

# Mompreneur Networks in Germany:

*Multiple-Case Study On How Women Entrepreneurs Utilize A Mompreneur  
Network In Germany*

MSc in Business Administration

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**Abstract:**

Building on previous research in the field of entrepreneurship that delves into the benefits, drawbacks, and purposes of social networks with a focus on women entrepreneurship, this research explores how female entrepreneurs utilize a mompreneur network in the German socio-political context. Through four in-depth exploratory case studies - consisting of open-ended semi-structured interviews, participant observation and archival data - five main ways to utilize mompreneur networks are identified. Mompreneur networks can be used to provide access to resources, information and trusted business associates. In addition, mompreneur networks can be utilized to market and promote business services, create empowering collectives for working mothers and to provide a source for emotional support, which is observed to be inductive to female entrepreneurial venturing. These four uses confirm findings relating to networks outlined by Zaheer et al. (2010). In addition, this research paper suggests an additional, fifth purpose in the context of mompreneur networks: That as a source of emotional support. Whether this finding applies to other networks as well could be included in future research.

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## 1. Introduction

Research in the field of entrepreneurship has repeatedly demonstrated the importance of networks and the social capital they provide toward entrepreneurial success (Bruderl & Preisedorfer, 1998; Greve & Salaff, 2003; Hoang & Antoncic, 2003; Witt, 2004; Zaheer & Bell, 2005; Anderson et al., 2010; Jack, 2010; Zaheer et al., 2010). A more recent focus of network research has been the role of gender in the development and impact of social networks (Klyver and Terjesen, 2007). Studies reveal that women entrepreneurs network differently than men (Aldrich, 1989; Cromie and Birley, 1992; Buttner, 1993; Ibarra, 1993; Klyver and Terjesen, 2007; Manolova et al., 2007; Hanson and Blake, 2009). Whereas some studies argue that women might be disadvantaged when it comes to extracting benefits from networks (e.g. Klyver and Terjesen, 2007; de Bruin et al., 2007; Ettl et al., 2010), other studies contend that women might in fact network effectively (Cromie & Birely, 1992; Buttner 1993; Martin, 2001; Hampton et al., 2009). Those studies argue that an emphasis on male norms and comparing women's practices to them is the problem of most existing research (de Bruin et al., 2007). As a result, there has been a call for research focused on women entrepreneur's networks in a women-only context that also takes in to account the geo-political environment (de Bruin et al., 2007). Mompreneurship, a portmanteau of mother and entrepreneur, is a unique subculture of female entrepreneurship that has been rising in popularity over the last decade (Korsgaard, 2007; Ekinsmyth, 2011; Duberley & Carrigan, 2012; Richomme-Heut & Vial, 2014). Because it is constituted of women only, this phenomenon provides a suitable context for studying how women entrepreneurs network in an all-female context. By focusing on how women entrepreneurs utilize a mompreneur network in Germany, this research paper explores how women entrepreneurs create an "empowering" collective by providing useful resources for business venturing.

Networks and their associated social capital are assumed to be a critical factor to entrepreneurial success (Greve & Salaff, 2003; Hoang & Antoncic, 2003; Witt, 2004). Entrepreneurs can access to information and resources that they would not have access to without their network contacts and connections (Jack, 2010). Moreover, networks have also been shown to act as a source of power and control, trust, signaling and resource acquisition (Zaheer et al., 2010).

Gender and social networks is a growing field of entrepreneurial research that examines how social networks are “gendered”. Findings consistently reveal that men and women develop different networks (Aldrich, 1989; Birely & Cromie, 1992; Ibarra, 1993; Hampton et al., 2009). For example, entrepreneurs have the tendency to network within their gender group (Aldrich et al., 1989; Cromie and Birley, 1992), especially during the early phases of starting a business (Klyver and Terjesen, 2007). Women entrepreneurs are more likely to network extensively within their circle of family and friends than male entrepreneurs (García and Carter, 2009; Klyver, 2011; Renzulli et al., 2000). Moreover, female entrepreneurs’ networks consist of stronger ties, whereas men have more weak ties (Aldrich et al., 1997), meaning that women are better at creating strong bonds that are not necessarily good for business and men are more apt at forming causal bonds that are optimal for carrying out business transactions, according to Granovetter (1973).

However, rather than continuing to compare female and male entrepreneurs, de Bruin et al. (2007) call for research focused on comparisons among samples of women. De Bruin et al. (2007) argue that a “more feminist perspective adds value in pointing to the “nonobvious” and in creating a “female norm” for engaging in entrepreneurship.” (p. 332). This is necessary in order to uncover and provide new insights for policy makers and institutions to help promote female entrepreneurship.

Some studies have indicated that women are disadvantaged when it comes to forming and sustaining networks due to societal and legislative factors (e.g. Ibarra, 1993; McManus 2001; Ahl, 2015). For example, in Germany the societal stance on women’s roles and entrepreneurship has been seen to act as an impediment to female entrepreneurship. Germany’s government is “oriented towards a more conservative role of women as housewives and mothers” (Welter, 2002; Welter, 2011; Branches & Elliot, 2016). To add to the gender stereotypes, German media and business support organizations are still fixated on the traditional image of the male “Schumpeterian entrepreneur” (Ettl et al., 2010). Studies have concluded that female entrepreneurs in Germany have restricted access to human resources and human capital (Welter, 2002; Ettl et al., 2010,).

However, findings reveal that women entrepreneurs actually make a sustained effort to maintain and grow their networks even during presumably limiting life-stage factors such as motherhood (Ettl et al., 2010). By utilizing maternity leave and the wide availability of digital services, women build networks through which they acquire new skills that allow them to remain relevant to the job market and contribute to the economy (Duberley & Carrigan, 2012).

Female entrepreneurs have launched a “movement” to redefine entrepreneurship in terms that accommodate their various roles, which are not limited to ‘business’ (Ekinsmyth, 2010). Hence, the “mompreneur” sub-category of entrepreneurship was born. Dating back to the early 1990s, the trend of stay-at-home mothers who start their own (home-)based-businesses in order to be able to provide economic means while caring for their families was becoming a reality of the business landscape (Richomme-Heut & Vial, 2014, p. 18). Estimates of mompreneurs reach 6 to 7 million women in the United States and Canada combined, and over 500,000 in Germany; more women continue on joining the mompreneur ranks worldwide (Richomme-Heut & Vial, 2014). Moreover, mompreneurs promote examples of work and home balance through social media, in order to inspire other women and create support networks (Richomme-Heut & Vial, 2014). Those networks demonstrate how collectives and networks can influence positive change and empower women (Richomme-Heut & Vial, 2014).

Based on the literature, my starting assumption is that being part of a network is beneficial to women entrepreneurs. Therefore, by investigating why women entrepreneurs join a mompreneur network and what resources mompreneur networks provide female entrepreneurs, THIS PAPER DOES WHAT?. This master thesis aims to present findings from an exploratory multi-method qualitative research conducted in Berlin, which focuses on the resources made available via mompreneurial networks and how they are utilized by women who also identify with the mompreneur label/sub-culture. In particular it will try to answer the following questions:

**Central Research Question: How do women entrepreneurs utilize a mompreneur network?**

*Sub-question: How do women entrepreneurs obtain the four potential benefits of networks as outlined by Zaheer et al. (2010) through mompreneurial networks?*

Through information-rich evidence from the MompreneursDE Facebook group and in-depth interviews with four Berlin-based mompreneurs, insights can then be presented into how female entrepreneurs utilize mompreneur networks. The resources that become available to them via the network will also be investigated and discussed as well as the content, governance mechanisms and structure of the mompreneur network. In conclusion, this mompreneur network study will provide new or supporting insights as to why women participate in mompreneur networks. It will also provide case studies of how women utilize the mompreneur network to support their personal and business development.

This research paper is divided into several sections in order to investigate the main research question. The theoretical background consists of theories and definitions regarding the purposes of social networks and social capital. Next, the literature review section provides a comprehensive overview of previous research dealing with the broader issue of female entrepreneur networks, followed by the context of female entrepreneurship in Germany and concluding with up-to-date findings regarding the origins and implications of the mompreneurship sub-culture. In the research methodology chapter, the case selection, positionality of the researcher and analysis method are presented. A description and cross-analysis of the case studies ensues. This is followed by the conclusions of this research. In the final section, the implications and limitations of this research as well as avenues for future research are discussed.

## **2. Theoretical Framework**

### **2.1 Entrepreneurial Networks**

Networks are defined as groups “consisting of a set of actors and some set of relationships that link them” and are a main source of resources for entrepreneurial ventures (Hoang & Antoncic,



2003; p. 40). Jack (2010) elaborates further, providing a more dynamic definition of networks as “complex, take many forms, are fluid, flexible, and dynamic, constantly changing and evolving to suit individual and organizational needs” (p. 134). As more than the sum of the invisible links (i.e. dyads) between nodes (i.e. individual actors) that form the network (as outlined by Burt, 1992; Ulhoi, 2005), networks are more than just relationships and channels of communication but rather links that provide the mechanism through which information and resources can be drawn and exchanged (Aldrich et al., 1987; Johannisson, 2000; Jack, 2010). Jack (2010) adds that “[networks] provide the bridges to new information and resources in other social structures and bond the various relationships between nodes together and provide the key to unlocking and accessing the social capital” (p. 130).

One of the earlier works on networks by Birley (1985) postulates that an entrepreneur's choice of network will inevitably shape her firm, and determine the availability of resources at hand, while adding that individuals within the network also provide confirmation, reassurance and support of the entrepreneurs business decisions (p.116). Since the paper’s publications, many breakthroughs in regards to the field of entrepreneurship and the area of social networks have been made and studies have been able to confirm Birley’s hypotheses (Bruin et al., 2007; Hoagn & Antoncic, 2003; Witt, 2004).

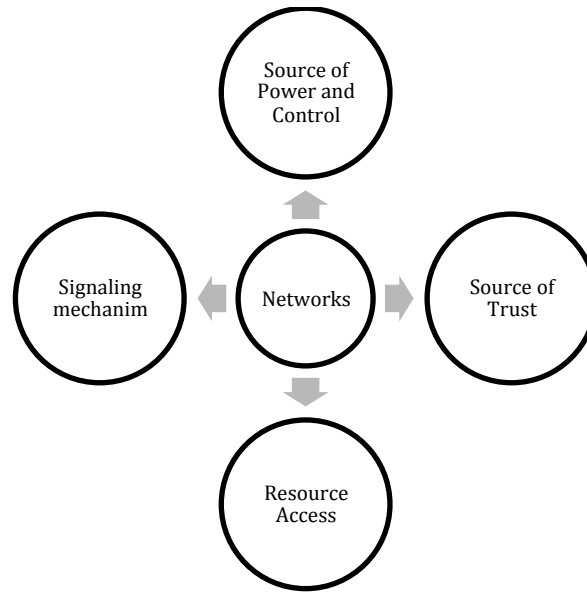
Various studies confirm the importance of networks in influencing entrepreneurial processes and outcomes (de Bruin et al., 2007; Hoagn & Antoncic, 2003; Witt, 2004). The entrepreneurial processes consist of distinctive activities such as opportunity recognition, mode of exploitation, and the venture creation (Shane and Venkataraman, 2000). On the other hand, entrepreneurial outcomes are seen as the critical milestones of the entrepreneurial process (Hoang & Antoncic, 2003, p. 167). Such milestones include: founding of a new venture, venture performance, and exit events. The literature assumes that social networks can stimulate entrepreneurship (Bruderl & Preisendörfer, 1998, p. 214). Entrepreneurs can gain access to additional complementary and external information through networks (Greve & Salaff, 2003). Those acquired resources and capabilities can then enhance entrepreneurial effectiveness and firm performance (Anderson, Dodd & Jack, 2010; Zaheer & Bell, 2005). Entrepreneurs’ investment in social capital in the form of networks has been found to yield benefits in the form of greater chances of survival,

higher profits and increased employment (Bosma & Harding, 2006).

Three elements of networks are viewed as critical to theoretical and empirical research which attempts to explain the impact of networks on entrepreneurial development and outcomes: “(1) the nature of the content that is exchanged between actors; (2) governance mechanisms in relationships; and (3) the network structure created by the crosscutting relationships between actors” (Hoang & Antoncic, 2003, p 168). The nature of the content pertains to the type of information, support and access to resources provided through the network. Governance mechanisms refer to trust and other social mechanisms such as power and influence, which enforce socially binding contracts rather than legal or bureaucratic ones. Finally, network structure deals with network size and an entrepreneur’s position within the network and their ability to access a diversity of sources (Hoang & Antoncic, 2003). The three elements will be applied in my case study of the mompreneurs network to determine how entrepreneurs utilize the resources on offer through the network.

Many scholars have attempted to understand how interorganizational or social networks work, using different theoretical frameworks (Coleman, 1988; Burt, 1992; Lin, 1999). However, despite the distinctness of each theoretical approach, Zaheer et al. (2010) point out major overlaps. Consequently, by cumulating all the distinct theories, the researchers were able to generate an exhaustive set of “four cross-cutting mechanisms that underlie the operations of networks” (p. 65). Social networks can therefore serve four purposes: 1. as resource access, 2. as a source of trust, 3. as source of power and control, and 4. as a signaling mechanism (Zaheer et al., 2010).

## Visualization of the Purposes of Social Networks



**Figure 1: Social Network Purposes adopted from (Zaheer et al., 2010)**

The four purposes outlined by Zaheer et al. (2010) are based in the social capital theory, resource based theory and relational theory domains. As my research is mainly concerned with understanding how women entrepreneurs utilize mompreneural social network, I will refer to definitions and concepts grounded in the social capital approach to networks.

### 2.2 Social capital and Social Networks

Social capital is essential to entrepreneurial ventures as it enables entrepreneurs to tap into the personal contacts to supplement their own capabilities and deficiencies (Aldrich & Zimmer, 1986; Greve & Salaff, 2003). A key component of entrepreneurial networks, social capital consists of contacts that contribute to an entrepreneur's entrepreneurial goals (Burt, 1992). In general terms, social capital refers to resources that are accessed and accumulated through personal relationships (Coleman, 1988). Social capital is defined as “the sum of the resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition” (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 14). Adler and Kwon's (2002) definition of social capital expands on that of Bourdieu and Wacquant, adding that “[social capital is] the goodwill available to individuals or groups... Its source lies in the structure and content of the actor's social

relations. Its effects flow from the information, influence, and solidarity it makes available to the actor” (p. 23). Ellison et al. (2007) argue that social capital can be regarded as “a positive effect of interaction among participants in a social network” (p. 1146), allowing individuals to gain resources from other network members.

Adler and Kwon (2002) point out that “the fit between the network features that contribute to social capital and the organization's objectives – its "task" – is critical to understanding the value of that social capital” (2002, p. 33). Closure is achieved when all the members or contacts within a network are linked/connected to one another, which can only be achieved within smaller networks. For example, closure in a network is beneficial when performing uncertain tasks as actors are more likely to share “tacit knowledge”. Closure provides a set of effective norms and sanctions that can monitor and guide behavior, creating trustworthiness in social structures. Without closure, good or bad reputations cannot be formed and negative externalities cannot be imposed on failure to comply with “obligations and expectations” (Coleman, 1988, p.107). Therefore, closure ensures the trustworthiness of a network and is necessary for imposing collective sanctions, should the need arise. Closure also provides the basis for the ‘networks as a source of trust’ argument presented by Zaheer et al. (2010).

### Graphic Representation of Closure in a Network

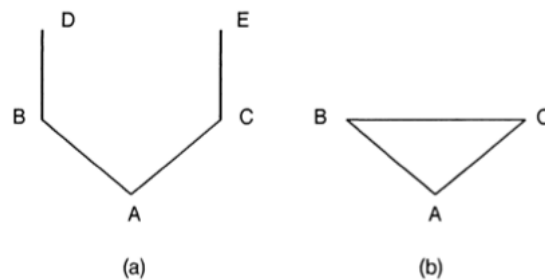


FIG. 1.—Network without (a) and with (b) closure

Figure 2: Closure (adopted from Coleman, 1988)

On the other hand, structural holes can be linked to the networks as a source of power and control mechanism presented by Zaheer et al. (2010). Structure holes, the opposite of closure, are more suited to “relatively certain tasks because they allow a cost-effective way of accessing a wider range of information” (Hansen et al., 1999). Structural holes are non-redundant contacts

that act as a buffer between two contacts, providing added benefits rather than overlaps or redundancies (Burt, 1992, p.65) and are necessary for establishing control and power within a network as well as providing information and access to resources. Acting as a bridge between disconnected groups, or by playing off one contact against the other, is one way with which entrepreneurs have been able to leverage their position and achieve power, a study by Burt (1992) found. Power is also seen as favorable to the group as a whole and not just the individual actor because “power gets things done... members [with power] can thus play a leadership role” (Adler & Kwon, 2002, p. 29), bringing the group together and creating “responsive” hierarchies. Power, in this context, is defined as the ability to influence and impact change and is derived from a political context. Depending on the use of different prepositions four meanings of power can be derived (Baden & Oxaal, 1997, p.1). “Power over”, refers to the “dominance and subordination, particularly where violence and intimidation are involved” (p. 1). “Power to”, refers to the ability to “make decisions and solve problems”. “Power with” involves “power to organize with a common purpose or common understanding to achieve collective goals.” Finally, power within, “refers to self-confidence, self-awareness and assertiveness” (Baden & Oxaal, 1997, p.1).

Networks as a source of trust can be explained using Granovetter’s (1973) theory of “the strength of weak ties”. Weak ties are “weaker” connections between individuals, that can still provide useful information or new perspectives but are typically limited with regard to the emotional/personal support they provide; whereas strong ties are founded in frequent interaction, mutual emotional intensity, and intimacy (“mutual confiding”) (Granovetter, 1973, p. 1361). Weak ties are regarded as bridging ties, and are deemed “as indispensable to individuals’ opportunities and to their integration into communities” by Granovetter (1973, p. 1378), whereas strong ties can also be observed as bonding ties (Putnam, 2000; as cited by Adler and Kwon, 2002). Strong or bonding ties provide trust in a network whereas weak or bridging ties provides new information and resources.

Trust plays a crucial role in establishing and activating ties in networks. Trust is defined as “a generalized expectancy held by an individual that the word, promise, oral or written statement of another individual or group can be relied on” (Rotter 1980, p. 1; as cited by Smith, 2010).

Similarly, “generalized reciprocity” (Uzzi, 1997) can also generate feelings of trustworthiness. A means of resolving problems, generalized reciprocity is described as a form of collective action that binds communities by functioning on the basis of "not 'I'll do this for you, because you are more powerful than I,' nor even 'I'll do this for you now, if you do that for me now,' but 'I'll do this for you now, knowing that somewhere down the road you'll do something for me'" (Portes 1993: 182-183; as Cited by Adler & Kwon, 2002, p. 26).

### **2.3 Drawback of Networks**

Despite all the network and social capital benefits outlined so far, research indicates that not all networks are equally beneficial to entrepreneurial ventures. Alder and Kwon (2002) note, “strong solidarity within a group may over-embed actors... overembeddedness reduces the flow of new ideas into the group, resulting in parochialism and inertia” (p. 31). Furthermore, Overembeddedness could lead to strong ties, however according to Granovetter weak ties are more desirable as they provide access to “nonredundant information” and are less costly to maintain. Similarly, Uzzi (1997), found that in over-embedded relationships, "feelings of obligation and friendship may be so great between trans-actors that a firm [or an organization] becomes a 'relief organization' for the other firms in its network" (p. 59), which could mean, as pointed out by Portes (1998) “that by bringing together dissatisfied actors, associational activity in civil society may deepen social cleavages” (as cited by Alder and Kwon, 2002, p. 31).

Furthermore, network literature generally assumes that social networks are a critical factor for entrepreneurial success. However, other research (e.g. Bruderl & Preisendörfer, 1998; Allen et al., 2007; de Bruin et al., 2007; de Bruin et al., 2009; Hakansson et al., 2009) challenges this one-sided view by pointing out some of the negative effects of social networks on business performance. Networks can present a liability or bad investment, and some relations may not only be redundant, but even damaging (Klyver et al., 2011). For instance, networks of female entrepreneur were theorized to act as barriers to venture growth (Ettl et al., 2010). Women are more likely to have fewer entrepreneurs in their networks (Allen, 2000), leading de Bruin et al., (2009) to conclude that women’s networks might not provide valuable information concerning business opportunities. However, the same authors acknowledge that those limitations might in fact enable women to detect innovative opportunities in the household and family context. A

through literature review of the issues pertaining to female entrepreneurs and networks will follow to discern how (and if) women entrepreneurs are disadvantaged.

### **3. Literature Review**

In this chapter, I will start by reviewing the prominent literature on female entrepreneur networks and networking practices. This will be followed by a discussion on the female entrepreneurship environment in Germany. Finally, I will provide a detailed review of the literature outlining the origins of mompreneurship and its implications on female entrepreneurs.

Casting the widest net possible, I started my literature research with a Google scholar search using the keywords: “networks” and “entrepreneurs”, which are in keeping with the guidelines for a systematic literature review proposed by Tranfield et al. (2003). Unsurprisingly, this yielded thousands of results (for exact numbers, see figure 3 below). I identified a highly cited article, which was a literature review of research on entrepreneurial networks. This acted as my starting point to gather background information on the topic to supplement my own knowledge from various university courses. Narrowing the scope of my search, I then searched for papers using the keywords: “Female”, “entrepreneurs”, “women” and “networks”. Again I selected the most frequently cited and relatively ‘current’ literature reviews from reputable top-ranked journals based on the rankings provided by Harzing’s (2016) comprehensive report on journal quality. Using this approach led me to identify two leading literature reviews, the first dealing with entrepreneurial networks by Hoang & Antoncic (2003) and the second dealing with literature on literature on female entrepreneurs by de Bruin et al. (2007). Those papers served as the basis of my own literature review and the starting point from which I was able to find and review related papers.

By reading the abstracts and keywords of various papers, I was able to assess and exclude various articles, always choosing highly cited articles from reputable journals. My selection criteria included studies based in Europe or the US, focused on women entrepreneurs and networks, adopting or integrating feminist discourse regarding gender and providing insights into family implications on entrepreneurship.

### Graphic Representation of the Literature Review Process

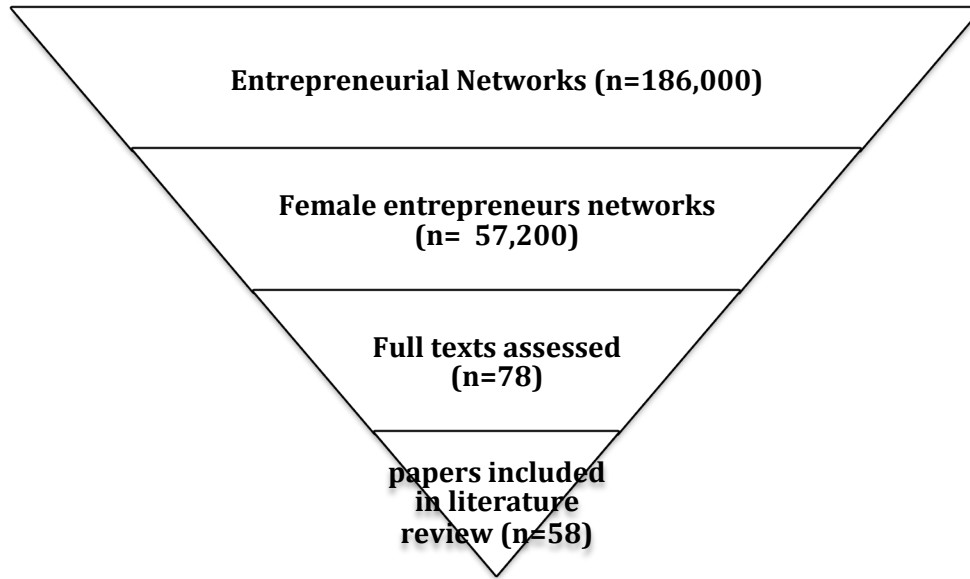


Figure 3: Diagram outlining the literature review search process

Towards the end of the process and recognizing the need for more current research and findings on my chosen topics, I also chose to include more recent literature reviews and articles, even if they were not as frequently cited. I made these selections, primarily based on the authors' established reputations, long-standing involvement and numerous previous publications on the topic of female entrepreneurship, some of which I had already encountered and included in the initial stage of my literature review research. Tranfield et al. (2003) argue, "the aim [of a systematic literature review] is to produce a protocol that does not compromise the researcher's ability to be creative in the literature review process, whilst also ensuring reviews be less open to researcher bias than are the more traditional narrative reviews" (p. 215).

My guiding literature review by de Bruin et al. (2007) revealed the following main themes in women's entrepreneurship research concerning networks: gender differences, networking behavior, women-only entrepreneurial networks, and effectiveness of women entrepreneurs' networking activities. The literature review also pointed out the limited availability of studies that include women and the problems arising from measuring female entrepreneurs against male standards. I adopted a similar structure in my own literature review of women entrepreneurs that



expanded on the findings of de Bruin (2007) and incorporated more recent research findings to better illustrate the current conditions of networks, female entrepreneurs and mompreneurs.

### **3.1 Networks and Female Entrepreneurs**

Network research has become a reoccurring topic in entrepreneurship studies (Hoang & Antoncic, 2003; Witt, 2004; Bruin et al., 2007;). The effects of networks and networking on start-up success have been under constant research. However, only a small number of studies focus on just women entrepreneurs (de Bruin et al., 2009; Ahl & Nelson, 2015). This lack of research is striking, given that by 2013, more than 126 million women across the globe were starting or running businesses (GEM, 2013). The majority of the existing networks research compares women with men (in terms of venture performance, growth, entrepreneurial network types and size) and has often yielded non-conclusive results or reinforced women's subordinate role to men (de Bruin et al., 2007; Ahl et al., 2015).

#### **3.1.1 Do Women and Men Network Differently?**

Networks literature implies that men and women network differently due to their differing backgrounds, assets, and 'gendered' formative experiences (de Bruin et al., 2007). A study by Renzulli et al. (2000), found that women effectively developed trust via direct personal contacts, whereas men were able to mobilize trust through shared identity or membership in a specific group (Ward and Tanpubolon, 2002; as cited by Blake and Hanson, 2009). Research by Brush (1992) and Ibarra (1993) assumed that women and men follow different network development processes, "with women entrepreneurs requiring network contacts that would provide both legitimacy as well as critical business information" (de Bruin et al., 2007, p.331). However when tested by Aldrich et al. (1997) the study found no gender differences in network size and amount of networking activity between male and female entrepreneurs; thus negating or downplaying the "importance of ascriptive groups for organizing networks" (as cited in Hoang & Antoncic, 2003, p.176).

Research findings have concluded that male and female networks are rather similar than different; "women business owners have adapted to the same competitive conditions as men and continuing competitive pressures require similar behaviors, regardless of gender" (Renzulli & Aldrich, 2005, p.323). Similarly, two (separate) studies by Foss (2010) and Klyver and Terjesen,

(2007), observed no significant differences between female and male entrepreneurs' networks. Concluding that research on the significance of gender for entrepreneurial success indicates that there is "probably more variation within than between sex categories with regard to network activities" (Foss, 2010, p. 83). Therefore, when it comes to the size of networks and amount of networking activity, there appears to be little evidence to support the existence of differences between women and men entrepreneurs beyond biology. Yet, studies continue to point out how women are a "disadvantaged" group in the entrepreneurship realm (Allen et al., 2007).

### **3.1.2 How Are Women Entrepreneurs Disadvantaged?**

Findings reveal that "women involved in early new venturing" were not as capable of reaping the benefits of their networking efforts and preferred to initially rely exclusively on networks made up of other women. Moreover, women maintain networks that provide less access to clients and entrepreneurial and managerial knowledge (Carter & Diaz, 2009). Klyver (2011) observed that women tend to have more women and family members in their networks compared to their male counterparts. In addition, women entrepreneurs have less access to existing personal and professional networks than men (Blank, 2010). More recent findings reported by GEM (2014) point out that women are "disadvantaged" before launching their venture and that there is less opportunity for them to network (Allen et al. 2007). Furthermore, women were found to lack a connection to smaller business networks to start and promote the growth of their businesses (Carter & Rosa, 1998). In addition, women did not have high-level network contacts to supplement legal and business know-how deficiencies that men possessed (Carter and Rosa, 1998). Societal factors also contributed to women having less time to carry out both informal and formal networking activities (Ibarra, 1993).

### **3.1.3 Women-only Networks**

Networks were observed to increase the confidence, self-esteem and emotional well-being of the entrepreneur (Hampton et al., 2009; Ekinsmyth, 2011; Richomme & Huet, 2014; Hanson & Blake, 2009, p.139). For instance, findings by Hampton et al., (2009) reveal that "as woman establishes her business, she tends to rely extensively, if not exclusively rely on networks that include only other women". Their findings reinforce the findings of previous studies, which suggest that all-women informal networks provide emotional support that is critical for the early stage venture owners as it ends their feeling of isolation and incompetence by providing a boost

in confidence (Smeltzer and Fann, 1989). The authors add that women heading new business ventures are drawn to all-female networks in the short term as they provide support and confidence. Women do not enter quasi-formal male dominated networks because of self-confidence issues and a perceived lack of competence relative to the male members. Findings by Hampton et al. reveal, that women who restrict themselves to all-female networks “may be limiting the potential for their firms to develop into robust ventures” (p. 206). Moreover, over the course of business development, women entrepreneurs come to regard those all-female networks as less valuable to the development and growth of their business (Hampton et al., 2009, p. 204). It should be noted that Hampton et al.’s findings concern female entrepreneurs heading technology startups.

#### **3.1.4 Women Entrepreneurs Network Effectively**

Despite the highlighted “disadvantages” faced by women entrepreneurs, several studies contend that women entrepreneurs do in fact network effectively. For example, Cromie and Birely’s (1992) expectation that female entrepreneurs were disadvantaged before launching their business (in part due to leaving the work-force “during child-bearing years”) was unfounded, leaving them to postulate that women “make a sustained effort to develop their networks in the early years of managing their venture” (p. 250). This implies that mompreneur networks might be more useful than initially perceived and critical for achieving entrepreneurial outcomes. Furthermore, contrary to popular belief, “few barriers exist to entering more formal networks that are traditionally dominated by men...female representation was welcomed in such networks” (Hampton et al., 2009, p. 205). Additionally, women were found to be inherently good at networking as they intrinsically develop inclusive, collaborative and reciprocal social relationships through their networking activities (Buttner 1993; Martin, 2001). However, “the culture-saturated perceptions of individuals and the gender biases of institutions make it harder for women to act in correctly codified trustworthy and legitimate ways” (Blake and Hanson, 2009, p. 139). As a result, women experience a great deal of difficulty in breaking into those male-dominated circles. Therefore, society and gender stereotypes play a large role in “disadvantaging” women (Ahl, 2015; Ettl et al., 2010).

### 3.1.5 Analyzing Female Entrepreneurial Practices Against Male Norms

Rather than comparing female and male entrepreneurs, Bruin et al. (2007) and Ahl et al. (2015) call for research focused on comparisons among samples of just women. Entrepreneurship literature continues to report studies that compare men and women, “with little or no attention paid to constructions of gender” (Ahl et al., 2015, p. 218). Brush (1992) suggests research has been unable to find conclusive evidence of gender differences due to the reliance on measuring instruments developed for male entrepreneurs. Similarly, Stevenson (1990) argues that since researchers consistently use male-gendered measuring instruments, women are more likely to appear inadequate in comparison to men, limiting our learnings about the intricacies of female entrepreneurs. “The question here concerns what we can learn about entrepreneurship generally by studying female entrepreneurs” (de Bruin et al., 2007, p. 331). Various perspectives can be discerned in past research, which have both advantages and limitations. The feminist standpoint perspective posits that women have fundamentally distinct life experiences and therefore are in a unique position to study and understand members of their gender and their conditions. Yet this approach often assigns certain stereotypes to women, thus prejudicing potential findings (Chodorow, 1999; Gilligan, 1982; as cited by Ahl and Foss, 2015, p. 222). The post-structural perspective on the other hand assumes that gender is ruled by social and cultural norms, and its roles “may vary over time, between contexts and between as well as within sexes” (Ahl, 2007b). However, this view makes it by definition impossible to draw universally valid conclusions. Finally, Jennings and Brush (2013) argue that by examining female entrepreneurship, researchers can gain a better understanding of gender through the way it manifests itself in the context of entrepreneurship since “entrepreneurship activity is embedded in families, that it can result from necessity as well as opportunity and that entrepreneurs often pursue goals beyond economic gain” (as cited by Ahl & Foss, 2015, p. 222).

Bird and Brush (YEAR?) explored gender perspectives on entrepreneurial processes and argue for closer examination of the “underexplored and unarticulated feminine set or processes and behaviors that influence new venture creation” (as cited in de Bruin et al., 2007, p. 331). DeTienne & Chandler (2007) argue that women are socialized differently and therefore perceive opportunities differently (as cited in de Bruin et al., 2007). As a result, “opportunities are nested within a woman’s life and her experiences” (de Bruin et al., 2007, p.331), which calls for more

macro-environmental considerations. Therefore, women's entrepreneurship needs to be analyzed and understood in its social context (Welter et al., 2006).

### 3.2 Female Entrepreneurship in Germany

Women-owned businesses are the fastest-growing entrepreneurial ventures in the world. Their ventures contribute to employment, innovation and wealth creation (Brush et al., 2006). Despite the increase in numbers, women entrepreneurs are still a minority worldwide and Germany is no exception. Most recent figures estimate that only 32.4% of entrepreneurs are women (bmffsg.de, 2015). Societal and legislative factors (such as the availability of childcare facilities, maternity leave time and pay, bank loan requirements, and support programs) act as the biggest deterrent to women entrepreneurship (Welter, 2002; Ettl et al., 2009). In order to understand the mompreneur phenomenon in Berlin, I first examined the reality of women entrepreneurs in Germany to better understand the entrepreneurial conditions, the environment and the challenges faced by the women in my sample given their geo-political context.

#### *Traditional Conservative Attitude*

The general environment for women entrepreneurship in Germany may still lack sufficient support (Branches and Elliot, 2015). In Germany, women are identified by their traditional roles namely as mothers and home-keepers. Overall "motherhood", the responsibility for family and children, is primarily considered a woman's responsibility (Ettl et al., 2010, p.120). German social policies are geared towards traditional gender roles and continue to be perpetuated by the ruling coalition political party (the Christian Democratic Party), which emphasizes the preservation of a conservative welfare state mode (Beland, 2009; Drobinc & Rodriguez, 2011; as cited by Branches & Elliott, 2015). Women tend to internalize the widely held view that women entrepreneurship is less desirable than that of men which may help explain the lower number of female entrepreneurs (Holst, 2001). As society expects women to be responsible for childcare and household maintenance, it provides less normative support for female than for male entrepreneurship (Ettl et al. 2010). Moreover, childcare laws encourage women to stay home with children, and despite subsidized daycare, limited kindergarten places and shortages confine women to the home (Blanches & Elliot, 2015).

### *Entrepreneurial Image*

Women in Germany are reluctant to pursue entrepreneurship because of the “ambivalent image of entrepreneurs (Unternehmer)...[which] is still attributed with male characteristics” (Welter, 2002, p.9). Many women perceived entrepreneurship as a cut-throat “full commitment”, riddled with sacrifices and leaving little to no time for “other important avenues” (Hyrsky, 1999, p. 29; as cited by Welter, 2002, p.9). In German society this is further heightened by the “higher value attributed to male role stereotypes”. As a result, Welter (2002) found that most women entrepreneurs in Germany did not view themselves as “Unternehmerinnen” as the “the Schumpeterian pioneer” image still dominates the media (Ettl et al., 2010, p. 125). The study found that business support organizations add to this stereotype by referencing traditional images like the “Schumpeterian pioneering entrepreneur”. Experts within the study pointed out that women’s part-time entrepreneurship was “one of the general problems” of female entrepreneurship. This attitude illustrates how the refusal to acknowledge different types of entrepreneurship is an additional limiting factor to female entrepreneurship. Recent research findings from 2015 reveal that entrepreneurial attributes are still seen as masculine in Germany, “creating a gendered hierarchy where women are defined as lacking” (Marlow and Swail, 2014; as cited by Branches & Elliot, 2016, p. 5).

### *Access to Resources*

In addition to the societal and legislative factors limiting women's entrepreneurship, research on women entrepreneurs in Germany, found that women have more limited access to external resources as well as acquiring and mobilizing human, social and financial capital. This deficit is further augmented by the gaps in the women’s work history, caused for instance by maternity leave, and an overall “lower level of work-related training” (Welter, 2002, p. 5). Leading scholars conclude that gender-related differences pertaining to human capital might partly explain the lower number of women entrepreneurs (McManus, 2001). Furthermore, as female networks have been observed to be smaller and more homogenous, scholars have concluded that those networks offer fewer networking opportunities, which further hinders women entrepreneurs from developing robust social capital (e.g., Aldrich 1989; Döbler 1998; Jungbauer-Gans 2000; Meyer, Harabi 2000; Renzulli et al. 1999; as cited by Welter, 2002).

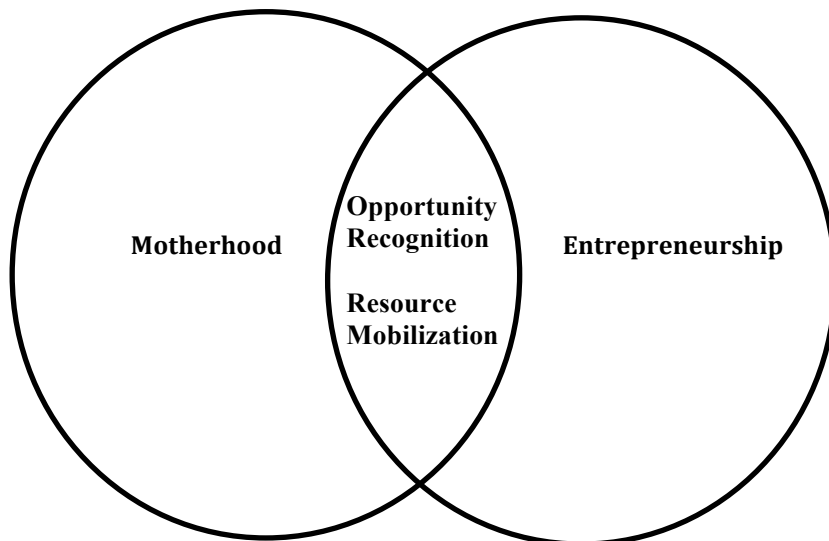
### 3.2.1 Motherhood and Entrepreneurship

Although the demands of motherhood are acknowledged by research on women entrepreneurs, few studies point out the differences between women entrepreneurs with childcare responsibilities and women without them (Ekinsmyth, 2014). There seems to be a lack of research focused on the issues arising from motherhood and entrepreneurship. Whereas some issues, such as financing, might apply generally to all women entrepreneurs, “issues arising from social and geographical embeddedness will vary depending upon a woman’s family status and geographical situation” (Ekinsmyth, 2014, p. 7). In their comparative study between the United States and Sweden, Ahl & Nelson (2015) found that a strong family-policy welfare state does not necessarily promote more entrepreneurship amongst women and that there were more similarities than differences with how women entrepreneurs were seen and treated by media and policy in both countries. The authors reason that male norms position “women as different, women as discriminated” and result in “a discourse surrounding policies for women's entrepreneurship that positions women's entrepreneurship in both countries as a means to an end”(p. 287). Similarly to Germany, childcare and housekeeping are considered women's work in both the United States and Sweden, where the gender division of domestic and childcare labor is rarely discussed. “Women are expected to contribute through entrepreneurship to economic growth and job creation (both countries), to get themselves out of poverty (U.S.), and to restructure the public sector and repopulate the countryside (Sweden), while continuing to care for the family and engage themselves in civil society.” Concurrently, the authors reveal that women are positioned as weaker than men and “in need of special assistance.”

Both the nature and composition of a woman’s household as well as the relationships between different family members play an important role in determining the likelihood of her starting a business and how she can access resources (Brush et al, 2009). For instance, in a dual-income household, a woman tends to face less financial risk and can draw on a larger joint income when considering entrepreneurship (Aldrich & Cliff, 2003). An increasing participation in the work force among women amplifies opportunities for gathering financial resources and building relations that can be utilized by mothers in the creation of a new business (Aldrich & Cliff, 2003). On the other hand, higher labor-market participation means women are increasingly unable to fulfill all of their traditional obligations. This gives rise to new business opportunities,

for instance in the supply of services to households, including childcare, cooking, cleaning and shopping (Cohen, 1998; Hochschild 1989; Oropesa, 1993, as cited by Aldrich & Cliff). Mothers of young children tend to face time constraints, which makes conventional employment less attractive. Aldrich and Cliff (2003) argue that entrepreneurship then becomes a method of earning an income while benefiting from a flexible schedule and work arrangements such as working from home, which from an economic perspective makes use of “underutilized resources” (Shane & Venkatamaran, 2000, p.222). Furthermore, family transition, such as childbirth and motherhood can provide family members with new information “about unmet customer needs” which results in an entrepreneurial opportunity recognition. The family structure not only changes the perception of opportunities but also provides new sources of information, which may subsequently trigger the recognition of an entrepreneurial opportunity, and possibly the other processes involved in venture creation” (Aldrich & Cliff, 2003, p. 589).

### **Relationship between Entrepreneurship, Motherhood**



**Figure 4, based on literature review findings by Aldrich & Cliff, 2003; Brush et al., 2009; Ahl & Neslon, 2015)**

Public discourse in Germany emphasizes the disadvantages of motherhood on entrepreneurship. Women supposedly possess less time and professional experience and suffer from a loss of contacts during the early motherhood period, Ettl et al. (2010, p. 121) point out. However, research has shown how “motherhood” assisted women in developing entrepreneurial competencies (Ettl et al., 2010). Research found that many women use their time at home during maternity leave to acquire new skills and knowledge (Jungbauer-Gans and Preisendoerfer, 1992)



On the one hand, family may provide women with ideas and inspiration on how to capture business opportunities. On the other hand, the impetus for entrepreneurship may also rise from the necessity of having to provide for the family (Ettl et al. 2010).

### **3.2.2 Required Entrepreneurial Support for Mothers**

Research points out that mother entrepreneurs in Germany need support in the following areas: acceptance of and support for non-traditional entrepreneurial behavior and ambitions and conduct, such as working part-time. Ettl et al. (2010) argue “as long as she as a mother and business founder is not accepted, she will always encounter problems in financing, managing and growing her business (p.120). The authors call for the adoption and spread of a diverse entrepreneurial image by policy-makers and support organizations. They also call for “incorporating the diversity of women’s entrepreneurship and their specific learning approaches into policies and support offers” as well as lobbying for nascent female entrepreneurs (Ettl & Welter, 2010, p. 125). Similarly, McManus (2001) identified “information and education, networking activities, targeted finance activities and targeted business support initiatives” as areas in which mother entrepreneurs need more support. Hampton et al., (2009) urge for greater profiling in the media of successful female entrepreneurs in order to encourage more women to engage in entrepreneurial ventures (p. 207).

### **3.3 Mompreneurs**

The growing trend of women starting their own firms has garnered much attention over the last years by scholars and the media alike (Duberley and Carrigan 2012; GEM 2016). The term mompreneur, often used to describe those enterprising women, was first coined by Patricia Cobe and Ellen Parlapiano in their book, *Mompreneurs: A mother’s practical step-by-step Guide to Work-at-Home Success* (1996). In this research context, I will be adopting Carol Ekinsymth’s definition of a mompreneur as “an individual who discovers and exploits new business opportunities within a social and geographical context that seeks to integrate the demands of motherhood and business” (2011, p.105). The exact number of mompreneurs worldwide is difficult to determine. However, evidence from an online Google search points to widespread growth of the phenomena. For example, on 28 January 2010 terms ‘mumpreneur’ and

‘momprenneur’ yielded 120,000 hits (Ekinsmyth, 2011); in 2012, 701,700 hits (Duberley & Carrigan, 2012) and the most recent search in August 2016 resulted in 1.886.000 hits. A recent statistical analysis conducted in Germany by Ebay Inc. estimated that there are over “461,000 self-employed mothers (with children under the age of 18) earning a collective 42,4 Billion Euros in Germany, annually” with “mompreneurs earning 505 Million Euros in online-shops” (Ebay.de, YEAR).

Despite the growing phenomenon of mompreneurship not much academic research exists on the topic. As of September 4, 2016, a Google scholar search yielded 95 articles for the term “momprenneur”, 90 articles “mumprenneur” and 6 articles for “mamaprenneur”. After weeding out multiple article listings and non-English language articles, only a select few remained which were relevant to this research context and originated from reputable sources and first tier journals. The shortage of research available in the field of mompreneurship research reaffirms the need of more research on the topic in general and the relevance of my own research at hand. Researchers have studied the motivations that lead women to pursue entrepreneurial ventures and have identified compelling combinations of push-and-pull factors (for example, Mallon and Cohen, 2001; Patterson and Mavin, 2009). Push factors, identified by Grady and McCarthy (2008), include a lack of flexible employment arrangements and lack of career advancements. Pull factors include the notion of independence and autonomy as well as better work-life balance (Rouse and Kitching, 2006; Duberley & Carrigan, 2012). Furthermore, the 2015- 2016 GEM report disclosed “women are nearly one-third more likely to start businesses out of necessity than men” (p. 25).

Women view business ownership as means to contribute financially to their families’ income while still managing their household (“domestic”) and family responsibilities (Davidson, 2003; Nel et al., 2010). The lack of flexibility in traditional employment structures posed a great challenge for women found in a study by Lewis et al., (2015). The study participants presumed or experienced first-hand that their previous workplaces were not conducive to their roles as parents. The pressures and the tensions experienced by the mothers in the study was not “sufficiently mitigated by potential solutions such as daycare” (p. 28). Therefore, entrepreneurship is seen by those women "as a means to finding flexibility and as a mechanism

by which to resolve their desire to combine having a career with being a ‘good’ mother” (Lewis et al., 2015, p. 28). A study by Lewis et al. (2015), found that entrepreneurship was sought by mothers as a way for them to impose a boundary on themselves rather than having a boundary imposed on them by traditional employment, where they are free to shape and mold their business, family ambitions and family responsibilities. Entrepreneurship is therefore used as a means to sustaining a certain “lifestyle and identity”. Duberley and Carrigan (2012) elaborate, “momprenurship provides ‘a stop gap with status’, in a role that allows them to be both economically relevant in a more credible career than other part-time work would confer, and to be a good mother until the children are older” (p.16).

Motherhood is also seen as driving force not just for entrepreneurship but also innovation. Experiences of dissatisfaction and frustration with products or lack of availability of products (pertaining to motherhood and children) in the market has led many women to start their business ventures (Bower, 2005; Kuchment, 2006). Motherhood could lead women to develop innovative products pertaining to their babies or recognizing an unexploited business opportunity that would result in a commercial product or service geared at other mothers (Nel et al., 2010; Richomme-Heut & Vial, 2014). Momprenurs, however, are not restricted or limited to baby or children related products and services but a wide array of business ventures. Ekinsmyth (2011) explains, they are a group who are especially poised for entrepreneurship...[by] virtue of a major life-transition, entrepreneurial ideas and opportunities can present themselves...[coupled with] a pressing need to re-think their contribution to the formal economy” (p.113).

Korsgaard (2007) on the other hand, suggests that the guilt associated with leaving the home for work and therefore not being “good mother” is the main driver that pushes women into entrepreneurship rather than recognition of a unique business opportunity or desire for achievement. His findings were not corroborated by further research (Ettl et al. 2010; Ekinsmyth, 2011; Duberley & Carrigan, 2012; Lewis et al., 2015), which indicate that women’s need for independence is the biggest motivation to pursue entrepreneurship. Various studies have been able to conclude that mompreneurs are motivated to pursue entrepreneurship in order to achieve personal satisfaction, independence and work-life-balance rather than money (Rosa, Carter and Hamilton, 1996; Welter, 2002; de Bruin et al., 2009; Ettl et al., 2010; Nel et al., 2010).

### **3.3.1 Enabled by the Internet**

The spread and development of the Internet has made it easier than ever before for mothers to become entrepreneurs (Richomme-Heut & Vial, 2014). It provides them with access to various networks and sales channels without the need to leave the home (Bower, 2005). Krueger Johnson (2015) observes that “there seems to be nothing new about the denser marketization that these various [mompreneur] enterprises might represent, producing a greater number and variety of products and services to choose from, all mediated by markets” adding that most of those ventures were enabled by digital technology and online services (p. 67). Digital services have the added benefits of empowering mompreneurs “to pursue the idea, acquire the appropriate information to know the product would be relevant, acquire funding, being able to manage the globalized industrial production of their products, marketing the product for sale, and networking with potential relationships for expansion” (Krueger Johnson, 2015, p. 67).

### **3.3.2 Mompreneurship as a Business**

A thorough analysis of mompreneurial ventures by Krueger Johnson (2015) revealed that most of the self-proclaimed mompreneurial ventures were directly linked to motherhood. Several businesses formed relating to mompreneurship are actually those that support mompreneurship itself, as is the case with MompreneursDE (Krueger Johnson, 2015). Similar to MompreneursDE (the network under study in this research), the businesses/networks identified by Krueger Johnson (2015) typically feature success stories “about mompreneurs as mompreneurial enterprises themselves; their existence is the founder’s ticket to work-life balance”, revealing that some networks charge membership fees and others hold conferences for which they charge fees. Most of these online network support spaces are not obviously monetized with their offering being restricted to digital technology (2015, p.68).

### **3.3.3 Empowering: As a Movement to Change Societal Attitudes**

The increasing worldwide popularity of the mompreneur movement has scholars and women divided. Some view the term as condescending and confirming with “gender specific constitutional constraints” (Richomme-Heut & Vial, 2014, p. 20), whereas others see it as a way of “emancipation”. Women are able to “to play with the discourse of identity, and create, through

their everyday work activity, new models of enterprise and success that interweave desires of relationships, in spaces not limited by conventional notions of labor and knowledge that can be commodified and exchanged... enact[ing] vivid, empowering environments” (Fenwick, 2002, p. 719). The empowerment extends beyond dispelling stereotypes but also generates actual societal benefits such as job generation. Nel et al. (2010) reveal that mompreneurs are disproportionately likely to hire and work with other mothers and to participate in mother networks. This effect was noted to have an impact on decreasing discrimination against women in the labor markets of developing countries, (Weiler and Bernasek, 2001). Kelan (2008) argues “mompreneurs act as more than just a trend, but role models that dispel gender-related stereotypes and promote entrepreneurship amongst women whilst eventually making those stereotypes “irrelevant in the long run”(p. 7). Mompreneurs can also be seen acting as a “lobby for nascent women entrepreneurs” (Ettl et al., 2010, p. 120) which studies found missing. Researchers therefore call for support organizations that propagate “diverse entrepreneurial images and in incorporating the diversity of women’s entrepreneurship and their specific learning approaches into policies and support offers” (Ettl et al., 2010, p. 125). Similarly, Ekinsmyth (2011) calls for government initiatives and events aimed specifically at mother entrepreneurs that take into consideration and accommodate women’s spatial and time constraints.

#### **4. Methodology**

I selected an in-depth case study to illustrate how female entrepreneur utilize the mompreneur network. This research takes an exploratory case study approach in uncovering the different ways with which the MompreneursDE network is used by women entrepreneurs in Berlin. I set out with the aim of examining and understanding how different women with varying ventures and backgrounds utilize the mompreneur through open-ended interviews, which were triangulated with my field observations and evidence from the Facebook group posts. Although online tools, which analyze networks, network structure and network density of Facebook groups are widely available, I was unable to utilize them due to the privacy settings of the MompreneursDE Facebook group. It is unfortunate, as the results could have provided deeper insights into and visual representations of the group’s dynamics and structure.

My motivation for choosing to investigate the Berlin MompreneuersDE group stemmed in part by its proximity to my own geographical location and the “limiting” socio-political environment pertaining to female entrepreneurs in Germany, discussed earlier.

#### 4.1 Research Design

A qualitative approach will be adopted in order to explore the topic at hand, partly due to Hoang and Antoncic’s (2003) “plea for more qualitative, inductive research that will stimulate further work by introducing new theoretical ideas” (p. 183) as well as insights. The contributions of such a qualitative approach will also outweigh its limitation, namely it’s descriptive rather than predictive nature (Hoang & Antoncic, 2003, p.183). Furthermore, qualitative methods continue to gain importance in entrepreneurship research (Neergard and Ulhøi, 2007). I chose a qualitative approach, because my study was exploratory in nature, aiming to uncover the ways with which mompreneurs utilize the mompreneur network. Those aspects could not be captured via a standardized quantitative approach at this stage of development of the research topic.

The question of how mompreneur networks are utilized by female entrepreneurs will be addressed through the exploratory case study approach. Championed by Yin (1993), the case study approach is particularly fitting to this research, as it investigates a phenomenon within its real-life context. In particular, it seeks to examine the mompreneur network through semi-structured in-depth interviews as the primary source of data as well as participant observations and archival data, which I then coded and categorized following the inductive coding approach (Thomas, 2006). I adopted this multi-method qualitative study design because Tashakkori and Teddlie (2003) argue that multiple methods are helpful for providing various sources with which to answer a research question as well as providing a larger degree of validity (as cited by Saunders et al., 2005, p. 153)

The interview data is triangulated with other sources of data collection such as participant observations and archival evidence from the MompreneuersDE Facebook group. Interviewing the founder and organizer of the Mompreneuers group also provided valuable data into the behind-the-scenes workings of the mompreneur network, mainly founding reasons, history and growth.

#### 4.1.1 Selection: Sampling Strategy

Fossey et al. (2002) posit that “qualitative sampling requires identification of appropriate participants, being those who can best inform the study” (p.726). In order to gain a greater understanding of and generate theory based on group or personal experiences, Fossey et al. (2002) call for purposive sampling that enables researchers to select “information rich and robust data” cases. Purposive sampling encompasses three types of cases: 1) *typical cases*, 2) *extreme cases*, and 3) *disconfirming cases*. Although the nature of the sampling methods used does not allow for generalizations to be made, there is no reason to believe that the profile of the three cases studied is not typical of women entrepreneurs in the mompreneur network. By purposively selecting a “typical” sample of self-identifying “mother-entrepreneurs”, I sought to obtain narratives that demonstrated how a mompreneurs network is being utilized and for what purposes.

This research will focus on a sample of three typical cases, which meet all of the five following criteria:

1. A mother
2. Who attends Mompreneur Berlin Meet-ups
3. Who is a member of the closed Facebook Group: Mompreneurs
4. Who has founded and is currently running or plans on running an entrepreneurial venture
5. Who is willing to carry out the interview in English

#### 4.1.2 Semi-Structured in-Depth Open-ended Interview

The in-depth interview is a technique provides a vivid picture of the participant’s perspective on the research topic. Due to the exploratory nature of this research, this method is especially useful as it enables the interviewer to “learn everything that participant can share about the research topic” (Mack et al., 2005, p. 29) via posing neutral open-ended questions and follow-up questions. In-depth standardized open-ended interview proves to be a suitable method as it enables “people to talk about their personal feelings, opinions and experiences” as well as providing “insights in how people interpret the world, particular events, phenomena and beliefs“ (Mack et al., 2005, p. 30).

I used a semi-structured in-depth interview guideline that drew on themes and topics identified in the theoretical and literature review, which however left room for the interviewees' individual narrations and theorization. Topics included the business stories of the female entrepreneurs; motivations for joining the network; instances of utilization of the network as well as first impressions and theories regarding growth; criticisms and network shortcomings; and a personal outlook on extent of future participation and utilization of the mompreneur network. Questions were created to ensure that answers delivered insights into how women entrepreneurs utilized the mompreneur network and their reasons for joining the group.

All interviews ranged between 1 and 1.5 hours and were conducted face-to-face by the researcher between the period of June and August 2016. All interviewees agreed for the interview to be recorded, which allowed the researcher to develop verbatim transcripts. The length of the interviews allowed the interviewees to thoroughly discuss and reflect on issues and provided rich material for further analysis by the researcher (Kvale, 1996).

I was unable to find a pre-tested set of questions to adopt for my research purposes due to novelty of the topic at hand. Therefore I created a question guide based on the relevant themes from my theoretical framework and literature review, which centered on networks and social capital utilization as well as mompreneur challenges.

The interviews were conducted in either the homes of the interviewees, cafes or business offices. With the only exception being the interview with the Mompreneur.de founder, which took place via Skype, due to scheduling conflict that prevented the interview from occurring face-to-face.

## **4.2 Validity and Reliability**

The findings from a non-standardized research method are not essentially meant to be repeatable, Marshall and Rossman (1999; as cited by Saunders et al., 2005) argue. They reason that as the method reflects data that was gathered under unique conditions which cannot be replicated, the data can therefore only exist in the period and circumstances that it was collected in, which when changed could change the data as well. However, the authors recommend taking detailed notes regarding the research design as well as any supporting arguments in order to enable other



researchers to easily understand the process and argumentation that led to the findings.

Participant observation is considered a high form of construct validity due to its embedded nature in the environment of the study (Saunders et al., 2005). However, observer bias holds the biggest threat to the reliability of the observations. Observer bias cannot be avoided “because we are part of the social world we are studying we cannot detach ourselves from it, or for that matter avoid relying on our common sense knowledge and life experiences when we try to interpret it” (Delbridge and Kirkpatrick, 1994, p. 43 as cited by Saunders et al., 2005). The only measure against observer bias is to be aware of it and to control any effect it might have on the general reliability (Saunders et al., 2005). Following Saunders advice, I included a section about my positionality within the scope of my research to disclose any biases that I may have, which could shape the information in any form.

#### **4.2.1 Positionality**

As a mother, who is pursuing a degree in entrepreneurship management and innovation, I came into contact with the mompreneurs group two years prior to conducting my thesis research. I joined one meeting in 2014, in the hopes of finding friends and inspiration mainly pertaining to the challenges of motherhood. I later offered to help support the founder with her social media channels, as I had previously worked in the field. Beyond a brief email correspondence, I had not been in contact with the founder or the organization prior to selecting my research topic.

My heightened empathy with my sample’s time constraints, work and family pressures, made it difficult for me to be persistent with my requests for interviews and presented a very slight limitation to my sample size. For example, when I received a last minute cancellation, which did not include the possibility of rescheduling, I did not push the matter further and pursued other interviewees rather than continuously “pestering” an unavailable interviewee. Other researchers might have been deeply frustrated by the amount of cancellations and low correspondence rate but as a mother myself with limited time and low scheduling reliability, I was able relate to the women in my sample and understand their motivations for canceling.

My experience with motherhood and my own upbringing provided my motivation for the topic. I doubt that I would have pursued the mompreneur topic had I myself not been a mother with entrepreneurial intentions. As a Syrian woman raised in the Middle East, my preconceived notions regarding women and entrepreneurship stemmed from a Middle Eastern perspective rather than a German one. My exploration of the societal context in Germany was eye-opening. It exposed limitations that I didn't even know were experienced by German women.

As a student of entrepreneurship studies, I found myself first viewing mompreneurs as not necessarily entrepreneurial. However, my literature review on both the cultural context and differences in gender and entrepreneurship made me gain an appreciation for a more diverse view and understanding of entrepreneurship.

### **4.3 Ethical Considerations**

“Ethical considerations are paramount in all research from its design to conclusion” (Fossey et al., 2002, p. 723). However, while the ethical principles of “informed consent and minimizing harm apply to all research,” the authors argue that they are open for differing interpretations depending on the research process. To that extent, measures were taken to ensure the ethical consideration of conducting an exploratory study are met in this research, namely the anonymity of the interviewees. In order to insure and address all possible concerns regarding the anonymity, confidentiality, data generation as well as the analysis process, the exploratory purpose of the study was explained to all participants. By providing aliases, I was able to ensure a degree of anonymity and confidentiality to the study's interviewees. I did not provide an alias for the founder of the MompreneursDE network as her involvement in the organization is well documented by the media and social networking sites. All of the interviewees were interested in the outcome of the thesis; however, they also expressed limited to no availability for further correspondence.

## **5. Case Analysis and Findings**

Four semi-structured interviews were conducted and recorded for the purposes of this research. The collected data was manually processed. Verbatim transcripts were created for the purpose of synthesis, coding and analysis. According to Taylor and Gibbs (2010) and Thomas (2006),

coding enables the analysis of an interview text and is considered a useful strategy for interpreting qualitative data. “Coding...makes it easier to search the data, to make comparisons and to identify any patterns that require further investigation” (Taylor & Gibbs, 2010). For the purpose of analyzing this research’s data, inductive coding was used. Thomas (2006) argues that inductive coding is well-suited to exploratory forms of research where no relationships are identified beforehand. Concepts, Themes and models are derived through interpretations made from the raw data by researchers and evaluators with the primary purpose of allowing “research findings to emerge from the frequent, dominant, or significant themes inherent in raw data, without the restraints imposed by structured methodologies” (Thomas, 2006, p. 238).

In keeping with Hoang and Antoncic’s three critical elements of empirical research of networks, my case-study analysis of the MompreneursDE network delved into the nature and content of exchange between actors, the governance mechanisms of the network and the network structure between members (and admins), as well as the history and reasons for founding the network in order to best understand how women entrepreneurs utilize the mompreneur network and to what ends.

A note on terminology: the words ‘network’ and ‘group’ are used interchangeable in the network literature (Borgatti & Halgin, 2011). In this research context, the words are used interchangeably to describe the MompreneursDE Network, as it is both a closed Facebook group and an open network via the Meet-ups and public website/ Mompreneur profiles.

### **5.1 MompreneursDE Case Study**

Mompreneurs.de was established over one and a half years ago. However, the Meet-ups during which the idea behind the site was formed, started earlier, in 2013, as free monthly Meet-ups where women who are mothers and are also trying to break into the Berlin startup scene can meet and talk about relevant issues. The founder, Esther Eisenhardt, has since grown the Meet-ups into a website with a spinoff Facebook group (MompreneursDE) and nationwide monthly events and workshops, promoting business know-how and best practices presented by prominent German-speaking mompreneurs. Those events charge admittance fees (ranging between 11EUR – 15EUR). The network and founder were featured in several news articles over the past year (for example: Berliner Zeitung and GruenderSzene).

The founder envisions MompreneursDE as a community where other fellow entrepreneurial mothers can find inspiration and motivation as well as “advice and knowledge”. She reveals that when she first started with weekly profiles highlighting “mompreneurs in Germany” she was unsure if she would be able to find a new mompreneur each week but has since been “amazed” by the group’s growth, Germany-wide expansion and subsequent popular media attention. She believes that her Mompreneurs.de website and initiatives have “contributed to the fact that more and more people understand what mom entrepreneurs or mompreneurs is all about” in Germany.

### **5.1.1 Growth and Setup**

Since their launch in 2013, the casual monthly Berlin Meet-ups have spawned a website, a Facebook page, and a very active closed Facebook group. At the beginning of 2016, Esther launched Meet-ups throughout Germany (in 17 cities), which bolstered members’ benefits and increased numbers by the thousands. Esther was unwilling to disclose exact numbers. Throughout the three-month period that I observed the Facebook group I saw numbers increase exponentially. Even though Facebook provides exact growth figures and statistics, the researcher was not given access to them. Furthermore, the closed-privacy-status of the group prevented the use of any third party Facebook analysis tools.

Daily activity averages 20+ posts per day varying from new members self-introductions, requests for help and recommendations, job postings, inspirational articles and MompreneursDE promotional content as well as Meet-up reminders and updates. I also attended and observed six physical Meet-ups held at Basecamp, a trendy cafe geared at technology and startup enthusiasts (both men and women). Attendance fluctuated based on the speaker/topic of the Meet-up but was well within the range of 30 women per event. Some women attended regularly, whereas most were there more than once. Previous speakers were also in attendance on two occasions. The Meet-ups begin at 9:30 a.m. and consist of a “fireside chat” between Esther and the speaker, followed by an open Q&A session and concluded with an introduction round and networking. During the personal introductions round, each attendee has two timed-minutes to introduce herself, her business and her children. The personal-introduction round is followed by thirty-minutes of casual networking, during which attendees talk to one another and exchange contacts

(i.e. business cards, flyers and phone numbers or social media contacts) for presumably future business collaborations, or even a sympathetic ear. A large number of the Berlin event attendees are freelancers in the classical sense (e.g. journalists, photographers, physical health and well-being instructors and coaches) who were not necessarily entrepreneurial (yet) but could provide relevant business and personal services (e.g. party planning, cosmetic workshops, massages) to the mompreneurs in the group. Some other attendees were currently unemployed or on maternity leave and attended out of curiosity or were accompanying an entrepreneurial friend. Babies and small children were always in attendance and ranged in numbers between –five and seven.

### **5.1.2 Member Profiles**

The MompreneursDE group members (4,935 Facebook group members as of 9 September 2016) and event participants consist of women with prior work experience (ranging between “–five to 20 years” of relevant and “senior position” experience, according to Esther). However, my own observations based on discussions with various Meet-up attendees and further exemplified by the in-depth interviews reveal that although experts in their fields, most of those women have a maximum 10 years of work-related experience. The members, according to Esther, are seeking a “feeling of just belonging and having the trust to maybe talk about challenges and really I think it's a very very very deep emotional need to do something [they] can enjoy.” She emphasizes the members desire for “flexibility and comfort” coupled with “Selbstverwirklichung” (self-realization) vs. “growth and profitability” when it comes to pursuing and managing their own business ventures.

Similar to the Meet-ups, I also observed that a large number of the Facebook group members already have established businesses as consultants, business and social media coaches, small business owners and self-employed professionals (lawyers, accountants, designers, Health trainers, alternative medicine practitioners, copywriters, journalists, bloggers, photographers..etc). The members operate across different industries, however e-commerce is especially dominant. With the majority acts as “solopreneurs rather than companies” often employing one or two people or freelancers, or a partner/spouse. This observation is true not

only for all of the interviewees in this research but also for all of the members who I encountered during the Meet-ups and reached out to with interview requests.

### **5.1.3 Mompreneurs DE Group Dynamics and Governance**

The Facebook group is described by Esther as a place where women can exchange ideas with likeminded women without fear of judgment or competition coupled with ease of use (an inherent characteristic of social networking sites). This dynamic is supposed to be founded on trust which stems from shared common beliefs and values, rooted in the struggles of balancing motherhood and entrepreneurship. She adds: “Just having the same struggles, the same goals... connects the mompreneurs”. The monthly Meet-ups also act as a way for mompreneurs to connect face-to-face which establishes and reinforces trust especially given the social networking sites limitations in that arena (Ellison et al., 2006). Early research on Facebook found that rather than searching for strangers to meet, users “search” for people with whom they have an offline connection (Lampe, Ellison, & Steinfield, 2006).

The MompreneursDE Facebook group operates on the basis of generalized reciprocity, guided by a strict set of rules and enforced by rigorous administrators. Posts that don't comply are deleted. Esther revealed that as the group grew “people want[ed] to just [negatively] take advantage of it”, this promoted her to change the group settings to “approve only”, a Facebook privacy setting that prevents people from posting directly in a group without the pre-approval of the group admins. Esther said that the policy change to “approve only” has had “an educational effect” and firmly established the group as a place “not just about advertising [but]...about sharing experience and supporting each other.” Citing “focus and value” as her main drivers for the group governance, Esther believes that members need “to contribute... and to share before [they] take.” However, according to network literature, this policy might turn into a stifling force in the long run, preventing the flow of new ideas and information (Alder & Kwon, 2002).

The high growth rate of the group has also raised some concerns by both the group's members and its founder, Esther reveals: “ I think it has grown...a little bit too much. You have no structure and it's very difficult to find things and to connect with members ...and to understand who does what.” This limitation she blamed on Facebook's structure and algorithm.

#### **5.1.4 Facebook Posts**

Types of Facebook group posts range from help pleas for legal and technical issues to business products and recommendations about services, to experiences with certain suppliers and recommendations for restaurants and children birthday gifts. I used an inductive coding method to categorize the different post's topics and measure their frequency (a detailed breakdown of the observed posts over a 45day period can be found in the appendix). With 52 out of 328 posts, "technical and legal help" is the most frequently posted category, followed by job offers and self-introduction of newly joined members. Second comes "Job offers". This supports Ekinsmyth's (2011) findings regarding how women actively seek to employ other women. The posts also demonstrate a wide range of network utilization.

#### **5.2 Users Cases**

Each user story will shortly describe the participants in the research and will provide background information about who they are, without including any specific details that would reveal their identities. The cases will include a description of the entrepreneur's business, number of children, education and previous work experience, motives for joining MompreneursDE and a personal assessment of the impact of the MompreneursDE network on their personal and business development. All the cases included depict typical cases based on a convenience sample of available women entrepreneurs who spoke English, were also mothers and attended the MompreneursDE events that I was present at. All interviews were conducted in English and excerpts are included verbatim.

##### **5.2.1 Case A**

Angela (alias), a political scientist by training, is a PhD student, and a mother to an "active toddler." In 2015, she started her non-profit entrepreneurial venture, which aims to raise awareness about social and political issues through art. Through sales of reproductions, T-shirts amongst other articles, Angela will raise money to support and grow her business. Both, her and her husband are social entrepreneurs, owning and heading two different ventures with currently no other full-time employees.

Angela strongly identifies with the term mompreneur, frequently referencing herself “a mompreneur”. She describes mompreneurs as “entrepreneurs who are not interested in the [socializing elements] of the startup scene.” She adds “we [mompreneurs] don't have time for a party” citing her time-constraints due to childcare duties coupled with running a business as the culprit. She has been regularly attending Meet-ups in Berlin since early in 2015. She first attended the Meet-ups to gain insights into how to optimize her Twitter usage but finding that it boosted her confidence in her own skills, she continued to attend later “Meet-ups” in order to identify further knowledge gaps or competencies that she might possess. Angela describes how women’s networks might be “really gossipy or trashing people” but her experience with the MompreneursDE group are “very professional and I think it's unusual for a woman's activities so I like that but it's definitely still women-y,” especially since children are welcome and almost always present at the Meet-ups.

Through Facebook, Angela was able to hire and work with three other mompreneurs. She has plans to work with more in the future as she views the mompreneur network as the “most useful network that [she has]. Simply because it's so active and it's so big and because I know that people are going to be more...flexible.” Her work experiences with the various mompreneurs, whom she connected with via the Facebook group and the Meet-ups, are described as flexible, rooted in deep understanding of the responsibilities of motherhood and childcare.

Angela plans on attending future meeting and maintaining her active engagement in the group in the future. She recommends the MompreneursDE group to mothers (and fathers) entrepreneurs, due to the flexible and supportive environment it provides, but expresses worries about the organizers ability to manage and maintain the growing network in the future.

### **5.2.2 Case B**

Hilary\* (alias) is a television producer by profession with years of experience and a master’s degree. She is currently at the resource-acquisition stage of co-founding her own business with a friend and her significant other: a “high-quality” innovative video magazine aimed at parents made my parents and consulting experts. As the mother of a one year old daughter, she identifies herself as a mompreneur by reasoning, “I want to be an entrepreneur but I want to be a mom first



so, that's what I like about the word mompreneur, it puts mom first and that's like the whole idea behind it. It is to be a mom [first] and then someone who's working too.”

She first joined the Mompreneurs Facebook group out of curiosity but later found it inspirational, drawing on the experience of other mothers’ struggles with balancing motherhood with entrepreneurship. Even though Hilary is interested in the group, she views its overwhelming number of daily posts a source of “procrastination” especially when given her limited time. However she does admit that she finds the Mompreneur.de content useful for her own business; “I think ‘ah’ this is a great woman - maybe we can portray her too with our video magazine.”

Hilary plans to continue her engagement with the group. In the future, she will be posting links to her magazine's content regularly on the Facebook group, adding that she would first have “to find a way where it doesn't annoy people,” presumably the admins who, as the Group’s founder previously disclosed, frown at self-promotion.

### 5.2.3 Case C

Margaret\* (alias) is a serial entrepreneur and mother of three. With her significant other and business partner, she has founded two startups in Berlin. Her most recent startup, founded in 2013, a type of subscription box service aimed at children, was highlighted during a recent Berlin Meet-up. Due to the company’s most recent guerilla marketing efforts, Margaret, was asked to be speaker at the event. Her knowledge of entrepreneurship is not only based on her personal experience with her startups but also founded in her five year-long studies of entrepreneurship and entrepreneurial support in Berlin.

Margaret describes her affiliation with the term mompreneur: “I'm a mom and I'm proud of being a mom and for me it's good being a mom and being an entrepreneur. So for me, it's ok to be the mompreneur,” but admits “Normally for me it's not good to say I'm a mompreneur because then other people would think: ‘ok she's only a mom. And not a business lady.’” Ekinsmyth (2014) was able to draw the same conclusion, noting that the term “‘mumpreneur’ can thus be read as a

less serious, more limited, rather *female* version of the real (masculine) thing” (Ekinsmyth, 2014, p. 21).

Margaret first came in contact with Mompreneurs.de directly through Esther. She was later invited on as speaker for a Meet-up/workshop on “social media marketing,” where she discussed some of her techniques and tricks to promote her company

The group did not meet Margaret’s expectations. She reveals that at first she was motivated to join the Mompreneurs group for both business and personal reasons. “I’m interested in collaborations. I’m interested in opportunities. And I’m interested even in friendships” but discloses that she was unable to find fellow likeminded mompreneurs.

### 5.3 Main findings of The Study (Cross Case Analysis)

The number of cases that were included in the study is not enough to make generalizations over the whole population of mompreneurs or women entrepreneurs in Germany. However, there are some common trends that were found across the cases using an inductive coding approach, which provide illustrative examples of how women entrepreneurs utilize mompreneur networks. This can provide useful contextual knowledge regarding all-female entrepreneurial networks.

The 5 main findings about the women in the study derived from the cross case analysis are:

1. *Women entrepreneurs use the MompreneursDE network to find flexible and trustworthy business partners*
2. *Women entrepreneurs use the MompreneursDE network to gain access to resources and information, including but not limited to, business development and optimization, technical and legal help as well as product recommendations.*
3. *Women entrepreneurs use the MompreneursDE Network to promote their business and gain publicity.*

4. *Women entrepreneurs use the MompreneursDE network to establish 'collective rates' and an empowering environment for working mothers.*
5. *Women entrepreneurs utilize the MompreneursDE network to obtain emotional support, build their confidence, and find inspiration.*

This part of the chapter will discuss each of the findings in depth with direct quotations from the interviewees.

### **1. Women entrepreneurs use the MompreneursDE network to find flexible and trustworthy business partners.**

Both women entrepreneurs from cases A and B, expressed how the MompreneursDE network provides avenues for collaborations as well as reputable contacts and business partners who understand the challenges of running a business alongside childcare and family duties.

For example, Angela describes how by virtue of working with other mothers she is able to find flexible working arrangements, making the mompreneur network extremely useful for her business:

“It’s actually the most useful network that I have. Simply, because it's so active and it's so big and because I know that people are going to be more flexible.”

Angela also describes how she can still go to the Meet-ups even if she encounters a family emergency (such as a sick child):

“I mean if my child got sick, I could still go and that's not true about another activity that I go to. I know I can still go to mompreneurs and bring him [child], put him down in a corner and I think everybody would be okay with that.”

According to Angela, the MompreneursDE network doesn't just provide flexible business associates but also quality contacts:

“I can find a business coach who I know is going to be really good, really focused because she's busy, she needs to get her stuff done because she has a kid. So it's not going to be this fluffy business stuff. It's going to be real value coming out of it, I assume. I have a choice and I can ask other mompreneurs right away, have you worked with this person or ask for a recommendation within the group and then get a mom recommend to me. So I can see using the business services there for a long time within a non-profit and for-profit organization.”

In this regard, MompreneursDE network is able to provide women entrepreneurs with business relations that are absent of the stress of accountability. “The deletion of this relationship from the workplace equation can thus be seen as a strategy employed to minimize the conflict between family responsibilities and a career” (Korsgaard, 2007, p. 43).

Angela views the group as “filter”, “a quality assurance”, that comes with “built-in flexibility” and “understanding”. She also adds that due to the large size of the network, she doesn't have to compromise “quality for flexibility” or settle for the first offer:

“[The Mompreneurs network] it's like a filter. You know you're getting somebody who will respect you...somebody who's going to work with me and not cause me problems or business problems because my kid is sick because there's a monster under the bed. Because somebody threw up. These are things that I have to deal with, they could ruin my business. Let's say I get a business partner that doesn't understand that. That's a problem for me that am a liability. So, from a very practical perspective, I know I'm getting some built-in flexibility by going to this network and there's enough mompreneur in the network that it actually works. So, it's not just a random number or a couple of people and you wouldn't be assured of quality.”

Angela's description of the quality and understanding reflects the extent of the group's closure. Coleman (1988) suggested that higher closure in a network creates trustworthiness, which in return forms reputations. Higher levels of trust are associated “with lower transaction costs, which increase the efficiency of inter-organizational relationships such as alliances and joint ventures (Beamish & Lupton, 2009)” (as cited by Zaheer et al., 2010, p. 65). Coleman (1989)

argues that closure creates trustworthiness which in turn lower transaction costs are associated as a result of higher levels of trust. As the mompreneur group is (for the time being) a high-closure network due to the restrictions on membership (approve-only), it provides better functioning alliances.

Similarly, Hilary regards all the connections that she's made through the mompreneur networks as potential business partners.

“All these mompreneurs that I met - They can all be business associates somehow. I mean of course we can do portraits about everyone or we can work together with them on some kind of level or you know, that's always interesting stuff really.”

She does see avenues for collaboration with other members, but mostly through the founder, who she views as source of power within the network that would provide her with the means to connect to other members.

“Actually I'm thinking about maybe Esther [the founder of MompreneursDE], herself would be someone that I would consider, like a real business contacts.”

The two cases illustrate how the MompreneursDE network provides flexible and trustworthy business contacts, which promote collaborations among group member and increase the group's closure, which in turn gives rise to trust and helps the establishment of reputations.

## **2. Women entrepreneurs use the MompreneursDE network to gain access to resources and information, including but not limited to, business development and optimization, technical and legal help as well as product recommendations.**

In addition to business contacts, the network has also been useful at providing information and helpful business tips. As the Mompreneurs group's Facebook presence and membership, the women entrepreneurs in the cases expressed how they were able to gain access to further resources.

In Angela's case, she was able to find "illustrators, designers and copywriters" as well as "sales and marketing coaches" and other information to supplement her desire to learn "a bit more about what those people are doing and so I was there for informational purposes".

She also reveals that the organized Facebook group posts, (for example "Blog Tuesday") were a helpful way for her as well as other mompreneurs to get tips about their blogs and exposure.

"There's a Blog Tuesday and that's helped me see a lot of other mompreneur blogs... I think a lot of other mompreneurs find a lot of readers for their blog via the mompreneur group and they get a lot of tips."

She also describes how the information during the Meet-ups was a useful source of information that also pointed out the deficits in her own business knowledge.

"The second [meeting's topic was] sales, I realized I don't know anything about sales and that I needed to get help."

Hilary found a similar utilization for the network. In the most recent Meet-up, Hilary was able to expand her knowledge on affiliate content and links, a service which she aims to provide on her own website.

"Like when we met we heard a presentation about making money online and that's of course a thing we can do too."

However she disclosed that despite the helpful tips, the group does provide a flood of information that can present a form of procrastination from her daily business activity, albeit a resourceful one.

I consider that procrastination, unfortunately, a little bit. Of course procrastination were I can learn, but you know clicking on a portrait sometimes I think 'ah this is a great woman maybe we can portray her too with our video magazine."

Similarly, Margaret found the meet-ups to be educational. "I learned something that I didn't know before...And [I was able] to give my new knowledge to my team." And despite her comments regarding mompreneurship, she continues on attending the Meet-ups because of their informative and practical business-related content.

### 3. Women entrepreneurs use the MompreneursDE network to establish collective rates and an empowering environment for working mothers.

Solidarity has also emerged in the form of a “unionization” effect where prices for services are set at a group standard, creating collectively established rates. Angela revealed:

“We’re trying to establish at least within our group, at least a 60EUR [an hour]. So it's almost like a union where we're pushing.”

What Angela described is an act of solidarity that is commonly observed as a product of social capital. Adler and Kwon note (2002) that “clan-type organizations with strong shared norms benefit from lower monitoring costs and higher commitment” (Adler & Kwon, 2002, p. 30). Empowerment goes beyond mere decision-making but also enables women to put themselves in the position to make a decision both emotionally and in the social context (Rowlands, 1995; as cited by Oxaal & Bade, 1997). It also provides women with the opportunity to determine what choices are available; in effect “empowerment corresponds to women challenging existing power structures which subordinate women” (Oxaal & Baden, 1997, p.3).

“From what I understand the hourly rate is at least 50-60 Euros at least for a mompreneur and that’s what we're trying to establish within our group, to say don't sell yourself short...because outside of mompreneurs circle there's a lot of pressure on prices this goes down, but within our circle you wouldn't get away with paying somebody 25-30 EUR, because once you subtract insurance from that what do you have left over? So I think we're trying to establish at least within our group, at least a 60EUR.... And I would be ashamed personally, to hire somebody for really less than 60 euros an hour within the mompreneurs group. I wouldn't do it. It would be a kind of etiquette breach.”

Networks as a means of establishing collective power is further supported in social network literature. Zaheer et al., (2010) argue that networks can increase and constrain the power of the actors. “Enact[ing] vivid, empowering environments and subjectivities in networks of collective activity” (Fenwick, 2002). By working together, actors within a network can accomplish more

than they could alone, creating a unionization effect via solidarity (Borgatti and Halgin, 2011). “The experience of mompreneurs in terms of their identification and organization into a powerful network serves as an example for other minorities to emulate as they seek economic and social empowerment” (Richomme-Huet and Vial, 2014, p. 26).

Angela revealed that the group provides women entrepreneurs with a benchmark regarding industry and free-lancer rates. “You see people asking all the time: what should I charge? And they're getting that "charge 60 euros an hour".

Openly discussing fees and rates also establish an empowered environment that it enables women to gauge the value of their services, time and products that enables them to ask for competitive rates. Likewise, Hillary stated that the Meet-up provided her with information regarding rates; a topic that she believes is hardly discussed in German society:

“She [the event’s speaker] said how much they get for posts and that, yeah, how much money they make really. That was interesting because Germans don't like to talk about that a lot.”

Both Hilary and Angela highlight how the mompreneur network empowers mothers by creating a collective that not only supports but also actively engages other mothers by providing work opportunities. This may act as a counter-mechanism to the discrimination faced by mothers in the work place. Blanche and Elliot (2015) write that “standard work arrangements [in Germany] have discouraged the employment of women, especially mother of young children” (p. 6).

Hilary stresses how she would prefer to hire mothers:

“I will go to my professional network and ask the people I know from there. But of course I will always prefer maybe a mother, you know. Of course that's something in my mind too that we try to support moms. As often as we can.”

Ekinsmyth (2011) reports similar findings, where her interviewees were also “choosing co-workers, customers and service providers who were in a similar role-position to themselves, mothers with dependent children” (p. 111). She also discusses how the mompreneur in her



sample identified colleagues and customer through their motherhood networks rather than formal business networks or activities (Ekinsmyth, 2011). Decisions about the suitability of workers were based on “like-mindedness and the likelihood of shared understandings of the typical time–space constraints of motherhood” as well as qualifications,” according to Ekinsmyth (2011, p. 111).

Angela also described how the MompreneursDE group demonstrates a new working model for women where they can have a career and run a business:

“Mompreneurs have pretty successfully shown that it's possible to...when you're a freelancer or self-employed that you don't have to make that choice that you can be that.... I think that from the outside world that it might seem like a lie but what they don't realize is that your schedule is changing.”

This statement echoes Richomme-Huet and Vial (2014) findings. They observed: “mompreneurs have decided that they neither have to sacrifice their professional life nor feel guilty because of the time taken up by family responsibilities” (p. 25).

Therefore, MompreneursDE group serves as a platform where working-mothers and women entrepreneurs can unite and set collective rates. At the same time the group creates an empowering environment that supports and propagates positive images of working mothers and female entrepreneurs, which actively contradict restrictive societal expectations and media stereotypes.

#### **4. Women entrepreneurs use the MompreneursDE Network to promote their business and gain publicity.**

Both the cases of Margaret and Hilary provide examples of how women entrepreneurs use the MompreneursDE network as a channel for promoting and advertising their company and services. Networks can also serve as a signaling mechanism to communicate the quality, legitimacy and status of a business (Zaheer et al., 2010).

Margaret first came in contact with Mompreneurs.de because she wanted to gain more publicity for her company:

“I telephone[d] with Esther. And I wanted her [to do] an interview of me so the reason was, I wanted my name and our company on her blog. For having my name and having just the company's name on the Internet. Also for later, for maybe journalists or press.”

Margaret relied on establishing/projecting the quality and status of her business through the inferred relationship with the MompreneursDE organization. By using the Mompreneurs.de network (and by extension the MompreneursDE Facebook group) as a signaling mechanism, Margaret was able to garner more visibility for her company by the press. Being a speaker provides legitimacy to the business and the authority of its founder. As Margaret’s new startup is built on the legacy of a previously failed startup, she relied on establishing/projecting the quality and status of her new business through the inferred relationship with the MompreneursDE organization. By being affiliated with the mompreneurs group, Margaret was able to “signal” that her startup is a relative success. Zaheer et al. (2010) describe how actors can use their relationships to networks in the marketplace to signal “quality”, especially in a situation where there is no effective measure of quality. Margaret’s case demonstrates how the MompreneursDE network can be used for publicity and media exposure.

Hilary also plans on using the group to promote her company:

“When we will launch, I will definitely go on the site and do a little, how do you say, ‘holler holler’ a little. Make a little noise and introduce [myself].”

She would like to utilize the group as way for her to connect with her business’s target audience and market her product.

“And I think it might be interesting for our audience because I think there's gonna be a lot of, hopefully, a lot of mompreneurs in our target audience too.”

Exposure to a wider audience, especially a targeted audience is one of Hilary’s utilizations of the network, especially since it happened organically. For example, Hilary was able to present her business during a Facebook Live video, which was broadcast on Facebook to all group members.

“The biggest resource for me... is actually these, the presentation of my business and Esther even came up and filmed us [for Facebook Live]”

Angela pointed out that the group functions as a self-promotional outlet aimed at curated target audience:

“It [the MompreneursDE group] is free advertising basically to a group of people who are potential customers.”

As a highly engaged group of diverse women united in their interests in motherhood and entrepreneurship, the group acts as a media outlet that has a wide and varied reach, suited to provide publicity and media exposure for the women entrepreneurs’ business ventures.

#### **5. Women entrepreneurs utilize the MompreneursDE network to obtain emotional support, build their confidence, and find inspiration.**

The MompreneursDE group provides both a media as well as an emotional outlet. The three women entrepreneurs in the cases joined the group for business resources as well as emotional support and inspiration.

Angela attended the Meet-ups and later joined the group to find emotional support, as a way for her to overcome her own doubts about her own business practices.

“So it wasn't like a workshop but you just kind of feel ‘am I doing something which is normal?’ Like other people and then you're like yes, I am. We're all doing this, there's no secret recipe here. I can try some new things just to kind of get some feedback as to whether you're on the right path on single things that you're doing.”

Over the course of her participation in the network, Angela found that Meet-ups boosted her confidence, “so that helped me become more confident” and taught her to be more assertive:

“So you have to be more assertive... you have to say this is what I want from you and then let them go work and then if you don't give good instructions you're not going to get anything out of it.”

Similarly, Hilary found a group as an outlet to vent about the challenges of balancing the demands of motherhood and running a business:

“But we of course we always talk about how to, how to work as a mom at all.”

Hilary also utilizes the group as a way venture out and improve her networking skills and overcome her “shyness about asking people for advice” and build up her confidence:

“I like to be forced to talk about my business and to go out there. Because it's like so many hours behind the computer and it's always good to go out in the real world. There's a little hesitation, so for that this mompreneur Meet-up is great because you're just like forced to talk to each other even though you are maybe a little shy.”

Hampton et al. (2009) also noted that women experienced lack of confidence at the early stages of an entrepreneurial venture. Their findings indicate “all-female informal networks provided critical support to the early stage venture owners by ending feelings of isolation and boosting confidence” (p.204). Moreover, findings by Ekinsmyth (2010) indicate that events aimed at mompreneurs are encouraging and generally “more appealing to some as attendees can expect to meet like-minded and like-time/space restricted individuals, and importantly, ‘no confidence-knocking Richard Branson-types’”(p. 111).

Hilary describes how the physical Meet-ups help boost her confidence regarding her business and presentation skills by forcing her to overcome her self-consciousness.

“This is Facebook Live and it's not gonna get edited. I'm talking crap right here and the two other girls...were like perfect. So for me the whole thing is to get more real about my own business because online, of course, it's only passive. And the Meet-up is something where I have to get active and that's something that I like. I mean it's not always easy and sometimes it's embarrassing when you see yourself like, in a video after that. But that's something that I have to do and of course if I'm expecting all our experts to be in front of the camera, I have to be comfortable as well and learn how to present my business idea.”

Hilary stated she found the women in the group's founding stories as source of inspiration:

“I think it's extremely inspiring to see other moms who are founding because it's a whole different struggle”.

Margaret, on the other hand, found the content inspiring, stating that it even provided the inspiration for her business:

“It inspired me to do things different.... that was an inspiration for my business.”

Margaret commented that at first she was motivated to join the Mompreneurs group for both business and personal reasons. “I’m interested in collaborations. I'm interested in opportunities. And I'm interested even in friendships.” She also points out that the group is useful because “mompreneurs or even women network different than men. And so it's helpful” but she adds “in the end you have to sit and make it alone. So nobody can do your work. You have to do it alone.”

In conclusion, the women entrepreneurs utilize the MompreneursDE network to build their confidence about their business and business practices. They also find emotional support within the group to help combat the isolation of working from home as well as the challenges of juggling motherhood and business duties. Finally, the group’s members and attendees provide inspiration and encouragement for the women entrepreneurs to pursue new business ideas or to simply just keep going.

## **6. Conclusions and Recommendations**

By studying an all-female entrepreneurs’ network, MompreneursDE, within its geopolitical context Berlin, Germany, this paper explored how women entrepreneurs utilize mompreneur networks. To this end, a qualitative multi-method study was designed to explore how mompreneur networks provide value to women entrepreneurs. The findings indicate a variety of reasons. Specifically, they confirm the four potential benefits of networks, as outlined by Zaheer et al. (2010). These include trustworthy exchanges, information, empowerment (power) and signaling. In addition this paper suggests a fifth purpose of networks, namely emotional support.

This research adds to findings of Zaheer et al. (2010) that mompreneur networks serve four main purposes by identifying a fifth. The first purpose, outlined by Zaheer et al. (2010), highlights how networks can be used to access resources and information, whose quality is safeguarded by the network's closure. Networks also act a source of trust, which in turn allows for the formation of reputation and provides lower transaction costs and increased efficiency of joint venture alliances. Power and control also emerge through networks. Whereas Zaheer et al. (2010) primarily observed power from the nodes perspective (at an individual level), my findings illustrate how a network can also serve a source of collective power that enact societal change and act as a control in the form of "network etiquette". Networks can also be utilized for signaling purposes, such as to convey reaching of entrepreneurial milestones, or promote an entrepreneur's product and services both to the group members (who might also be potential customers) as well as to media outlets due to the visibility afforded by the affiliation with such a large group that's currently receiving press coverage. The fifth way of utilizing networks suggested by this paper is the following: networks can be a source of emotional support. Female entrepreneurs seek to create collaborative and reciprocal social relationships through their networking activities as well as strong ties (Buttner 1993; Martin, 2001). Therefore, a social network should also provide a setting where strong ties can be established and nurtured. The emotional support purpose of a network would enable women entrepreneurs to form ties, find commonalities based on emotional rather than merely business experiences.

## **6.1 Limitations**

It must be noted that the study is constrained by a number of limitations, namely sample size and limited geographical reach. For example, the use of purposive sampling has resulted in few cases from a limited geographical location, which would restrict the generalizability of the findings. However, by providing extensive and detailed descriptions, this exploratory study has helped to fill in a research gap and illustrate how female entrepreneur utilize a mompreneur network in an all-female context.

Furthermore, I approached and contacted over 20 women with interview requests. However,

though I was initially met with willingness at the Meet-ups, a large number of the women that I contacted per email never replied. Approximately, one quarter of the replies were flat-out refusals due to scheduling conflicts (citing school and kindergarten/daycares summer holidays) and time constraints or lack of English-language proficiency. Last-minute business and family emergencies resulted in further cancellations. Furthermore, my sample size was restricted by my desire to interview women heading entrepreneurial ventures rather than freelancers (such as journalists, photographers and course instructors), which constitute a large number of the population of women attending the MompreneursDE Meet-up events in Berlin. This is not to suggest that free-lancing mothers cannot be regarded as entrepreneurs, however as they did not fit the definition of mompreneur adopted in this study I was unable to include them in my sample. A mompreneur is defined within the context of this research as “an individual who discovers and exploits new business opportunities within a social and geographical context that seeks to integrate the demands of motherhood and business” (Ekinsmyth, 2011, p.105).

## **6.2 Recommendations for Future Research**

It is beyond this study’s scope to identify whether the women’s identification with the term “mompreneur” impacts the way they utilize the mompreneur networks. A broader study with a larger sample may yield interesting results and shed light on how perceptions and discourse affects network utilization and vice versa.

Furthermore, since my sample consisted of three female entrepreneurs at varying stages of venture development, I was unable to discern if the purpose of network utilization had any relation to the entrepreneurial process stage (outlined by Shane, 2003). Future research in the field would benefit from selecting a sample, consisting of women-helmed ventures at the same entrepreneurial stage as it would provide relevant insights and support to previously cited research (e.g. Smeltzer & Fann, 1989; Aldrich et al., 2007; Carter et al., 2001; Hampton et al., 2009). It would be interesting to conduct a longitudinal study to fully investigate the effects of the Mompreneurs group’s growth on its utilization by the members.

## **6.3 Recommendations for Practice**

The MompreneursDE network illustrates the potential benefits of providing tailored support to women entrepreneurs who are also coping with the challenges of motherhood. Social and

business institutions would benefit from providing similar resources to those of the MompreneursDE network in order to promote female entrepreneurship. Services could focus on highlighting role models that not only illustrate the success stories but also the failures, this would help women entrepreneurs gain more confidence about their own ventures. Emotional support should also be considered part of a network's offering. Emotional support can be provided both online (through social networking sites) and offline through Meet-ups as demonstrated by the MompreneursDE case, this bridges online and offline communities and helps in establishing trust and a sense of community.

Given its empowerment agenda, the MompreneursDE network can also benefit from taking a more active role in lobbying for mompreneurs, and women entrepreneurs in general. Research points out that mother entrepreneurs in Germany need support in the following areas: acceptance of and support for non-traditional entrepreneurial behavior, ambitions, and conduct, such as working part-time. Previous research has called for "incorporating the diversity of women's entrepreneurship and their specific learning approaches into policies and support offers" as well as lobby for nascent female entrepreneurs (Ettl & Welter, 2010, p. 125), MompreneursDE can fill in this gap.

#### **6.4 Reflections**

The process of conducting and writing this research paper was eye-opening. For starters, I became acquainted with a wide array of topics pertaining to entrepreneurship, networks and gender. Prior to conducting this master research, I had never undertaken a research project of this size and complexity. The systematic literature review was one of the most challenging aspects but also the most rewarding as it enabled me to read a wide range of exciting and interesting studies, which I would very likely never have read otherwise. I have also improved as well as acquired new primary research skills during the course of researching and writing this master thesis. By constructing four case studies, I was able to collect an array of primary data from the women at the events and on Facebook, I also learned about the inductive and deductive research process. I learned how to conduct open-ended interviews and pose probing questions. I look forward to using those skills in the future.



Writing this master thesis has also greatly improved my time-management and multi-tasking skills. The research process required extensive preparation and planning, which at first was challenging given the scope of the research topic. However, through trial and error, I learned how to set deadlines, create and adhere to plans as well as juggle a job, a child and research. This required discipline and organization. I followed a strict regimen involving prioritized to-do lists and action plans to tackle the elements of the master thesis, which I broke down into manageable segments.

Unfortunately, not everything went according to my plans. I did experience some setbacks, namely summer holidays, which not only hindered my proposed interviews (and data collection) but also meant that I was left without my usual child-related support system. Despite this setback, I managed to remain productive and positive about the outcomes of this thesis. I am confident that those skills will serve me well in the future.

As few people have studied the mompreneur phenomenon in an academic context so far, I consider myself fortunate to be among the “pioneers in the field”. By completing this master thesis I have gained specialized knowledge in networks, social capital, gender studies discourse, female entrepreneurship, mompreneurship and feminist theory. Understanding the political and societal context in Germany has also deepened my knowledge of the issues pertaining to women in Germany and Western countries in general.

## 7. Appendix

### MompreneursDE Case Study: Expanded

#### *MompreneursDE: Origins*

Due to the demands of motherhood Esther realized that she wanted to start her own business in order, therefore motherhood acted as a both a pull and a push factor, “to have like stability....[and] pursue my own dreams rather than always working for someone else,” a driver which she reveals is also shared by fellow mompreneurs in the group. The demand for “flexibility” and “self-fulfillment” led her to become involved in Berlin’s Startup scene, which she describes as male dominated and growth focused, remarking that she saw “very few women and even fewer mothers”. She reasons that “a lot of women can’t identify with the entrepreneur image in Germany”, which she adds is not something she would want when she’s juggling family responsibilities. Deciding to undertake an entrepreneurial venture appeals to women as way to achieve work-life balance and flexibility and combining career ambitions with motherhood responsibilities (Duberley and Carrigan, 2013). The authors also reveal that while being “good mother” was paramount to mompreneurs, they rejected the “stay-at-home mother” image, preferring to adopt the new career identity that combined both motherhood and work.

Identifying her niche as other entrepreneurial mothers, Esther set out to create Meet-ups and web content that would cater to mothers in order “To help them, to support them, to motivate them, to inspire them to do their own thing, and just being able, at the same time, to balance family [demands].” Her purpose behind founding MompreneursDE is to “make sure that mothers are not alone.” She aimed to accomplish this by building a community that allows mompreneurs to connect with other “likeminded” mompreneurs both offline and online in order to leverage the mothers’ accumulated “super rich resources by just helping... inspiring and motivating each other.” Her main objective with MompreneursDE is to provide business support in terms of starting a business or optimizing a business practices and models especially by “leveraging online tools”. This is in keeping with Ekinsmyth’s (2010) findings regarding the importance of the Internet and particularly social networking sites, in acceleration and facilitating business opportunities as well as e-commerce activities. Furthermore, online Social Networking Sites

(SNSs) support both the maintenance of existing social ties and the formation of new connections. Researchers continue to emphasize the importance of Internet-based linkages for the formation of weak ties (Ellison et al., 2008). Adding, “bridging social capital might be augmented by such sites, which support loose social ties, allowing users to create and maintain larger, diffuse networks of relationships from which they could potentially draw resources ” (Ellison et al., 2007, p.1146).

### *Empowering Experiences*

Esther highlights the importance of sharing experiences and know-how to “overcome this challenge [motherhood],” to show other women how to balance business and family life and to avoid “burn-out”. Fenwick (2002) points out: “through their everyday work activity, new models of enterprise and success that interweave desires of relationships... in spaces not limited by conventional notions of labour and knowledge that can be commodified and exchanged..., enact[ing] vivid, empowering environments and subjectivities in networks of collective activity” (p. 719). She discloses that a “special” feature of the group is how mistakes, difficulties, challenges and failure are openly and “honestly” discussed (both at Meet-up events and online) “everyone is quite open and honest about these challenges and happy to share the mistakes they've made”, she adds that failure is not openly discussed in other entrepreneurial circles ( “people are not talking about that it's [entrepreneurship] difficult”. MompreneursDE, according to Esther, is a group where topics that are “never talked about elsewhere” are a source of inspiration, encouragement and motivation. This echoes a best practice suggested by McGown et al., (2012) which points out to the importance of “sharing” failure stories amongst women in order to promote entrepreneurship. “A workable balance between the domestic/business spheres of their lives, and are able to talk about both the highs and lows of business venturing, is likely to attract more women into business and encourage those who are in business and struggling, to persevere and overcome the challenges which might otherwise defeat them so that they go back to a regular nine-to-five job.” (McGown et al., 2012, p. 69)

### *Empowerment Agenda*

Esther regards mompreneurship as a “movement” that can inspire and contribute to social change by challenging German societal norms both in regards to entrepreneurship, gender and motherhood; where “mothers are seen in society and in the economy as something that is

valuable that it's not about like sitting at home and taking care of the kids while your husband works". Esther adds that the group is "really about empowerment and connecting and giving the mompreneurs...a voice. Everyone just contributes and together we can just make a difference [towards] society change". Kelan (2008) and Ekinsmyth (2011, 2014) attribute similar societal benefits stemming from mompreneur groups, mostly about breaking gender-stereotypes regarding entrepreneurship and providing support and advocacy for new ventures.

*MompreneursDE: Venture Success Evaluation*

Success is viewed differently by mompreneurs (in contrast to entrepreneurs). Esther states, "I know for sure, that it's not about all about the big thing. Meaning to build the next Facebook or something like that, that's not what they [MompreneursDe member] want." Instead, Esther reemphasizes the importance of self-fulfillment and a degree of financial independence. She adds " they [mompreneurs] are happy because they have time for themselves...and they do something they believe in, they love...rather than being after only money, money, money and having nothing else. No friends, no family anymore." This observation is in keeping with Ettl and Welter's (2010) findings. Women entrepreneurs "often stress that they do not want to earn heaps of money, but rather prefer to pursue activities they consider meaningful and worthwhile. Earning money is not their topmost priority" (Ettl & Welter, 2010, p.122).

**Facebook Post Types**

**Figure 5: MompreneursDE Facebook Group: Posts' Categories and Frequency**

Using an inductive coding approach, I created categories depending on the content of the various group Facebook posts. Below is a list of the frequency of posts in the observed categories in the period between 1 July and 16 August 2016.

Facebook Post Type	Number of Posts (Monthly average Between 1 July – 16 August, 2016)
Job offers	29
Self/Company introductions	26
Asking for supplier-related help	9
Promote your blog Esther "Blog Tag"	9
Business Update (milestones)	8
Experience with product/supplier	15
Asking for business practice optimization ideas/tips	22

Mompreneuers.de promotional content	7
Meet-up reminders and information	24
Seeking work	4
Collaboration requests	10
What to charge for services	7
Looking to connect with other mompreneurs	5
Seeking to media connections	5
Info/news about mompreneurship	15
Business idea and feedback	11
Asking for legal/technical help	52
Spiritual and inspiration posts (community building)	16
Self-marketing	6
Helpful business tips from Group members	3
Admin posts about Group's rules and regulations	4
Personal/children Product/ service recommendations	11
Blog awards nominations	1
Real estate to sell/to rent	4
Looking to interviewees for mompreneur news article	2
Asking for community support (surveys, competition votes)	12
Mompreneurs Meet-ups: call for speakers	1
Children and parenting	2
Promoting other events	5
Blogger a blogger self employed	3

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