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Black women entrepreneurs' perceptions of the value of entrepreneurial coaching: a qualitative study on business success in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

Entrepreneurial coaching (EC) is increasingly promoted as a developmental tool for entrepreneurs, yet its perceived value remains underexplored, particularly among Black women entrepreneurs in South Africa. This study examines how these entrepreneurs perceive EC and how it relates to the success of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Guided by an interpretivist paradigm, the research employed a qualitative approach and conducted semi-structured interviews with 15 Black women entrepreneurs across diverse industries. The findings reveal that systemic inequality and discrimination continue to limit access to essential resources, including EC. Many participants reported limited awareness of coaching, often conflating it with mentoring. As a result, EC was frequently perceived as inaccessible, unproductive, overly costly, and lacking credibility due to the unregulated nature of the industry. Despite these negative perceptions, participants who engaged in EC described significant personal and professional benefits, including enhanced self-efficacy, confidence, self-awareness, and business clarity. This study contributes to the growing body of knowledge on entrepreneurial support by highlighting the dual challenge of systemic barriers and misconceptions that hinder the uptake of EC. It underscores the importance of clarifying the distinct role of coaching, raising awareness of its benefits, and professionalising the field to build trust. By doing so, EC can be more effectively positioned as a catalyst for entrepreneurial growth, resilience, and equity among Black women entrepreneurs.

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SUBJECTS
Gender and development; Gender studies; African studies; Entrepreneurship and small business management; Business coaching

1. Introduction

In South Africa, SMEs are key to addressing job creation, economic growth, and inequality. Systemic barriers hinder SME success, particularly for Black women entrepreneurs. Black women, in particular, contend with the compounded effects of racial and gender discrimination. Despite historical efforts, such as the 1956 Women's March to the Union Buildings, which advocated for economic independence, black women continue to face structural disadvantages in business (Muller, 2017). McCluney and Rabelo (2019) note that black women must work harder to gain recognition in their professions. Efforts, such as the South African National Empowerment Fund's ZAR 141 million investment in black women entrepreneurs (National Empowerment Fund, 2021), aim to address these disparities by improving access to financial support.

However, research suggests that many black women enter entrepreneurship out of necessity rather than opportunity, often lacking preparation, business acumen, and managerial skills to run sustainable enterprises. EC has emerged as a potential solution for addressing these challenges. Brinkley and Le Roux (2018) and Kotte et al. (2021) acknowledge coaching as an effective tool for supporting entrepreneurs at various stages of their journey. Kotte et al. (2021) argue that coaching is increasingly valuable in helping entrepreneurs navigate the complexities of business management. Nichols-Nixon and Maxheimer (2022)

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further advocate for coaching as a core element of startup support, emphasising its role in reducing business failure.

> The study posits that the absence of EC for black women-owned businesses, as a strategic support mechanism, may contribute to an increased risk of business failure. Consequently, this study endeavours to answer three research questions:

- ***Research Question 1:*** *What kind of challenges do black women entrepreneurs face?*
- ***Research Question 2:*** *What are the perceptions of black women entrepreneurs on EC within the SME space?*
- ***Research Question 3:*** *What are the outcomes of EC that contribute to the success of black women-owned SMEs?*

2. Literature review

This study occupies a distinctive position at the intersection of Bandura's (1976, 1977, 1986, 2020) Social Cognitive Learning Theories (SCLT) and Kolb's (1981; Kolb & Kolb, 2012; Kolb et al., 2014) Experiential Learning Theory (ELT). Both of these foundational social psychological theories have garnered significant attention for their profound influence and applicability within the entrepreneurial learning sphere. They underscore the critical roles that self-efficacy and observational learning play, respectively, in shaping an individual's belief in their entrepreneurial capabilities and the development of business ventures (Kisubi et al., 2021). This study, therefore, draws from these two theories to examine EC as a support tool for the success of Black women-owned enterprises. Since EC is about development, reflection, learning, and implementation, it aligns well with these two learning theories.

2.1. Entrepreneurial coaching and mentoring

It is essential that this study first define and differentiate EC from EM, as it is still a matter of contestation as to how they differ, and there is always a grey area. To ensure the reader is reading with the same perspective, it is best that they are thoroughly defined and differentiated.

2.1.1. Entrepreneurial coaching

The literature on EC is complex and multifaceted. Kotte et al. (2021) highlight coaching's growing prominence due to its individualised, active, and reflective approach. EC comprises three core elements: the coach, the coachee, and the context in which they work. Azizi et al. (2023) emphasise the importance of these components in shaping coaching outcomes. In the context, a dynamic and collaborative relationship emerges between the coach and the entrepreneur. This partnership is crucial for addressing the myriad challenges faced by entrepreneurs in their journey (Cronje et al., 2025).

Audet and Couteret (2012) defined EC as personalised support for entrepreneurs whose businesses are in the start-up or growth stages. This approach focuses on developing skills through learning in one or more areas of management. Based on this definition, it appears that EC is a tailored coaching method designed to help entrepreneurs or owner-managers develop their managerial skills. Together, they engage in a process that not only identifies obstacles but also co-develops effective strategies and honed skills tailored to navigate the complexities of entrepreneurship (Cronje et al., 2025). This supportive environment fosters resilience and enhances the entrepreneur's ability to adapt to changing circumstances, ultimately leading to greater success and fulfilment in their ventures (Cronje et al., 2025).

Kotte et al. (2021, p. 548), on the other hand, comprehensively synthesised the existing literature on the subject, intending to determine its definition. They subsequently proposed the following definition of EC:

> EC is a custom-tailored, reflective, and results-oriented development intervention that is directed towards entrepreneurs with differing levels of experience and across different stages of the entrepreneurial process. It is based on a collaborative relationship between a professional coach (who may or may not have personal

entrepreneurial experience) and an entrepreneur. EC can be embedded (e.g. in entrepreneurial programs or start-up grants) or be conducted as a stand-alone intervention. It entails both expert- and process-consultation elements and, beyond focusing on the individual entrepreneur and their work, involves a consideration of the venture level.

According to Cronje et al. (2025), the approach proposed by Kotte et al. (2021) fails to represent the true integration of coaching and mentoring fully. Instead, it leans more toward a mentorship-based and influence coaching strategy. In contrast, Cronje et al. (2025) emphasise both behavioural and domain-specific competencies, which are particularly vital during the early stages of development. This nuanced perspective encourages a more comprehensive understanding of the interplay between coaching and mentoring, ultimately fostering more effective outcomes in professional growth. As the benefits of such coaching relationships extend beyond immediate problem-solving, providing entrepreneurs with a framework for sustained growth and innovation (Cronje et al., 2025). It emphasises the need for a focus on the individual, their work, and the broader entrepreneurial venture. Coaching, therefore, supports entrepreneurs by fostering self-awareness, enhancing decision-making, and enabling strategic planning. This process aligns with SCLT, wherein the coach models behaviours and strategies that clients internalise and apply, ultimately strengthening their self-efficacy.

Coaching, particularly for women entrepreneurs, provides tailored support to address unique challenges, including limited access to resources, networks, and self-confidence. It provides a platform for skill development, strategic thinking, and resilience-building, essential for navigating the complexities of entrepreneurship (Ndlovu et al. 2025).

2.1.2. Entrepreneurial mentoring

According to Kotte et al. (2021), the concept of Executive Coaching is positioned between Classical Workplace Coaching (WPC) and EM, with a specific focus on new ventures and entrepreneurship. The authors argue that EC shares more characteristics and functions with EM and executive coaching than with WPC. While EM is primarily characterised by mentors sharing their experiences and knowledge, it also includes some process-oriented consultation elements that are similar to those found in EC. However, EM places a stronger emphasis on expert consultation. In contrast, EC focuses more on reflection and developmental growth. This emphasis on reflection is what also distinguishes EC from start-up consultancy, with results that are more venture-focused and individually tailored, accompanied by business-related learning outcomes in addition to self-directed learning, as highlighted by Kotte et al. (2021).

However, despite increasing interest in studies exploring EC, the literature on EC remains relatively nascent, with limited research on its role in promoting innovation within SMEs (Azizi et al., 2023). One of the key areas of focus is the need for a synthesised and agreed-upon definition for EC and EM to differentiate the two appropriately.

2.1.3. The convergence of coaching and mentoring

Coaching and mentorship are crucial developmental processes within professional settings, yet they serve distinct purposes. Coaching typically emphasises helping professionals identify and achieve their specific work-related goals (Jenkins, 2013). The primary aim is to assess their needs and facilitate improvements in performance and skills. In contrast, mentorship is more focused on guiding individuals in recognising their own developmental needs and setting personal objectives (Jenkins, 2013). This process encourages independent learning, enabling mentees to engage in a reflective journey. Through mentorship, individuals are supported in articulating and addressing their concerns, fostering a deeper understanding of their professional growth. Ultimately, both approaches are valuable, yet they cater to different aspects of personal and professional development.

The distinction between coaching and mentoring has historically been defined with clarity, yet recent trends suggest a growing overlap between the two. Jenkins (2013) critically examines Clutterbuck's foundational work, which is based on the dichotomy between European and US approaches to mentorship. This dichotomy initially outlined the unique characteristics and objectives of each practice. However, as the literature has progressed, the lines between coaching and mentoring have increasingly blurred, leading to confusion in both academic and practical contexts. This evolution suggests that, although distinct in their origins, coaching and mentoring now frequently overlap, underscoring the importance of a clear understanding of their unique characteristics in the face of this ongoing convergence (Jenkins, 2013).

2.2. Challenges facing black women entrepreneurs

Historically, black women have faced dual challenges of racial and gender discrimination (Desouza, 2020) For example, African American women often have fewer resources, networks, and entrepreneurial education compared to their white counterparts, who may benefit from inherited clientele and mentorship opportunities (Jackson, 2021).

It is the same in the South African context; black women entrepreneurs encounter a multitude of challenges that are deeply rooted in both systemic disadvantages and societal biases. These challenges include, but are not limited to, the intertwined impacts of race and gender discrimination, cultural attitudes, traditional norms, limited educational opportunities, and difficulties in accessing vital information and financial resources (Chiloane & Mayhew, 2010). In South Africa, women-owned businesses grow more slowly when compared to those owned by men, as a lack of vocational and technical skills remains a barrier to business growth (African Union, 2022). Liguori et al. (2024) emphasise the crucial importance of conducting gender-focused research to gain a deeper understanding of the complex interplay between societal norms and expectations, cultural influences, and institutional barriers that significantly shape the entrepreneurial experiences of men and women.

Black women entrepreneurs play a vital role in the economy, and studies have shown how their ventures significantly impact community development (Donga & Chimucheka, 2024). However, they face systemic barriers that hinder their business growth and limit their contributions. These entrepreneurs foster empowerment and directly address community needs, particularly in rural areas, by creating jobs and reducing poverty (Donga & Chimucheka, 2024). Their ventures enhance the quality of life and stimulate economic activity in underserved communities, underscoring their importance as agents of change. Addressing the obstacles faced by black women entrepreneurs is crucial for unlocking their full potential and fostering equitable regional development. Croucamp and Mathibe (2019) identify financial constraints and inadequate financial literacy as core challenges faced by black women entrepreneurs. Zizile and Tendai (2018) further highlight self-confidence as a critical factor influencing business operations and help-seeking behaviour.

These barriers not only hinder the entrepreneurial ambitions of black women but also perpetuate cycles of inequality, making it essential to explore and address these issues to foster an inclusive and equitable entrepreneurial landscape (Chiloane & Mayhew, 2010). Understanding the unique obstacles faced by black women in business is crucial for developing targeted interventions that can empower and promote sustainable economic growth.

Given the challenges mentioned, women, particularly black women entrepreneurs, as in the case of this study, face significant demands on multiple fronts. This context highlights how women entrepreneurs can benefit from EC. It highlights the potential benefits of this type of external support in helping them achieve their business objectives, while also examining how Black women entrepreneurs currently perceive EC.

> ***Proposition 1:*** *Challenges faced by black women entrepreneurs are discrimination, inequality and gender bias, which result in difficulty accessing funding, networks, sponsors and resources.*

2.3. Perception of entrepreneurial coaching

How individuals respond to coaching reflects their belief in its efficacy. Idris and Abu Bakar (2020) argue that women entrepreneurs' use of business coaching depends on their perception of its value, which influences their willingness to embrace it as a tool for acquiring knowledge, skills, and attitudes critical to business success. According to Azizi et al. (2023), a coachee's motivation is crucial to the success of coaching.

Timberlake's (2017) study highlights the perceptions of women entrepreneurs who received coaching compared to those who did not. Among coached participants, scepticism was prevalent. Many viewed business coaching as overly idealistic, with a limited understanding of its processes. Participants questioned its credibility, citing the absence of a regulatory body as a significant concern. This lack of oversight diminished trust in coaching as a legitimate support mechanism. Some business managers and entrepreneurs may hold negative perceptions of consultants, including coaches. For instance, they may expect coaches to offer practical support tailored to their specific business needs while also understanding the unique nuances that affect their operations (Azizi et al., 2023).

Additionally, Timberlake (2017) found that women demanded evidence of a coach's reliability, including documented success stories and client feedback. This desire for tangible proof highlights the importance of trust and its impact on coaching relationships. The study also revealed doubts about the effectiveness of coaching for individuals already familiar with basic business principles.

For women transitioning to full-time entrepreneurship, perceptions varied. Scepticism, a demand for evidence of success, and an emphasis on self-awareness were recurring themes. These findings suggest that women entrepreneurs seek validation of coaching's effectiveness before investing their time and resources.

Proposition 2a: *The perception of EC among black women entrepreneurs includes scepticism about its effectiveness*

Proposition 2b: *The perception of EC among black women entrepreneurs includes a desire for evidence of success*

Proposition 2c: *The perception of EC among black women entrepreneurs includes an investment validation.*

2.4. Outcomes of entrepreneurial coaching

Effective coaching enhances a coachee's entrepreneurial skills, ultimately boosting productivity, improving customer service, and increasing service quality and customer satisfaction. According to Azizi et al. (2023), achieving these outcomes necessitates the use of established coaching standards and methods, along with fostering empathy between the coach and the coachee. Hunt et al. (2019) suggest that entrepreneurial self-efficacy (ESE), defined as the belief in one's ability to achieve business goals, is a key indicator of coaching success. Self-efficacy encompasses:

- Enactive mastery: Building confidence through positive experiences.
- Vicarious experiences: Learning from the success of others.
- Social/verbal persuasion: Influences from societal or peer interactions.
- Psychological arousal: Understanding emotional responses to challenges.

Msimango-Galawe and Mazonde (2021) highlight the above four methods for developing self-efficacy, and add another method: role modelling, thus aligning with SCLT, which emphasises learning through observation and resilience in the face of adversity. Entrepreneurs with higher self-efficacy are more likely to persist despite obstacles, whereas those with lower self-efficacy are easily discouraged, which negatively affects their entrepreneurial outcomes (Mielniczuk & Laguna, 2020).

For coaching to be successful, entrepreneurs must view their coach as a partner. When viewed this way, coachees are more likely to be motivated to participate openly. This commitment to the bond between coach and coachee must be reciprocal (Azizi et al., 2023).

Proposition 3a: *EC enhances self-awareness, contributing to business success.*

Proposition 3b*: EC enhances self-efficacy, contributing to business success.*

3. Research methods and design

3.1. Research paradigm and approach

This study was a qualitative study that employed an interpretivist paradigm, which is particularly effective for exploring subjective experiences, perceptions, and meaning-making. This approach was appropriate for examining how Black women entrepreneurs perceive EC and how the competencies gained through coaching contribute to their business success (Campbell et al., 2020). The interpretivist stance recognises that knowledge is co-constructed between researcher and participants, enabling deeper engagement with lived realities.

3.2. Sampling and recruitment strategy

Participants were recruited using non-random sampling with a combination of purposive and snowball sampling to ensure relevance and diversity of insights. Initial participants were identified through the researcher's professional and personal networks as a Black woman entrepreneur. Subsequent participants were recruited through referrals and targeted outreach to include women from diverse industries and business stages. This strategy aligns with recent methodological guidance, which emphasises that purposeful recruitment should balance practicality, diversity, and alignment with research aims (Luetke Lanfer et al., 2024)

The following criteria defined eligibility to participate in the study: self-identification as a Black woman, active operation of a business in South Africa at the time of the study, and previous participation in entrepreneurial or business coaching. Participants who had never engaged in coaching or were not actively running a business were excluded. These criteria ensured that the data collected were directly relevant to the research objectives (Dahal et al., 2024)

A total of 15 semi-structured interviews were conducted online via Microsoft Teams between October and November 2022. The adequacy of this sample size was justified by both saturation and information power. Saturation was reached at participant 13, when no new insights were emerging, but two further interviews were conducted as already pre-scheduled. Recent work supports the argument that adequacy depends not on numbers alone but on the information power of the sample—determined by study aim specificity, participant expertise, and data quality (Dahal et al., 2024; Malterud et al., 2016). This combination ensured sufficient depth to address the research questions.

3.3. Reflexivity and researcher positionality

Given the socio-cultural and gendered dimensions of the research, reflexivity was embedded throughout the study. The researcher shared identity markers with participants (as a Black woman entrepreneur), which fostered rapport but also raised the possibility of bias. To manage this, the researcher maintained a reflexive journal to document assumptions, decisions, and emotional responses, refrained from disclosing personal entrepreneurial experiences during interviews, and prioritised participant voices during analysis. Such strategies echo recent calls for critical reflexivity and attention to positionality in recruitment and analysis, particularly in sensitive qualitative research with marginalised groups (Luetke Lanfer et al., 2024).

3.4. Data collection and analysis

Semi-structured interviews were used to capture participants' experiences while allowing for flexibility and probing. Interviews lasted 45–75 min, were audio-recorded with consent, and transcribed verbatim. Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step thematic analysis, involving familiarisation, coding, theme generation, and refinement. Reflexive memoing supported transparency and ensured that analysis remained grounded in participant accounts while also critically considering researcher influence.

3.5. Ethical considerations

Before the commencement of data collection, ethical approval was sought and obtained from the University of the Witwatersrand Human Research Ethics Committee (Non-Medical), under clearance number WBS (BA484272/602). The study adhered strictly to ethical research standards, including obtaining written informed consent from all participants and upholding principles of confidentiality and anonymity throughout the research process. This manuscript is based on a study undertaken initially as part of a Master of Business Administration (MBA) degree and has since been revised and adapted for this paper

4. Results and discussions

4.1. The profile of the participants

Pseudonyms were used throughout to ensure the anonymity of all the participants. This section gives an overview of the demographic and professional characteristics of the participants. The age distribution indicates that most participants were between 31 and 40 years old, reflecting a blend of early-stage and established entrepreneurs. The educational backgrounds of the participants were diverse, with the majority holding undergraduate and postgraduate degrees in various fields, including business, law, engineering, and psychology.

The business experience of the participants is nearly evenly divided, with half having 1–5 years of experience and the other half having 6–10 years of experience. This indicates a mix of early-stage ventures and slightly more established businesses. The participants come from a diverse range of industries, including media, manufacturing, retail, food and beverage, maritime, legal, marketing, advertising, digital, consulting, and fuel and food retail. A significant portion of them is involved in professional services such as consulting, legal, and marketing.

Regarding business size, all participants operate small to medium-sized businesses, with the majority having 1–5 employees, some having 6–10 employees, and a few having 11–30 employees.

4.2. Overview of thematic analysis

The themes that emerged during data analysis are summarised in Figure 1. Each research objective yielded several themes that are discussed in more detail below.

4.3. Findings on the challenges of black women entrepreneurs

Entrepreneurship is a cornerstone of economic growth and development; yet the journey of Black women entrepreneurs in South Africa's SME sector remains fraught with challenges. Despite efforts to promote inclusivity and equality, structural and systemic barriers persist due to regulatory issues, limited access to

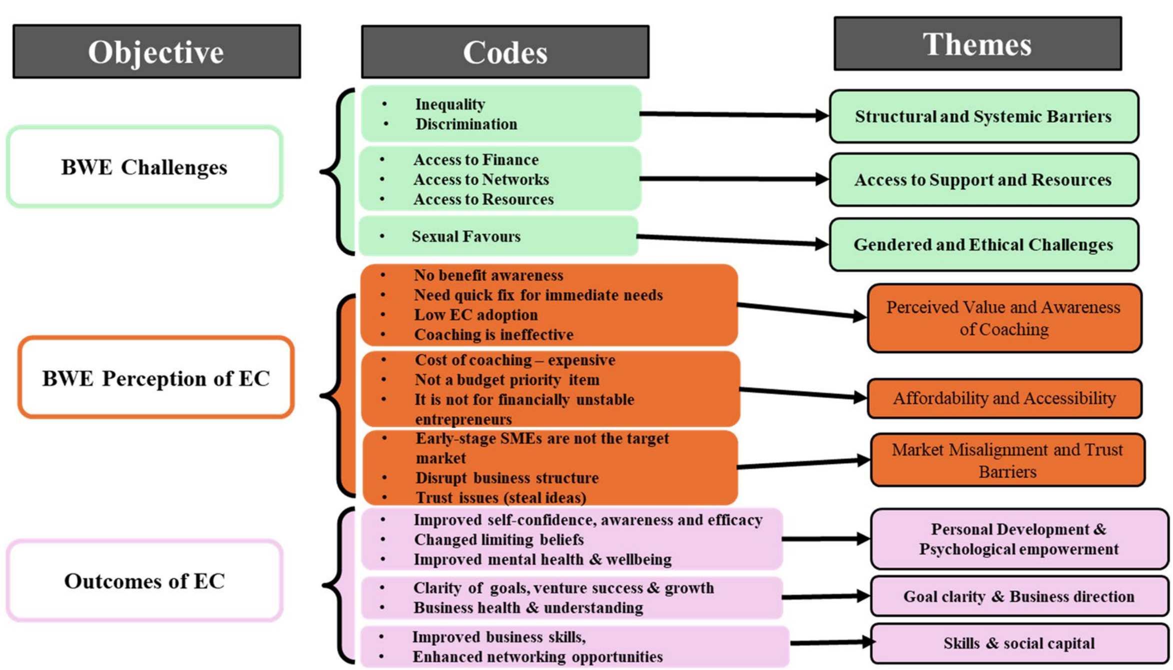

Figure 1. Overview of thematic analysis results. *Note:* Authors' Own.

finance, low rates of business education or work experience, risk aversion, and numerous other constraints (African Union, 2022). These persistent gender disparities require the exploration of the intricate relationship between gender and entrepreneurship (Liguori et al., 2024). As such, this study aimed to investigate the experiences of Black women entrepreneurs, shedding light on their struggles and providing insights into the broader socio-economic structures that perpetuate these challenges.

All 15 participants in this study reported facing significant challenges in growing their businesses. Their narratives offer a glimpse into the challenges not unique to Black women but also reflective of the broader inequities in the SME sector. For instance, **Participant 3** shared a harrowing account of a colleague who was ***denied funding*** after refusing a decision-maker's sexual advances:

> **Participant 3:** *'I know a lady who was on the verge of getting funding, where she met all the requirements for funding, but only one person was left for a signatory. She was then invited to his office, and after she refused his sexual advances, the funding was no longer available. There are many of these stories'.* ***Access to funding and sexual favours***

This anecdote highlights the power imbalances entrenched in male-dominated decision-making structures, forcing women to choose between compromising their integrity and losing business opportunities. As Molema et al. (2024), African Union (2022), Chiloane and Mayhew (2010) and others highlight that women entrepreneurs face numerous challenges, with gender discrimination being one of the most significant challenges they often encounter due to imposed cultural and societal issues and norms.

Additionally, black women entrepreneurs often find themselves working exponentially harder without access to support and resources to prove their worth.

> **Participant 6:** lamented: *'What I have noticed is that we need to* ***prove ourselves 500%*** *more than anyone else in business. I must go above and beyond to get half of what everyone else has'.* ***Inequality***

This sentiment underscores the pervasive bias that black women face, where any errors in their business operations are deemed intolerable, unlike their counterparts who may be afforded leniency. The blatant gender bias manifests itself through the discouragement of women entrepreneurs from seeking further knowledge or exploring additional business opportunities (African Union, 2022; Chiloane & Mayhew, 2010; Molema et al., 2024).

The intersection of race and gender exacerbates the challenges for black women.

> **Participant 13:** contextualised this struggle within a broader societal hierarchy, stating: *'When we look at the hierarchy of women in South Africa, at the bottom it's disabled people, black women, coloured women, Indian women, and at the top it's white women. That's what the stats have shown us: that black women are at the bottom'.* ***Discrimination & inequality***

This marginalisation reflects historical and systemic inequities that continue to disadvantage black women.

Another recurrent theme was the ***lack of access to networks and relationships*** crucial for business success.

> **Participant 10:** observed: *'The lack of relationships with decision makers in most companies that might buy services from us, so I think the benefit of being the 4th or 5th generation in a family of businesspeople or professionals means you have those relationships to tap into, whereas most of us are 1st or 2nd generation business people. Already, we have a knowledge deficit'.* ***Social Capital - Access to resources and networks***

This response highlights the challenges first-generation entrepreneurs face, who must establish their networks and acquire knowledge without the benefit of inherited businesses or established connections.

The participants emphasised that their limited ***exposure to entrepreneurial environments*** compounded this knowledge gap. This aligns with findings from Muchabaiwa and Msimango-Galawe (2021), who assert that exposure to entrepreneurial experience significantly influences motivation and competence in starting and sustaining a business. SCLT further supports this notion, emphasising that individuals learn from observing the actions of others, such as family members or peers (Nabavi & Bijandi, 2012). For many black women entrepreneurs, the absence of such role models creates a steep learning curve, further marginalising them in competitive markets.

This absence of role models also reflects a limitation in the vicarious learning opportunities described by Bandura's SCLT. Without exposure to successful entrepreneurial behaviours to model, participants' self-efficacy was undermined, reinforcing the disadvantages of being first-generation entrepreneurs.

The challenges faced by black women entrepreneurs extend beyond knowledge deficits to include deeply rooted socio-cultural and economic constraints. According to Seleman, Komba, Mwakujonga, and Ngalawa (2024), the success of women entrepreneurs is constrained by factors such as lack of financial access, limited personal assets, stereotyping, psychological fear of failure, inadequate education and training, socio-cultural barriers, and ineffective marketing strategies. These macro and micro-economic challenges resonate with the participants' experiences, highlighting systemic prejudice. For example, many economic actors remain hesitant to engage with black women-owned businesses, reflecting biases against their perceived competence.

As **Participant 6** noted, black women do not seek pity but demand equitable treatment and opportunities to rectify mistakes without facing blanket statements that undermine their businesses. ***Inequality/ Discrimination/Gender Bias/Ethics and Integrity***

> ***Finding 1****: Challenges faced by black women entrepreneurs are discrimination, inequality, and gender bias, which result in difficulty accessing funding, networks, sponsors, and resources.*

4.4. Findings on industry perceptions of entrepreneurial coaching

Black women entrepreneurs were asked for their views on industry perception of EC, and these are the findings drawn from 10 out of 15 participants. It was important to ask the participants about industry perceptions rather than their own, as it is always difficult to access those who do not adopt coaching when the study is about coaching. Their responses provide a nuanced understanding of the challenges and scepticism surrounding coaching:

> ***Participant 1:*** *'…They do not take it too seriously, and they don't think it works'.*

> ***Participant 2:*** *'…They think you can only get a coach once you reach a certain financial goal. Before that time, they didn't think there was much value in it'.*

> ***Participant 4:*** *'… Perhaps a coach will steal the idea and will interfere with the structure of the business'.*

> ***Participant 8:*** *'They think it's an expensive exercise, why should they spend about one thousand something, whereas they can redirect those funds somewhere else in the business?'*

> ***Participant 10:*** *'…coaching takes a long time; they want immediate solutions… like a quick fix'.*

Scepticism regarding EC was a recurring theme. This aligns with the first proposition, suggesting that Black women entrepreneurs often question the effectiveness of coaching. They tend to seek evidence of a coach's prior success before investing in coaching support. **Participant 1** noted that, as a Black woman entrepreneur, she initially dismissed coaching entirely, perceiving it as ineffective. **Participant 4** raised concerns about trust, particularly the fear that coaches might steal ideas or disrupt existing business structures. These perceptions underscore the need for greater credibility and transparency within the coachee-coach relationship. However, it also highlights a more pressing issue: a lack of appreciation or understanding of ***what EC is and the benefits*** it may offer to Black women entrepreneurs.

The cost of coaching was identified as a significant barrier. **Participant 8** highlighted the preference for redirecting funds toward immediate business needs rather than investing in coaching. Similarly, **Participant 2** noted that many entrepreneurs believe coaching is only attainable after achieving specific financial milestones. These responses highlight the importance of demonstrating the return on investment (ROI) and the affordability of coaching to potential users.

Participant 10 noted that some entrepreneurs seek immediate, tangible solutions rather than the longer-term benefits that coaching provides. This preference for 'quick fixes' suggests that the value of coaching as a strategic tool for sustainable growth has not been effectively communicated or understood.

Participants indicated that many black women entrepreneurs ***lack awareness of the potential benefits of coaching***. For those unfamiliar with its benefits, coaching is often viewed as an unnecessary expense.

These findings align with those of Idris and Abu Bakar (2020), who argue that coaching provides significant advantages for recipients; however, these benefits must be conveyed to build trust and interest.

The unregulated nature of the coaching industry contributes to entrepreneurs' mistrust. As Timberlake (2017) observed, business owners unfamiliar with coaching often perceive it as a money-making scheme. This lack of confidence was echoed by participants in this study, who expressed similar doubts about the legitimacy of coaching services.

The research highlights ***a critical gap in the understanding and adoption of EC among black women-owned SMEs.*** Participants reported that coaching is often seen as inaccessible or unnecessary due to financial constraints, scepticism, and limited exposure and understanding of its benefits. Concerns over the credibility and regulation of the coaching industry further compound this scepticism.

Mindset plays a pivotal role in shaping perceptions of coaching. Entrepreneurs who recognise the value of coaching often do so through trusted sources such as mentors, accelerator programs, or business partners. These influencers serve as gateways to coaching, particularly for individuals navigating complex business challenges.

The perceptions that black women entrepreneurs have about coaching are often not well-informed. Due to a lack of understanding of its benefits and what it entails, black women entrepreneurs fail to see the value and deem EC a costly and non-essential financial expense. Ultimately, this contributes to a negative perception held towards EC.

From a theoretical lens, this scepticism can be understood as a break in the experiential learning cycle outlined by Kolb's ELT. Without prior positive experiences of coaching to reflect on and learn from, participants struggled to see its relevance. Similarly, SCLT suggests that observational learning is crucial. In the absence of visible success stories or credible models, mistrust in coaching persists.

> ***Finding 2:*** *The perception of EC is negative (Expensive – it's only for certain people, it does not work, Trust issues – the coach will steal their ideas, limited financial resources for urgent needs, no awareness of value, non-essential expense, inaccessible, unregulated – mistrust, intangible outcomes).*

4.5. Findings on outcomes of entrepreneurial coaching for business success

Here, the participants were asked about the outcomes of EC that contribute to the success of Black women-owned SMEs. All participants agree that there are excellent outcomes from such initiatives, which not only grow the business but also benefit them personally. This was contradictory to the general industry perspective, which showed that Black women entrepreneurs hold a negative perception about EC and suggested that they do not engage in it. This was separated into two key questions during the interview, namely:

- What are the key factors that made your coaching journey successful or effective?
- How have key outcomes such as self-efficacy, confidence, and self-awareness evolved since engaging in coaching?

The study revealed profound personal and professional transformations among participants following their coaching journeys. Key outcomes included enhanced self-efficacy, confidence, and self-awareness:

> **Participant 8** shared, 'After the coaching initiative, I ***was more confident*** in what I was doing. I became aware of my strengths and weaknesses and how that affects my business'.

> **Participant 2** remarked, 'My ***self-awareness*** really increased. I'm more able to identify my blind spots and how to work on them'.

> **Participant 15** reflected, 'I already had confidence in my abilities, but since getting a coach, I learned to distinguish between the ***health of my business and my worth***'.

> **Participant 12** observed, 'I grew a lot during the process. I had ***major imposter syndrome,*** and that subsided. Coaching really validated and invalidated some of my limiting beliefs. All of this contributed to my confidence growing'.

These outcomes closely align with Bandura's four sources of self-efficacy: enactive mastery (successful business actions), vicarious experiences (learning through others' success in coaching), social persuasion (encouragement from the coach), and psychological arousal (managing stress and limiting beliefs). Coaching, therefore, acted as a structured mechanism for strengthening entrepreneurial self-efficacy, enabling participants to persist despite systemic barriers.

These narratives emphasise the diverse benefits of EC. In addition to improvements in business performance, participants reported substantial personal growth. This supports Proposition 2 mentioned above. When coaching is understood and its benefits appreciated, participants can articulate how it has improved their confidence and ESE. They are then able to leverage these insights in their pursuit of entrepreneurial goals and success. **Participant 15's** ability to separate personal worth from business performance reflects a heightened level of self-awareness, critical for resilience and sustainability in entrepreneurship. Similarly, **Participant 12's** journey from imposter syndrome to confidence underscores the role of coaching in dismantling limiting beliefs, enabling entrepreneurs to unlock their full potential.

The findings affirm the pivotal role of self-efficacy in entrepreneurial success. Participants concurred that without self-efficacy, entrepreneurs struggle to maximise their potential, as it underpins the confidence required to persevere and innovate. As **Participant 12's** experience illustrates, coaching interventions that validate or challenge existing beliefs play a crucial role in building this foundational trait.

The literature further substantiates this connection. Muchabaiwa and Msimango-Galawe (2021) posit that ESE has a significant influence on entrepreneurial intention and venture success. Similarly, Santoso and Oetomo (2018) emphasise the interplay between self-efficacy and self-confidence, noting that entrepreneurs with low self-efficacy often lack the assurance necessary to execute tasks successfully.

It was evident that these outcomes were made possible by a couple of key success factors, including the coach's character, the content and relevance of the program, the coachee's attitude towards coaching, and mutual respect. Participants highlighted the interplay between the coach's characteristics, the content of the coaching program, and their attitudes as entrepreneurs. For instance:

> **Participant 13** noted, 'It's the ***coach's character*** and also my attitude as the entrepreneur that made the coaching a success'.

> **Participant 10** highlighted, 'It's the ***contents of the coaching program*** that make it a success'.

> **Participant 15** added, 'For me, it was my ***attitude towards coaching***, my coach's character and knowledge, and the relationship we had together'.

These responses reveal the crucial tenets upon which the relationship between coach and coachee needs to be built for success. As highlighted by Azizi et al. (2023), for coaching to be successful, entrepreneurs must view their coach as a partner. When viewed this way, coachees are more likely to be motivated to participate openly. This commitment to the bond between coach and coachee must be reciprocal.

Respect, boundaries, and alignment with individual needs were central to the coaching's effectiveness. As **Participant 15** elaborated, while the relationship was open-ended, it was grounded in ***mutual respect***, enabling professional boundaries to be maintained. **Participant 10's** assertion about the ***program's relevance*** underscores the necessity for tailored coaching interventions that address specific entrepreneurial needs. This alignment facilitates the journey from the entrepreneur's current state to their envisioned future.

This process also mirrors Kolb's ELT cycle, where entrepreneurs engaged in concrete experiences, reflected on their challenges, conceptualised new strategies, and experimented with them in practice. Coaching created a structured environment for this learning cycle, supporting both personal growth and business development.

> ***Finding 3:*** *Outcomes of coaching included personal development and psychological empowerment, as well as goal clarity, business direction, skills, and access to networks.*

4.6. Other findings – understanding of coaching vs. mentoring

The study initially focused on EC as a tool for the success of Black women-owned SMEs. However, during the semi-structured interviews, it became apparent that participants held inconsistent understandings of the concepts of EC and EM. Of the 15 participants interviewed, 10 said they had undergone EC, and five said they had EM. However, further probing revealed that participants did not understand the difference and the study opted not to differentiate it when exploring the other questions. However, we were able to record what they perceived EC and EM meant and what the differences were. These are captured in the Table below, which enabled a comparative analysis of the definitions, roles, and participants' understanding of these two concepts. Among the 15 participants, 10 were familiar with the concept of coaching, while five were familiar with mentoring.

The qualifying question for participants was, 'Have you been coached before?' with 'coaching' in this context referring to EC. The participants provided the following responses:

> **Participant 4:** 'Not formal coaching, but I have asked for guidance from other business people. So no, I don't have a coach per se, but my mentor is a helpful coach'.
>
> **Participant 5:** 'I have always thought that they are the same thing, just that one you pay for and the other one you don't'.
>
> **Participant 7:** 'It wasn't formal, but I do have a life coach who does sometimes touch on the business aspect of my life'.
>
> **Participant 12:** 'Yes, I have, not formally, but I have a few mentors to whom I go get advice from as and when I hit stumbling blocks'.

The responses revealed that participants 4, 5, 7, and 12 misunderstood the concept of coaching as intended by the study. For instance, Participant 5 equated coaching and mentoring, differentiating them only in terms of monetary compensation. This suggests a perception that mentorship transitions into coaching when payment is involved.

Further probing revealed that participants 7 and 12 referenced both formal and informal coaching, distinguishing between these based on the structure of the relationship and the presence of payment. Informal coaching, as understood by these participants, often resembled a form of mentorship.

When asked to differentiate between EC and EM, the themes presented in Table 1 emerged:

The table highlights the participants' comparisons of the two concepts and the meanings they ascribed to them. Although many participants understood the significance of mentoring and coaching for personal and business growth, their interchangeable use of the terms indicated a conceptual disconnect. As highlighted by Stokes et al. (2021), conflating these concepts creates challenges both conceptually and practically. When these terms are misconstrued, entrepreneurs may address incorrect objectives, potentially undermining their growth.

Van Coller-Peter and Cronjé (2020) emphasise the importance of understanding the distinct contributions of mentoring and coaching to entrepreneurial development. Supporting this research's findings, the literature suggests mentoring is perceived as less formal and relationship-based, while coaching focuses more on performance and alignment with business objectives (Van Coller-Peter & Cronjé, 2020). Participants frequently associated formal coaching with monetary compensation and structured interactions, while informal coaching often resembled unstructured mentorship relationships.

The findings align with Stokes et al.'s (2021) assertion that formal coaching typically involves a paid, contractual relationship that specifies services. This distinction reflects the participants' understanding, which emphasised the role of structure and compensation in differentiating coaching from mentoring. Additionally, elements of mentoring discourse were observed to be performance-oriented, while aspects of coaching discourse encompassed growth or learning-oriented themes. This supports the idea that mentoring relationships are more likely to focus on growth, whereas coaching relationships prioritise reflection and development (Jenkins, 2013; Kotte et al., 2021).

Table 1. Participants' responses on coaching and mentoring.

Coaching	Mentoring
'Structured'	'Unstructured'
'Not much of a relationship is needed'	'Relationship based'
'You pay for coaching'	'You don't need money'
'Not necessarily needing business experience'	'Business experience'
'Has walked through the journey'	'A well-rounded person'
'Has the lingo of business'	'Generic like a life coach'

Other findings: *Black women entrepreneurs can't distinguish coaching from mentoring. They could not respond with certainty whether they are receiving value from coaching or not. This suggests that coaching, as a distinct concept separate from mentoring, is not fully understood, and has not been thoroughly explained to them by their coaches. Ultimately, this impacts how coaching is perceived, and the appreciation or value thereof is not fully understood, which hinders the establishment of clear expectations.*

It is evident that access to finance and networks is crucial for the success of Black women entrepreneurs, and the perceived value of coaching, which impacts adoption. Meanwhile, systemic barriers create significant challenges, including market misalignment, which affects trust and affordability.

5. Conclusions and recommendations

EC serves as a crucial catalyst for personal and professional transformation, enhancing self-efficacy, confidence, and resilience. Through tailored, respectful, and collaborative processes, EC equips entrepreneurs with the necessary tools to overcome systemic barriers and gain clarity in pursuing their entrepreneurial goals and business success. The experiences of Black women entrepreneurs in this study highlight both their resilience and the unique systemic challenges they face, many of which are also characteristic of first-generation entrepreneurs.

5.1. Theoretical contribution

This study advances theory by extending SCLT and ELT into the entrepreneurial coaching context. The findings illustrate how EC operationalises Bandura's four sources of self-efficacy: mastery experiences, vicarious learning, social persuasion, and psychological regulation in the realities of Black women entrepreneurs. Simultaneously, EC demonstrates the relevance of Kolb's (1981) experiential learning cycle, as participants moved from experience to reflection, conceptualisation, and active experimentation in their businesses. By applying and integrating these two frameworks, this study not only validates their applicability in entrepreneurial learning but also demonstrates their combined explanatory power for understanding how coaching fosters both personal transformation and venture growth.

5.2. Practical contribution

The findings carry important implications for practice. First, policymakers and entrepreneurship support organisations should recognise EC as a strategic intervention, not a luxury, and work to improve its accessibility through subsidised or affordable models. Second, the regulation and professionalisation of the coaching industry is essential to address mistrust and build credibility. Third, awareness campaigns and structured programmes should differentiate coaching from mentoring, while promoting their complementary use. Finally, incubators, accelerators, and funding programmes should integrate EC as part of comprehensive support packages to enhance ESE and long-term business sustainability.

5.3. Limitations and future research

This study was limited by its small, qualitative sample, which restricts generalisability. Future research should quantitatively test the magnitude of perceptions and outcomes of EC across broader populations of entrepreneurs. Comparative studies could explore differences in access and impact of EC between urban and rural entrepreneurs, and across racial or geographic contexts. Further inquiry into the return on investment of EC, as well as longitudinal studies tracking its impact over time, would deepen understanding of its long-term value. Finally, examining the interplay of EC and EM in structured programmes could clarify their distinct and combined contributions to entrepreneurial development.

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Artificial intelligence

The author used OpenAI's ChatGPT (GPT-5) for language editing purposes only. All intellectual and analytical contributions are solely those of the author.

Authors contributions

CRediT: **Ntandoyenkosi Kunene**: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – original draft; **Jabulile Msimango-Galawe**: Formal analysis, Methodology, Project administration, Supervision, Validation, Writing – review & editing.

Disclosure statement

In accordance with Taylor & Francis policy and our ethical responsibilities as researchers, we declare that there are no conflicts of interest to disclose

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Data availability statement

Data will be made available upon reasonable request

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