

"It's Just so Superficial and Really Puts me off Personally" – Views and Perceptions of Networking Among Women Working in Small and Medium-Sized Businesses in England

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Abstract

This paper analyses women's views and perceptions of networking and the changes in networking practice since the COVID-19 pandemic. The study focuses on a largely unexplored area of women in small and medium-sized businesses (SMEs), using a case study from the Leeds City Region, England, UK. An online questionnaire was disseminated to 65 participants (51 women and 14 men), and interviews with 14 women working in SMEs were conducted.

A three-tier thematic analysis was used to analyze each dataset individually, and then a joint thematic analysis was conducted. The findings show that networking is mainly assessed negatively and as something that affects work-life balance, causes communication issues, and is largely difficult and not particularly useful. In the post-pandemic era, a lot of networking is done online, with the rise of the LinkedIn network, mentioned in a positive context, raising the question of whether LinkedIn networking could solve issues with harassment and work-life balance.

Keywords: networking, women, small and medium-sized businesses, UK, work-life balance

JEL classification: J

1 Introduction

Networking is part of organizational work, and employees often advance their careers through networking. The practice of networking is “deeply embedded in the competency systems of most major organizations, demonstrating to individuals that this is a valued behaviour” (Newbold, 2000, p. 294). However, networking has traditionally disadvantaged women. For example, Saval (2015) argued that historically, women stayed at home whilst men worked, which led to the situation that networking was set up as an after-work activity due to organizations functioning as masculine. Networking is also closely linked to organizational and work performance as part of organizational behavior research. Work performance has been defined as the extent to which employee behavior contributes to organizational goals (Motowidlo, 2003). However, in terms of work performance, formal, in-role performance, and extra-role work performance were identified, with in-role performance being linked to conducting the work, such as producing goods and services, which contributes to organizational goals and technical processes, and are commonly listed as job requirements. On the other hand, extra-role performance is linked to informal practices that are not part of

the job specification, and these behaviors involve social and psychological contexts of work tasks, such as helping others, cooperating, and suggesting improvements (Nesheim et al., 2017). These practices can also include networking, which is usually an interpersonal activity in a work setting or outside of work, but is linked to work and career progression.

Women's networks have been viewed as helpful in establishing a means by which women, who are often excluded from male-dominant networks, can come together and share information and learning experiences with other women (Cross & Armstrong, 2008). Despite the increasing use of women's networks within organizations, scant research has explored women's networks (Wiggins-Romesburg & Githens, 2018). These networks have not always been perceived as positive, with even the intended beneficiaries questioning their value (Pini et al., 2004). Some women worry that women's networks are viewed as "have-a-chat-clubs" or "hens clubs" (Pini et al., 2004, p. 290). Others worry that by joining a women's network, they will be seen as "recipe swapping male-bashers" (Bierema, 2005, p. 216) or as sending the message that they "need help" (O'Neil et al., 2011, p. 735).

In their focus on a broader societal context to understand how gender norms and gendered practices become replicated in the technology sector, Ozkazanc-Pan and Muntean (2018) contend that gendered institutions (Acker, 1992) contribute to the continuation of inequality for women technology entrepreneurs. Derived from Acker's (1992) influential work, gendered institutions mean that "gender is present in the processes, practices, image and ideologies, and distributions of power in various sectors of social life" (p. 567; see also: Acker, 1990). Gendering is a process whereby power relations become replicated in entrepreneurial contexts and regarding how social networking is enacted. In this sense, understanding how particular behavior, such as social networking, "gets done" (Nentwich & Kelan, 2014; West & Zimmerman, 1987) in entrepreneurial contexts is central to understanding how the production and reproduction of inequality take shape along gender lines (Ozkazanc-Pan & Muntean, 2018, p. 10).

However, whilst networking has been studied in the context of masculinity and the opportunity it creates for women in business, little is known about women's views of networking and how networking works after the COVID-19 pandemic. Even less is known about small and medium-sized businesses (SMEs) despite these businesses being labelled as the backbone of the UK economy (Dowden, 2018). What is more, most businesses in the UK are SMEs; according to data, this number goes to 99.2 percent of all businesses in the UK (National Federation of Self-Employed & Small Businesses Ltd, 2024). Research shows that women working in, or owning SMEs, face barriers, including access to finance, networks, and family support, due to cultural expectations that women will be caregivers (Hunt et al., 2019; Outsios & Farooqi, 2017; Landig, 2011). However, in a systematic literature review of women and SMEs, on which this paper is based (Topić et al., 2021a), findings have shown that SME research is mainly conducted on women entrepreneurs, and not women employed by SMEs. Literature seems to treat entrepreneurship and SMEs as synonyms, which is true to an extent because entrepreneurs are also SME owners; however, this is not always true for all SMEs because some SMEs are larger and have employees. Therefore, we focus on SMEs as organizations rather than women entrepreneurs because literature covers barriers women entrepreneurs face, but not enough is known about SMEs as organizations. Organizational research is either general and does not specify the type and size of organizations studied, or it is focused on corporations. What is also particularly lacking is research on women's networking in the context of SMEs because available literature, some of which is used in this paper, is conducted on corporations or without consideration of the type of organization (Topić, 2021, 2021a, 2021b). Therefore, we focus on understanding how networking works post-pandemic in the context of women working in SMEs in the Leeds City Region (LCR) in England, UK. LCR is an interesting case to study because some studies have shown that women based in the north of England, particularly also from Leeds, express higher work satisfaction and more positive attitudes towards career progression opportunities than, for example, women based in the south of England (Topić, 2021a); thus, LCR was deemed an interesting region to conduct this research.

2 Women and Networking

Scholarly studies have argued that organizations are gendered (Acker, 1990; Alvesson, 1998), highlighting structural and cultural patterns that disadvantage women. Studies conducted during the 1980s and 1990s in the US (Rose, 1989) and Australia (Ehrich, 1994) highlight the powerful role of old boys' networks in impacting careers, and the barriers faced by women in accessing these, often due to their gendered nature and the way they operate, for example, via informal invitations to traditionally masculine events, such as sporting events. The authors argue for the importance of women accessing networks to benefit from increased career information and reputational benefits (Rose, 1989); visibility of career options and opportunities (Paul, 1985); as well as access to training and support, and the opportunity to build personal power. Studies show that even when women are successful in joining networks, they may still struggle to build such power and may instead seek to focus on enhancing relationships with people they already know (Travers et al., 1997). Women report facing barriers towards inclusion in networks much more so than men (Tonge, 2008). Barriers include time, caring responsibilities, social barriers, expectations around female roles, and long hours work cultures (Ogden et al., 2006; Tonge, 2008).

Whilst, historically, studies have argued that women engage less in networking than men, Tonge (2008) and van Emmerik et al. (2006) argue that the opposite is true, with women engaging more in networking than men. It is important to consider the nature and impact of such networking, which can be seen as located in the broader context of the tokenization of women (McGuire, 2002) and their lack of power within organizations. Where women do engage, less impact is reported on career satisfaction and enhancement, with van Emmerik et al. (2006) suggesting men may have a more instrumental approach to using the networks to help them achieve their career goals. Finally, the lack of women in powerful roles is recognized as a barrier to forming successful women's networks (Topić et al., 2021a, 2024).

Networking is defined as “creating a fabric of personal contacts who will provide support, feedback, insight, resources and information” (Ibarra & Hunter, 2007, p. 41). Burkinshaw and White (2019) argued that, whilst networking is an important element of women’s career progression, there are challenges to successful female networking. Where networks focus on masculine behaviors, and where women participate in male networks, those networks, unsurprisingly, perpetuate maleness and gender inequalities. Burkinshaw and White (2019) found that in the context of their research, when women participate in women-only networking and career development opportunities, they learn and experience the benefits of effective and supportive networking. However, they find working in the “whole” organization and networking with men a very different and more gendered experience. In her work on gender and masculinities in public relations and advertising, Topić (2021, 2021a, 2021b) argued that gendered practices in networking adversely impact women. Where networking, either as formal or informal socializing, takes place outside of working hours, women, particularly those with caring responsibilities, are unlikely to be able to join in, and even where they can attend, experiences of sexism and sexual harassment tend to lead them to choose not to participate. Thus, it is both the timing and the nature of these networking processes that perpetuate their maleness.

When it comes to women and networking, a study by Tonge (2008) found that women face more barriers than men do in networking, and these include societal expectations that even when women work full-time and have successful careers, they play a dual role, doing more of the caring and household tasks than men do. In the British Social Attitudes Survey (BSAS), Allen and Stevenson (2023) found that attitudes have changed, and support for a traditional division of labor has declined, with only nine per cent of those interviewed considered that a man should earn the money while a woman looks after the home and family. However, the reality is different: women continue to do more household labor than men, in what is referred to as a “second shift”, or “modified male breadwinner model”, with “63% of women reporting doing more than their fair share of household labour, compared with 22% of men” (Allen & Stevenson, 2023, p. 4).

3 Networking and Career Progression

Lambe and Maes (2018) argued that several studies have tracked women in top managerial positions (Heller & Stepp, 2011; Ibarra et al., 2010; Ibarra et al., 2013; Knörr, 2005; Long, 2014; Ragins et al., 1998), and all these studies found that, while the number of working women has increased and women are running more businesses, overall, women are still struggling regarding career advancement and the opportunity to actualize their potential. Lambe and Maes (2018) pointed out that there seems to be a scarcity of women role models for successful managerial leadership (Ibarra et al., 2013; Lambe & Maes, 2018). Study by O'Neil et al. (2011) examined both the perceptions of the women members of the network as well as the perceptions of women's networks, studying 737 members of the executive leadership team about the purpose, outcomes, and expectations of the women's network in their organization. O'Neil et al. (2011) argued that networks are a source of social capital and power (Krackhardt, 1990; Perriton, 2006; Timberlake, 2005). Ibarra (1993) claimed that networking helps individuals understand the political and cultural aspects of an organization. Networking affects career success, with studies showing that it is associated with increased salary, promotions, and career satisfaction (Seibert et al., 2001).

Research has found that women tend to have less influential and less well-developed social networks, which are associated with fewer opportunities within their firm and in the external labor market (Forret, 2014). In a study of male and female managers in three large organizations, Burke et al. (1995), for example, found that women had more women in their networks than men did, and men had more men in their networks than women. Given that more men typically hold higher-level managerial roles than women (Ragins et al., 1998; Schein, 2007), women's networks are likely to result in less access to opportunities for career advancement. Similarly, studies have found that networking strategies that are successful for men do not work equally well for women. Forret and Dougherty (2004), for example, discovered that using networking to increase internal visibility was significantly related to several promotions for men, but not for women.

Women's networking is often further blocked by organizational structures that influence women's interactions. If women do not hold line positions with accountability for profits and losses, they have fewer chances to interact with powerful organizational decision-makers who can assist them in their career advancement. A woman's position in the firm can prevent her from regularly demonstrating her abilities and achievements to important organizational leaders, thus inhibiting her opportunities for career advancement (see Forret, 2014). In addition to formal organizational structures, informal structures are likely to affect women's networking too, with women left out of informal communications among men because these conversations occur in traditionally male-dominated environments (e.g., hunting cabins, cigar clubs, or locker rooms).

The creation of formal women's networks within organizations began because women were often excluded from male-dominated networks which offer members advice, information, and friendship (Fawcett & Pringle, 2000; Ibarra, 1993; Linehan & Walsh, 1999; Smith-Lovin & McPherson, 1993) and provide access to mentors and other resources for career advancement (Brass et al., 2004; Burt, 1997). High-level executive women have mentioned and highlighted the key importance of "who they know" to their career success (e.g. Sheridan, 2002) and women in general "have consistently reported that a primary barrier to their career advancement is their exclusion from organizational networks" (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Ragins et al., 1998; Tharenou, 1999; O'Neil et al., 2011, p. 736). However, there have been contradictory findings about the potential value of women's networks. Some research studies have found that women's networks have resulted in benefits for participants and organizations alike. Pini et al. (2004), in a study of nineteen female mayors, found that eleven of the women reported positive benefits from membership in the women's network, including support, learning, advice, the fostering of a collective identity, and fewer feelings of isolation for the women. Similarly, Cross and Armstrong (2008) reported positive outcomes from participating in women's networks in their study of twenty female managers. They found that these networks provide a context in which individuals could transfer their experiences and what they learned, such as strategies for obtaining a mentor,

to the collective. While Pini et al. (2004) and Cross and Armstrong (2008) studied individual-level outcomes related to women's networks, Vinnicombe et al. (2004) discussed organizational benefits accruing from these networks, e.g., the retention of qualified women, enhanced corporate reputation, a better-equipped workforce, and organizational learning. Interestingly, at the organizational level, Bierema's (2005) research found that a ten-member women's network in a Fortune 500 company failed because it replicated the organization's patriarchal culture, this being the very culture that was already blocking and preventing their career advancement.

4 Method

Following the literature analyzed above and given the COVID-19 pandemic that shifted work online, this paper explores women's views on networking, and to what extent, if any, women's networking has changed since the pandemic. This provides a response to the question asked earlier in the paper: there seems to be literature on whether and how women network, but not much about whether women enjoy networking and how networking has potentially changed post-pandemic. There is even less research on women and networking in SMEs despite their economic importance.

The research study was conducted as part of a large project focused on providing coaching and leadership qualifications as well as networking opportunities to women working in SMEs in the Leeds City Region (LCR). Whilst the project was focused on entrepreneurial activities, such as providing coaching and leadership qualifications, and organizing networking events for women participating in the project, research agenda run concurrently led by the first author of this paper who was a research lead, along with academic leads (authors 2, 3, and 4) who were in charge of various projects clusters, such as manufacturing, digital, and IT. The research agenda was centered on understanding organizational culture in SMEs by looking specifically at issues such as working patterns and career experiences (Topić-Rutherford et al., 2025), as well as networking.

4.1 Sampling

A mixed methods approach was used. The authors collected 65 responses in the form of an online questionnaire, asking a mix of qualitative and quantitative questions. The online questionnaire was sent to the participants in the project by the University's enterprise office, which managed the project. Research was also expanded to include the wider population of LCR to avoid the preconceived bias of the project recruiting local women with connections to the enterprise office and potentially with preconceived views on gender equality, as they signed up to participate in a women's empowerment project. Bourdieu (2001) argued that masculine domination is so ingrained into everyday life that many women do not recognize it because it becomes "acceptable and even natural", and this practice can be seen as "symbolic violence, a gentle violence, imperceptible and invisible even to its victims" (p. 1). Therefore, it is not illogical to think that if women signed up for a project on women's empowerment and agreed to take free training, they perceive domination and oppression and have pre-conceived views on gender equality, which skews data and prevents disclosing practices that exist but might not be recognized. In addition to wanting more women to participate in a study, an effort was made to extend an online questionnaire to all genders and not just women, in order to compare views on networking, particularly since literature shows that networking is a practice established by men who, up to the present day, tend to benefit more from networking than women (Burkinshaw & White, 2019; Topić et al., 2021a, 2024; Saval, 2015). The wider population was recruited through Facebook groups for LCR SMEs. The online questionnaire's response rate was low, with only 65 responses, partially also due to the gatekeeping by Facebook group admins, which prevented accessing a larger pool of participants.

The participants in the online questionnaire were mainly female (51), with a small participation from male participants (14) and no participation from other genders. The age of participants was diverse, ranging from 18 to 70, and the sample was ethnically diverse, with participants reporting their race as White, Black, Indian, and European. Industries represented in the online questionnaire

consist of manufacturing, marketing, commercial property, construction, legal, arts, waste management, work support and training, design, IT, retail, services, accounting, financial services, events, social enterprise, communication, law enforcement, education, housing, research and development.

Due to a low sample collected in the online questionnaire, 14 qualitative interviews with women from SMEs in LCR were also conducted. The interviewees were recruited through the lead author's LinkedIn network and a project call for participants. Since the interview sample consists of 14 interviewees, which is a number that many qualitative papers use as a single data set, the paper provides a good insight into women and networking in SMEs, because the sample also has 65 online responses from the online questionnaire, qualitatively analyzed. Thus, a total of 79 qualitative responses are used in this study, shedding light on networking in SMEs, which can be used to inform future studies.

In terms of the 14 interviewed women, 12 hold managerial roles (one is also an owner of an SME organization), and two were employees without managerial duties. Interviewed women were between 26 and 60 years old; six were project participants, and eight were not, providing a good balance in the sample regarding a preconceived bias (Table 1).

Table 1: Interviewee Demographics

INTERVIEWEE NO	INDUSTRY	LOCATION	POSITION	AGE	Project participant?
1	Demography industry	Leeds	Director	32	Yes
2	Publishing	Barnsley	Editor	35	No
3	Real estate	Leeds	Owner	60	No
4	PR and Marketing	Leeds	Head of department	26	Yes
5	Manufacturing	Leeds	HR director	52	Yes
6	IT Consulting	Leeds	Senior business analyst	40	Yes
7	Business consultant	Leeds	Managing director	42	Yes
8	Learning and development	Pontefract	Director	55	No
9	Not-for-profit	Leeds	Managing director	50	No
10	Executive coaching	Leeds	Managing director	38	Yes
11	Consultancy and events	Leeds	CEO	41	No
12	Manufacturing	Leeds	Sales administrator	56	No
13	Manufacturing	Leeds	Managing director	56	No
14	Manufacturing	Leeds	Work manager	35	No

Source: Authors' work.

Before interviewing the women, the authors asked whether they had participated in an online questionnaire and used non-participation as a criterion to avoid the duplication of data. This was necessary because interview data were supplementing the online questionnaire so that findings could be explored further, and to confirm findings from a non-generalizable online study. Thus, the questions asked in both online and interview questionnaires were the same, with the language style adapted for different types of recruitment, as explained in the next section.

4.2 Questionnaires

The questions in the online questionnaire were part of a larger project, as mentioned earlier in the paper. In this paper, responses to the networking questions were analyzed, which were a mix of open-ended and closed questions.

Therefore, the questions asked were: Is there a networking requirement in your organization? (Three options for answers: Yes, networking happens after office hours. / Yes, networking happens during office hours. / No, there is no networking requirement.) / Has networking changed during the pandemic? (Yes/No) / How do you feel about networking now vs pre-pandemic? (Open-ended) / Are there any leisure activities being organised by members of your team (e.g., playing sports during weekends)? (Yes/No) / If yes, who organises them? (Open-ended) / How do you feel about attending leisure activities during the weekend? (Open-ended).

These questions provided a good insight into the views and perceptions of networking. The questions were developed by the authors of the paper based on available literature (Topić, 2021, 2021a, 2021b; Topić et al., 2021a; Portas, 2018).

Interview questions were also developed by the authors of the paper, drawing from research into women in advertising and public relations (Topić, 2021, 2021a, 2021b) as well as a book by Mary Portas, a British businesswoman, broadcaster and author (Portas, 2018) who narrated her experience of climbing the ladder in the retail industry and focused also on networking, particularly leisure activities and brainstorming ideas during work lunches. Therefore, interviewees were asked questions on whether there is a networking requirement in their organization and, if so, whether networking has changed because of the pandemic, which ties into other networking research used to inform this study (Topić, 2021, 2021a, 2021b). In addition to that, a question was asked whether their organization organized any leisure activities outside of work and how they feel about it, followed by asking whether people often go to work lunches and return with new ideas, and whether they are involved in these activities (Portas, 2018).

responses, then the data from the interview transcripts, and finally, both datasets together. The online questionnaire dataset consists of 65 qualitative responses, and the interview dataset consists of 14 responses. Combined, this yields data from 79 qualitative responses, providing a meaningful insight into the views of women from LCR SMEs on networking practices. Quantitative data from the online questionnaire were not analyzed due to a low sample size, which does not allow generalizations. Whilst this dataset is substantial for a qualitative analysis, the intention of this paper is not to offer any generalizations, which is also why a thematic analysis was used as a method for the analysis.

Thematic analysis is “a systematic approach to the analysis of qualitative data that involves identifying themes or patterns of cultural meaning; coding and classifying data, usually textual, according to themes; and interpreting the resulting thematic structures by seeking commonalities, relationships, overarching patterns, theoretical constructs, or explanatory principles” (Lapadat, 2010, p. 926). Thematic analysis is a sensemaking approach that helps reduce large qualitative datasets, such as the two analyzed datasets, 65 qualitative online responses, and 14 interviews. Thematic analysis also helps identify main themes in the data and, thus, trends that can be explored in further research. The method is more centered on identifying trends than theory-building, which was convenient for this research study, given the lack of research on networking in the context of women working in SMEs. Findings are first visualized, then also narrated using a summative approach and illustrations from participant responses as per the guide of Braun and Clarke (2006).

Research was conducted between 2023 and 2024. The authors tried to collect as many answers to the online questionnaire as possible, which prolonged data collection. Therefore, the online questionnaire was originally disseminated in spring 2023, and data collection continued during 2023. Since it became apparent that data collection was not harnessing enough responses, along with issues with gatekeeping on social media, the authors conducted initial interviews in 2023 and 2024. In 2025, when writing the findings and the analysis (which was delayed due to the first author of the study moving institutions and countries),

the authors conducted three further interviews to check whether the findings were still current, which was confirmed, as those three new participants did not say anything new. Saturation has been reached with the original 11 interviews conducted for the study, and confirmed with further three interviews.

Research ethics approvals were obtained for both phases of the research, the online questionnaire and the interview questionnaire. The approvals were granted by Leeds Beckett University.

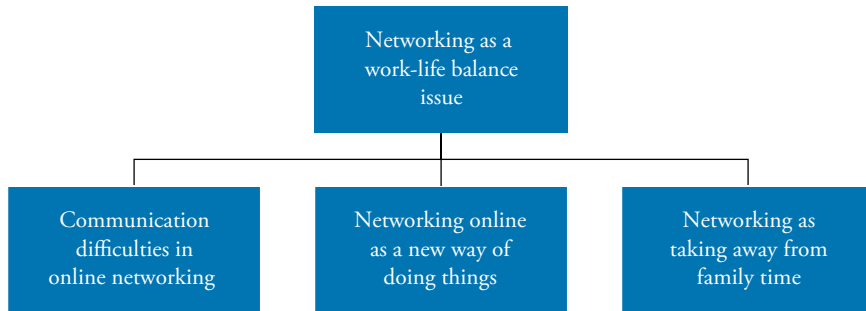
5 Findings

5.1 Online questionnaire

Most online participants said there is no networking requirement in their organization (75.4 percent), signaling that, contrary to literature, which arguably mainly focuses on the corporate world, SMEs seem to be more work-friendly and require less employee time. However, 67.7 percent of participants also said that networking has changed since the pandemic, which was the focus of this study. In addition to that, 63.1 percent of participants said that leisure activities outside of work are not regularly organized, again signaling a work-friendly environment in SMEs where employees might have more time for themselves and/or their families; a finding not commonly found in corporate research on workloads.

However, when it comes to views on networking generally and leisure activities after work, as well as work lunches, the overall sentiment is negative, with many participants expressing negative views of these activities. The thematic analysis thus concentrates on networking as a work-life balance issue as the main theme, with sub-themes including communication difficulties when networking online, networking online as a new way of doing things, and networking as taking away from family time (Figure 1).

Figure 1: *Thematic Analysis 1 (Online Questionnaire)*



Source: Authors' illustration.

In other words, there is a division between participants on how they feel about networking, with one part saying they are OK or enjoying networking. For example:

"Better now."

"We should do more."

On the other hand, the other part calls it useless and expresses negative views of this activity, including one participant criticizing their organization for no longer wanting to invest in networking:

"Still virtually useless."

"It is necessary for some roles. I dislike it and avoid it. It is not one of my strengths."

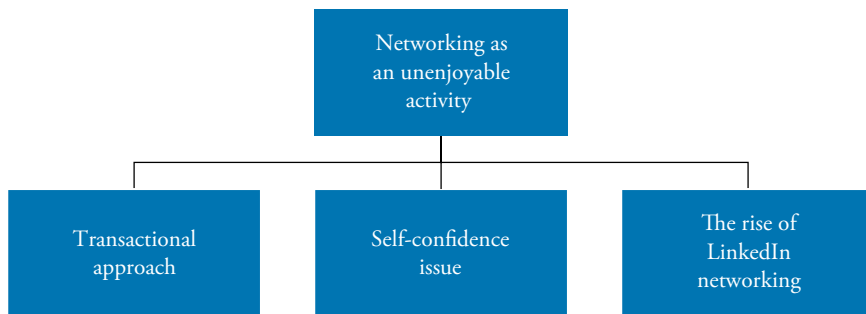
"Networking has been different in the last couple of years -- it's been all virtual. There are pluses and minuses. No doubt the shit institution that I work for is happy about the virtual because they don't have to pay for professional development because they're cheap bastards who don't actually care about professional development."

"I am not a fan of networking."

5.2 Interviews

When it comes to interviews, findings are similar to online responses, with women labelling networking as unenjoyable (main theme), with considerations also including a transactional approach, self-confidence issues, and the rise of LinkedIn networking (sub-themes) (Figure 2).

Figure 2: *Thematic Analysis 2 (Interviews)*



Source: Authors' illustration.

The findings from the online questionnaire were therefore largely repeated in the interviews with women, who said networking was something they do not particularly enjoy, because it requires self-promotion and boasting about achievements, and it is too artificial for some, who then avoid these events. For example:

"...personally, I always feel so artificial, and everyone is so self-promoting, and it's like (...) it feels so unnatural to me (...). Like everyone is trying to like, figure out 'What's your angle? What are you trying to gain here?' I'm not that sort of person. Uh, it's just so superficial and really puts me off personally" (interviewee 1).

This raises the question of whether women are hindering their career progress by not engaging in networking, so it feels like self-inflicted harm; however, there is a different way of looking at this, as the literature has shown. Networking is historically seen as a masculine practice because men worked whilst women

stayed at home and thus, men could network after work and develop this informal work culture that takes them ahead (Saval, 2015). However, at the same time, literature reports that many women do not enjoy these forms of socializing either because of caring responsibilities or because they face harassment (Topić, 2021, 2021a, 2021b). Therefore, women in this study expressing negative sentiments does not come as a surprise, and the question remains whether organizations need to change their internal career progression policies to avoid activities such as networking, bonding, and influencing careers. These sentiments are also in line with the literature on the differences in the way women network (Burkinshaw & White, 2019; van Emmerik et al., 2006). What is more, one interviewee, echoing negative sentiments towards networking, also emphasized the need for a notice because of her caring responsibilities:

"Yeah (...) if it was going to be after work, I'd probably want some notice just so that I have like, cover for my daughter 'cause I wouldn't like to leave her on her own late at night" (interviewee 14).

Furthermore, some women also displayed a transactional approach to networking, seeing it mainly as a way of closing sales. They also expressed a negative attitude toward the social aspect of networking, albeit they recognized that this has changed during the pandemic. For example, interviewee 8 said she did not always believe that networking was beneficial for her personally, nor did she think she was a particularly good networker in the past, because networking had to be about closing sales rather than a social event, but because of the pandemic, she changed her view due to LinkedIn networking:

"I didn't believe that networking was beneficial for me personally. I didn't think I was a particularly good networker, and I certainly didn't engage in networking (...). For me, networking has to be purposeful, and (...) when it starts to feel social, I disengage from it. I probably see greater value in it now than I did before (...). I think I have a greater application of the value of a network (...). It doesn't always have to be a quick win, and I think historically I felt that networking had to be quick and quick when it needed to be purposeful. It needs to be sales-oriented, and I think I've moved away from that thinking (...). I've also had some experience with social networking on LinkedIn, where I've probably been more engaged during the pandemic. On LinkedIn, for example, (...)

commenting and liking on people's posts and actually got work through very little effort, just being engaged and just being present in a social network. Because your name just keeps getting put in front of people, doesn't it? And then it's like, 'Oy, yeah, I know somebody who could help us with that.' It's one of those scenarios" (interviewee 8).

LinkedIn also came up in another participant's response. For example, interviewee 11 also said that LinkedIn has taken over face-to-face networking and that people are sharing more than they would normally share in a face-to-face networking event. This interviewee also said that she does not prefer personal networking anymore, a sentiment found in half of the online questionnaire sample, too:

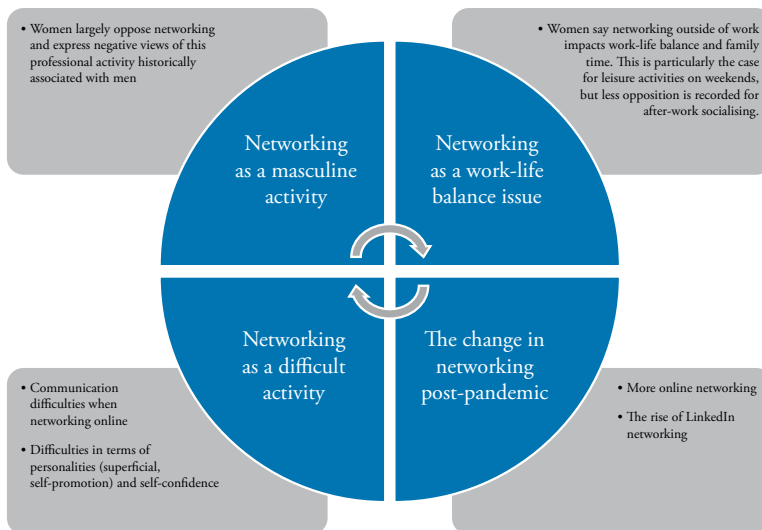
"LinkedIn has really taken off. And people are using it almost as a replacement for face-to-face engagement. So, they are sharing more things than they would normally share when you're sitting in front of them. They are sharing those things online. And I also find that people are less reluctant, and even in my case, reluctant to just meet up (...). You know, before, I could easily have lots of lunch, networking meetings, and just go out and meet people. I don't do that anymore. I don't have a need to do that. Because I feel we can easily achieve the same thing with a Zoom call" (interviewee 11).

Networking on LinkedIn, which seems to have exacerbated during the pandemic, opens an interesting question on the future of networking. If this form of networking is to continue, and given that the advertising and public relations literature shows that some women face harassment and unwanted advances in face-to-face networking (Topić, 2021, 2021a, 2021b), maybe social media networking could resolve this issue, open networking opportunities, and level the field for all. In addition to that, what the data seem to show is a lack of confidence, with some interviewees saying they did not think they were good at networking or seeing it as superficial, the latter being a disagreement with the networking concept, but also potentially signaling self-confidence issues. These sentiments can come from networking historically being a male activity and differences between men's and women's networking (Burkinshaw & White, 2019; van Emmerik et al., 2006). Self-confidence issues are not a new issue, with many studies emphasizing that women lack confidence, which was reported in many areas, such as networking, career development, accessing funding for entrepreneurs (Chen et al., 2012; McGregor & Tweed, 2002), etc.

6 Conclusion

After analyzing the first two datasets, as emphasized above, a third thematic analysis was conducted on both datasets. As per Figure 3, the main themes that derive from this small, qualitative study from northern England are networking as a masculine activity, networking as a work-life balance issue, networking as a difficult activity, and the change in networking in the post-pandemic era. What these findings mean is that women largely oppose networking and express negative views of this activity, which was historically set up by men (Saval, 2015). They say that networking negatively impacts their work-life balance and family time, which is particularly the case with leisure activities over the weekend, which many women do not attend. Views on networking are generally divided, with some seeing it positively but most negatively. Of those who see it positively, new opportunities for meeting others, closing transactions, and doing business are cited, whilst others see it as difficult.

Figure 3: Thematic Analysis (Joint)



Source: Authors' illustration.

What is particularly interesting in these findings is that LinkedIn is cited by some participants as a new form of networking and it is mainly assessed positively, opening an avenue for further research on the potentially positive impact of LinkedIn social media network on professional networking, which could solve problems with unwanted advances and harassment as well as issues with free time if one is to network online, which can be done via smartphone.

Whilst these findings are not generalizable or representative, the authors looked at gender differences in the online questionnaire to explore whether the data point towards any gendered differences. Interestingly, they do not, despite networking traditionally being seen as a masculine activity (van Emmerik et al., 2006; Saval, 2015; Forret & Daugherty, 2004; Rose, 1989; Ehrich, 1994), with 14 men in this small online sample showing similar views to those of women, opening a question of whether employees are starting to generally see networking as a work-life balance issue and something that takes away from family and/or free time. Therefore, research has emphasized that historically, networking has been a male activity and that men disproportionately advance through networking as opposed to women (Rose, 1989; Ehrich, 1994; van Emmerik et al., 2006; Forret & Daugherty, 2004). However, this small sample pointed in a different direction, which requires further research, since the men in this small study did not exhibit positive views of networking, raising a question of whether the work-life balance issue that networking causes is still just a woman's issue. Future research should further examine men's views on networking and explore the ways in which this activity could be redesigned to work for everyone, particularly in the context of work-life balance. The practice of networking is "deeply embedded in the competency systems of most major organisations, demonstrating to individuals that this is a valued behaviour" (Newbold, 2000, p. 294). Since networking can bring personal benefits, not just organizational ones, this practice should be redesigned to work for everyone and to enable work-life balance issues to be avoided, allowing people to network in ways that suit them.

In addition, interestingly, women in this study did not express the fear of being seen as "recipe-swapping male-bashers" (Bierema, 2005, p. 216) or "hens clubs"

(Pini et al., 2004, p. 290) nor did they express the need to fit into networking or that they needed help in their careers (O'Neil et al., 2011). They simply expressed negative views of the activity and saw it as useless; the question being whether this is because they traditionally did not benefit from networking or because they have an introverted personality, for example, and do not enjoy engaging with others in this way and building relationships. Using a larger sample, future research should look further into behavioral and personality profiles of all genders and their views of networking and explore what kind of people enjoy networking and what they think they get out of it, potentially using Goffman's performative framework and exploring networking as performance, as well as looking into how networking as a practice could change to bring personal, and not just organizational benefits.

Furthermore, the findings indicate that SMEs as workplaces require less networking than what wider organizational research, largely centered on the corporate world, shows, which also indicates that SMEs might be better workplaces for work-life balance, which requires further large-scale research. In addition to that, future research could also look at differences between corporate and SME networking, exploring to what extent networking is a requirement for large organizations, as opposed to small and medium-sized organizations, and how individuals working in all types of organizations perceive networking and its usefulness. Some participants in our study labelled networking as "useless"; however, this could be because of the perception that networking is not beneficial for smaller organizations, which leads to the question of whether employees as individuals perceive networking as useful for them personally rather than just for organizations.

Finally, only women working in SMEs were included in the study; thus, the limitation of the study is that it is not possible to compare the results with those of women working in large organizations. Future research should investigate women working in all types of organizations, using a large survey, likely a paid one via one of the large pollsters with access to large and representative samples.

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