comfort.

**Skills of the Narrative Researcher**

Findings revealed that listening, building trust, negotiation, and probing were essential skills that the researcher had to possess to successfully interview female entrepreneurs. In qualitative research, informed consent is negotiated and renegotiated throughout the research process (Nasheeda et al., 2019; Siwale, 2015). Despite the researcher having a background that featured some elements of insiderness, this did not offer an automatic benefit or access to the research site or participants, as had been assumed when planning this study (Breen, 2007). Renegotiation of roles and relationships was essential in order to gain acceptance by the research participants. For example, in Deepa’s interview, when the researcher first called her, she claimed to be busy these days. After explaining the line of work and the purpose of the research more clearly, it became apparent that she was reluctant to share her information due to revenue and tax issues. After several further explanations, she agreed to meet. Furthermore, the researcher faced access issues on some occasions, such as asking female entrepreneurs’ husbands permission.

Upon arrival in the research field, the researcher tried to develop good social relationships with the respondents and villagers. In Sri Lankan culture, there is an idea that calling people by only their first names is harmful to their respect and place in society. To avoid such situations, they use appropriate generic terms combined with the personal name of the addressee, depending on his/her gender and age. For example, Kumari Akka shows that “Kumari” is the personal name of the addressee, whereas the term “Akka” (elder sister)
means that Kumari is elder to the addresser. Different honor-ary titles are used appropriately to show respect toward a person in the community and indicate that this person is not a stranger. These generic terms help avoid awkwardness when meeting a new person. Thus, the researcher took up using various honorary titles with the personal names of the participants to create a close bond; this approach proved successful.

Details regarding the narrative interview process are explained in the methodology; stories of women are different from each other in ways of narrating and presenting the scene. For example, Nalani was asked to tell her life story, and she chronologically told her story along with illustrations, requiring little prompting. In contrast, Navarathna was asked about the launch of her business, and she initially responded by requesting the researcher to ask questions which she would answer. However, she required considerable convincing, as her replies were very short, and her trust needed to be built. This meant the researcher had to ask her an unusual number of questions, which turned out to be the most challenging interview. She asked the researcher about her life in the UK because her daughter lives there, and she took an interest in talking with the researcher. Moreover, she had no structure in what she was saying and kept saying whatever came to her mind, requiring the researcher to intervene to keep her on track.

The researcher is grateful to the participants for letting her into their lives and allocating their precious time. Whenever possible, the researcher gave a helping hand to whoever asked for it. For instance, this happened on several occasions when Navarathna asked the researcher to take a parcel of Sri Lankan sweets to her daughter in the UK. Another example was Kumudu asking the opinion from the researcher to introduce new tourist packages that would combine transport, accommodation, and tour arrangements. A final instance of help was when Indrani asked the researcher to fill out a passport application form.

**Constructing and Performing Multiple Identities of Women Within Narrative Research Interviewing**

According to Siwale (2015), multiple identities help to facilitate the research access process. In fieldwork, the researcher introduced herself as a doctoral student and a Lecturer attached to a Sri Lankan university. However, the researcher’s position as a doctoral researcher may have caused some discomfort amongst the respondents, as most of them had low educational levels (Siwale, 2015). However, the researcher’s identity as a lecturer currently living and studying in the UK was influential, as the participants respected this. To most respondents, the researcher’s most prominent identities were her nationality, having the exact geographical origin and being of the same gender. Being a woman and a mother helped maintain relational intimacy (e.g., maintaining eye contact during interviews) with this particular group and interacting naturally with these women. In this setting, the researcher can collaborate with others easily because of their multiple identities during the fieldwork.

The researcher used experiences of being a mother and a university Lecturer to build a trusting relationship with participants. For example, mothers who have busy schedules are talented at hiding their emotional feelings, such as anger and stress. As a mother in a similar situation, the researcher understood quickly their non-verbal cues (facial expressions, gestures, and the way of talking), which provided additional value to their verbal responses. In line with the identity theory, the findings revealed that social identities affect people’s attitudes and behavior in particular contexts and situations.

The perspectives possessed by the respondents shows that women’s entrepreneurial participation is clearly affected more by the social context rather than their individual decisions. It is not a secret that women are expected to play a large number of roles in their day-to-day lives in the social context. Women engage in all three activities types: domestic chores, social, and productive work such as running a business which could be another burden. Furthermore, women are limited in their choice of contacts by the traditional familial responsibilities of a female, the most common being a mother and wife. The other restrictions are her family’s and society’s attitudes toward women, which keeps the discrimination of gender alive in society.

**Second Interviews: Talking With Some More Than Once**

The researcher interviewed the same participants twice in order to collect more information (28 total interviews) in the sample. By conducting two interview sessions, the researcher could build trust with participants and show that he or she would like to listen to the participants’ stories (Bruni & Perrotta, 2014). Each second interview lasted approximately 1 hour, although the availability of the respondents influenced this. During the second interview, questions were directed at uncovering information related to specific focuses derived from the first phase. Therefore, the researcher did not have different questions for the second interview. However, when the researcher went through the first interview transcript several times during this period. Therefore, information gained from the first interview was helpful in identifying essential matters, contradictions, and inconsistencies prior to the second interview. Thus, conducting the second interview provided the researcher with a way...
to clarify responses and ask additional questions from the first interview. In addition, the follow-up interviews with the female entrepreneurs were vital to data collection, adding depth to their perspectives.

Recruitment and Consent

Fourteen interviews were conducted in Sri Lanka from July to November 2018. In addition, the researcher contacted the interviewees from time to time to ensure that they were still happy to contribute to the research. The interviews with the participants took place at their places and differed from one and a half hours. Except for two interviews held at an alternative time that was more convenient for the respondents, all the other interviews were conducted during the evening.

During this study’s fieldwork, one participant was unwilling to sign the consent form in the interviews. In addition, some key informants refused to have the conversation recorded because of political reasons. Nevertheless, they consented to provide the necessary information without indicating their names. Therefore, the researcher refrained from using an audio recorder to resolve this matter.

Almost all participants refused to sign the consent form before the interview. Instead, most participants signed the consent form after the interviews were conducted. This finding has complied with Bamberg (2010), who reasoned that until people gain the experience of interviews, they do not thoroughly understand the research process. Furthermore, the result complemented the comments of Bauer (1996) that building a strong relationship takes a certain amount of time.

Insider, Outsider Perspective

The researcher’s exposure to the Sri Lankan culture, taking use of the experience, led to the interviews being conducted in Sri Lanka. Furthermore, the researcher had lived for over 30 years in the Southern Province. Therefore, the research site was familiar to the researcher, and thus she could find various familiar ways to easily gain access to the research site. Thus, the researcher’s familiarity with the participants’ culture, values, and languages helped gain the relevant information for the research (Kerstetter, 2012). Several authors have highlighted the methodological issues arising from biographical differences between the researcher and research participants when undertaking qualitative research (Kerstetter, 2012). Such issues may include specific aspects of identity, such as ethnicity, socioeconomic class, and gender, and how these networks generate feelings of insider and outsider (Kerstetter, 2012). Applicants born and raised in the region or town where the study is located or who lived there for a considerable period of time were more likely to describe themselves as insiders (Kerstetter, 2012). Others noted having family ties, living among residents and working in the community as ways in which they were insiders (Kerstetter, 2012). Therefore, the researcher can describe herself as an insider because she is from the Southern Province and had lived in the Galle District for over 30 years, with many family members and relatives living in the area. However, this does not mean that being an insider is without its potential problems. Clashing and the confusion of roles can happen in any research. Though the researcher is familiar with the research site, it does not cause any issues (Kerstetter, 2012).

On the other hand, the researcher describes herself as an outsider who does not belong to the particular entrepreneurial community (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). In this research on the female entrepreneurs’ community, the researcher had no experience as an entrepreneur. Not being an entrepreneur, the researcher could collect information easily as entrepreneurs judge the researcher as an outsider and not a competitor. The Outsider Principle considers that researchers can conduct their studies as neutral, as they are detached from participants (Kerstetter, 2012).

It is clear that participants are more enthusiastic about sharing their experiences because there is an assumption of understanding in this setting. They sensed that “You are both one of us and not one of us” (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009; Siwale, 2015). This shared position as insider and outsider is helpful as it provides common ground with easy access to the field to start the research (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009; Siwale, 2015). In line with the identity theory, self-categorization in people relates to a particular community and identity, in which people define themselves as individuals (the “I”).

Challenges of Language Differences in Narrative Research

Both the researcher and research participants should have good communication skills (Haydon et al., 2018). The researcher is a native Sri Lankan and speaks Sinhala. Therefore, research participants who speak Sinhala were selected so that the researcher herself could engage herself in their real-life situations to gain a deeper understanding of the participants. Details are significantly limited when narrating someone’s story without using their mother language. This was the main reason for choosing entrepreneurs who speak Sinhala for this study. In narrative research, any language barrier might restrict the participants from answering detailed explanations. Instead, participants will try to respond with concise yes/no type answers.

The researcher faced challenges in language differences in this research, with the non-English data needing to be published in the English language. Translation of one language to another is a challenge as the true meaning could be disordered or lost. Language differences may thus be a concern because the concepts understood in one language may differ in other languages. Language is significantly important in qualitative research because they deal with text and words, not numbers.
Language is vital for every phase of research, from data collection to publications. Language differences are a considerable challenge affecting the validity of the results gained in a qualitative study.

In this study, communication between the participants and the researcher were done using the same language. Therefore, no language issues erupted at the data gathering and first transcript preparation. However, the first language differences may occur when interpretations are translated into English. Given these circumstances, the researcher used various strategies to reduce any loss of meaning and thereby enhanced the validity of the research. Instead of thinking of an idea in one language and struggling to convert it into English, the first strategy focused on creating and designing the thought in English itself. The second strategy was to translate them with the assistance of a professional translator. The researcher was actively involved in the translation process by negotiating the expected meaning with the translator.

**Discussion**

The importance of question types and researcher characteristics in terms of understanding, respect, and acceptance when interviewing female entrepreneurs was the research's major findings. The literature proposes that in-depth interviews were the main type used in narrative research, and there is very little guidance to help when doing narrative research (Haydon et al., 2018; Hytti, 2003). In this research, probing questions were more important than structured questions. According to the findings gained in this research, language is a critical component, as previously mentioned by other researchers (Haydon et al., 2018; Hytti, 2003; Riessman, 2005). Identifying the emotional problems of entrepreneurs includes asking questions with psychological content, active listening, maintaining eye contact, gestures, posture, and using occasional nodes, which all support the work of Hytti (2003).

Moreover, when talking to women about the experiences they have gone through and how they perceive things, the researcher should have a good ear to listen and questioning skills. The findings revealed that by using a narrative research approach, the researcher could gain in-depth knowledge of a person’s experience related to the past, current, and even the future. Narrative research can also help the researcher and participants to build trust where they can exchange ideas without an issue. Both parties acceptance and understanding are vital if a successful interview is to be conducted. These findings are similar to others mentioned: a sense of understanding, friendship, and nonjudgmental attitudes between both parties (Boeijinga et al., 2017; Hytti, 2003).

Regarding the strengths and limitations of the narrative interview, inherent subjectivity was its main strength, and the story is irreducibly perspectival (Birch, 2011; Czarniawska, 2004; Sunday et al., 2020; Wang, 2019). On the other hand, the person-centric investigation was possibly a significant limitation in the narrative research. A story is an interaction: a presentation created by art and linguist for an audience who shaped the story (Birch, 2011; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The narrative interview was described as a practical production, accomplished at the intersection through a healthy interaction between both parties: the interviewer and respondent (Boeijinga et al., 2017; Riessman, 2002). The process of unlocking hidden deeper truths “is not straightforward, and narrative research should not be equated with favoring the judgment of the researcher over that of the informant” (Bauer, 1996; Wang, 2019). The validity of the research process depended heavily on evidence of the researcher’s reflexive awareness (Cruz et al., 2020; Czarniawska, 2004).

**Conclusions**

The application of a narrative research approach in the female entrepreneurship research area was demonstrated in this article. In the interest of cultivating a person-centered practice, storytelling can maximize female entrepreneurs’ opportunities to be heard and understood. The narrative research method can reinforce understanding of the context and narrator background. Researcher skills can significantly contribute to narrative forms, but an interview guide does not do justice to narrative research. In the least as much as any other research method, the use of narrative design only develops with experience. The fundamental aspects of researcher and respondents’ multiple identities, insider/outsider perspectives, participant recruitment, and more extended fieldwork engagement like conducting second interviews used to generate integrated narrative research have been described. Further, the findings revealed that the novice researcher had several potential difficulties, such as language barriers. The academy community repeatedly discussed the practicalities of narrative research, but the use by researchers is little considered (Donnellon et al., 2014; Radu-Lefebvre et al., 2021; Yitshaki & Kropp, 2016). Therefore, this article suggests a new set of guidelines to help future researchers imagine the exact processes underpinning a narrative study. These guidelines provide a valuable path to visualize the interplay between the methods and procedures inherent in narrative research. By employing narrative methodology rigorously and correctly, entrepreneurship researchers can better design and justify their strategies and produce high-quality findings that will be more useful to professionals and the research community.

Gergen (2009) discusses the complexities of women’s narratives as being more reflective of human experience than male narratives, and he suggests that male narratives followed a linear path that restrained them from including important dimensions of human interaction and instead focused on uncomplicated plots that failed to show the true nature of human life. Women’s stories, which tend to include many complexities and subplots, communicate a life that involves emotions, the influence of family and friends, as well as unclear boundaries between work and home. These
socially constructed narratives we tell of our lives are rooted in our repertoire of experience and interactions with others; each of us brings the sum of our knowledge to every interaction. Findings emphasize that people cannot construct their life stories in a vacuum; people consider their experiences and responses from others.

By adding narratives of female entrepreneurs to the available theory, this research reminds scholars that gender impacts the narrative and provides an opportunity to pause and consider whether the traditional tale of the heroic, solid male hero exemplifies human experience. By adding to this discussion, the researcher believes that this research not only develops this body of knowledge but also adds to the relatively small body of qualitative literature on female entrepreneurs. It allows scholars to celebrate the complexities of human life and provides them with a more in-depth view of the experiences of female entrepreneurs.

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