



Navigating Leadership in Indian Startups: An Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis of Women Leaders

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ABSTRACT :

The present study employed Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to explore the lived experiences of women in leadership roles within Indian startups. The research aims to delve into the nuanced perspectives of women leaders, uncovering their challenges, strategies, and aspirations. Through semi-structured interviews with two female participants currently in leadership roles in startup environment, insights were gathered into their professional roles, interactions with subordinates, encounters with adversity, and perceptions of personal fulfillment and career development. The qualitative analysis revealed experiential themes reflecting the participants' subjective perceptions, emotions, and meaning-making processes. Clustering these themes generated Group Experiential Themes (GETs), highlighting commonalities across cases such as, Strategic Communication Optimization, Strategic Management of Risks and Challenges, Navigating Personal Well-being and Fostering Team-Oriented Mindsets and Collaboration. Reflexivity was employed throughout the research process to critically examine the researcher's role and biases.

Keywords: Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis, Organizational Behaviour, Leadership, Experiential Themes

1. Introduction :

The term leadership is not limited to academic circles. We are fascinated by leadership—in government, in the community, in the boardroom, on the football field, and on the shop floor. Leadership is an important dimension along which people are evaluated in all walks of life. Leadership is an especially hot topic during political elections. Naturally, leadership is not an easy concept to define. While historians generally recognize Martin Luther King Jr., Abraham Lincoln, and Mother Teresa as exceptional leaders, it's important to note that they possessed distinct styles, personalities, and backgrounds. For the purpose of conceptualization, leadership is defined as “the ability to influence a group toward the achievement of a vision or set of goals” (Robbins & Judge, 2012). This influence can stem from formal positions of authority within an organization, such as managerial roles. However, not all managers exhibit effective leadership, and not all leaders hold managerial positions. Simply having formal authority does not guarantee effective leadership. Informal leadership, which arises outside of formal organizational structures, is frequently just as crucial, if not more so, than formal authority. Essentially, leaders can emerge organically from within a group, not solely through formal designation. For organizations to operate at their best, they require both robust leadership and effective management. Today, leaders play a crucial role in questioning existing norms, envisioning the future, and motivating members of the organization to strive for those visions. Similarly, managers are essential for developing thorough plans, establishing streamlined organizational frameworks, and supervising daily activities.

1.1. Theories of Leadership

Several theories have been propounded and extensive research has been conducted in this field. This body of knowledge serves as a cornerstone for applying leadership theories effectively within organizational contexts. Broadly, leadership theories are grouped into the following types.

1.1.1. Trait Theories

Please make sure that you use as much as possible normal fonts in your documents. Special fonts, such as fonts used in the Far East (Japanese, Chinese, Korean, etc.) may cause problems during processing. To avoid unnecessary errors you are strongly advised to use the ‘spellchecker’ function of MS Word. Follow this order when typing manuscripts: Title, Authors, Affiliations, Abstract, Keywords, Main text (including figures and tables), Acknowledgements, References, Appendix. Collate acknowledgements in a separate section at the end of the article and do not include them on the title page, as a footnote to the title or otherwise. Throughout history, renowned individuals like Buddha, Napoleon, Mao, Churchill, Roosevelt, and Reagan have been distinguished by their unique personal characteristics. The initial systematic examination of leadership emerged in the 1930s through the establishment of trait theories. These theories concentrate on identifying the specific personal attributes that contribute to individuals being effective leaders. During its initial phase, the trait approach to leadership, often referred to as the “good man/good woman theory,” was predominant in leadership research until the 1950s (House & Aditya, 1997). This early research was largely atheoretical and relied heavily on common-sense

understandings of leadership and social interactions. Scholars investigated numerous individual characteristics, including gender, dominance, intelligence, appearance, physical energy, need for power, and need for achievement. In a seminal review conducted in 1948, R. M. Stogdill examined studies that explored traits such as intelligence and dominance in relation to leader effectiveness. However, the overall findings did not strongly support these relationships, and there was little consistency in the results. Consequently, scholars concluded that there were minimal, if any, universal traits that reliably predicted leadership (Stogdill, 1948).

One study found that individuals high on dominance, intelligence, and self-efficacy were more likely to emerge as leaders than those with other personality trait patterns (Smith & Foti, 1998). Recent research has shifted towards examining the Big Five traits in relation to leadership outcomes. Further investigations have begun to dissect the influence of these traits on various leadership outcomes. For example, a study conducted with military personnel in Singapore found that extraversion significantly contributes to leadership self-efficacy (LSE), which refers to individuals' perceived capabilities to effectively execute leadership tasks (Ng, Ang, & Chan, 2008). Individuals characterized by high extraversion, indicating sociability and assertiveness, tend to exhibit strong leadership self-efficacy, thereby often demonstrating effectiveness as leaders.

1.1.2. Behavioural Theories

Trait research offers insights into selecting individuals suitable for leadership roles, whereas behavioral theories suggest the potential for training individuals to become effective leaders. Notably, the Ohio State Studies conducted in the late 1940s aimed to identify distinct dimensions of leader behavior (Northouse, 2018). Initially exploring over a thousand dimensions, the studies eventually identified two primary factors that significantly explained most leadership behaviors reported by employees: initiating structure and consideration. Initiating structure reflects a leader's inclination to define and organize their role and those of employees in pursuit of goal achievement. Conversely, consideration pertains to the extent to which a leader's relationships with subordinates are marked by mutual trust, respect for their ideas, and consideration for their emotions. The University of Michigan's Survey Research Center conducted leadership studies with similar aims to identify behavioral characteristics associated with performance effectiveness. The Michigan group identified two behavioral dimensions: employee-oriented leadership, which emphasizes interpersonal relationships by showing a personal interest in employees' needs and accepting their differences, and production-oriented leadership, which focuses on task accomplishment and technical aspects of the job. These dimensions closely align with those identified by the Ohio State studies, where employee-oriented leadership corresponds to consideration, and production-oriented leadership corresponds to initiating structure. In fact, many leadership researchers use these terms interchangeably.

1.1.3. Contingency Theories

Contingency theories of leadership suggest that a leader's effectiveness depends on various situational factors. Unlike trait or behavioral theories, which focus on the characteristics or actions of leaders, contingency theories recognize the importance of contextual variables in determining leadership effectiveness. These theories suggest that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to leadership and that different situations call for different leadership styles or behaviors. One prominent contingency theory is Fiedler's Contingency Model, developed by Fred Fiedler in the 1960s. According to this model, the effectiveness of a leader depends on the match between the leader's style and situational favorableness. Fiedler recognized two main leadership styles: one that focuses on tasks and another that centers on relationships. Task-oriented leaders focus on achieving goals and tasks, while relationship-oriented leaders prioritize building interpersonal relationships. Another influential contingency theory is the Path-Goal Theory developed by Robert House in the 1970s. This theory posits that a leader's effectiveness depends on their ability to clarify the path to goal attainment and provide the necessary support and rewards to help followers achieve those goals. The theory outlines four distinct leadership styles: directive, supportive, participative, and achievement-focused.

One of the strengths of contingency theories is their recognition of the importance of situational factors in shaping leadership effectiveness. By considering the specific circumstances in which leadership occurs, these theories provide a more nuanced understanding of leadership than trait or behavioral theories alone. Additionally, contingency theories offer practical guidance for leaders by emphasizing the need to adapt their leadership style to fit the demands of the situation. However, contingency theories also have limitations. They can be complex and difficult to apply in practice, requiring leaders to accurately assess the situational factors and adjust their behavior accordingly. Additionally, some critics argue that contingency theories do not adequately account for the role of individual differences in shaping leadership effectiveness.

1.1.4. Charismatic Theories

Charismatic theories of leadership focus on the charismatic qualities and behaviors exhibited by certain leaders that enable them to inspire and influence others. These theories emphasize the leader's ability to articulate a compelling vision, demonstrate confidence and conviction, and exhibit extraordinary personal qualities that attract and motivate followers. One of the earliest and most influential theories of charismatic leadership was proposed by Max Weber in the early 20th century. Weber defined charismatic authority as a form of leadership based on the personal qualities and charisma of the leader rather than traditional or bureaucratic authority structures. Building on Weber's work, subsequent researchers have identified several key characteristics of charismatic leaders. These include vision and articulateness, which refers to the leader's ability to communicate a compelling vision of the future and inspire others to pursue it (Conger & Kanungo, 1987). Charismatic leaders also exhibit confidence, optimism, and a strong belief in their own abilities, which helps to instill confidence and trust in their followers (Bass, 1985).

One of the most well-known contemporary theories of charismatic leadership is the Transformational Leadership Theory developed by Bernard Bass. According to Bass, transformational leaders are characterized by their ability to inspire and motivate followers to achieve extraordinary outcomes through the articulation of a compelling vision, the provision of individualized support and encouragement, and the promotion of intellectual stimulation and innovation (Bass & Avolio, 1994). Research on charismatic leadership has found that charismatic leaders are often perceived as more effective and inspirational than other types of leaders. For example, a study by House and Shamir (1993) found that followers of charismatic leaders reported higher levels of satisfaction and commitment to their organization compared to followers of non-charismatic leaders. Similarly, a meta-

analysis by Judge and Piccolo (2004) found that charismatic leadership was positively associated with follower satisfaction, performance, and organizational commitment.

1.1.5. Transformational Theories

Transformational theories of leadership focus on the leader's ability to inspire and motivate followers to achieve exceptional performance and outcomes. These theories emphasize the importance of vision, charisma, and personal relationships in driving organizational change and innovation. One of the pioneering scholars in transformational leadership theory is Bernard Bass, who, along with Bruce Avolio, developed the Transformational Leadership Theory in the 1980s. According to this theory, transformational leaders engage in four key behaviors: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration (Bass & Avolio, 1994). Research on transformational leadership has found that transformational leaders are often perceived as more effective and inspirational than other types of leaders. For example, a meta-analysis by Judge and Piccolo (2004) found that transformational leadership was positively associated with follower satisfaction, performance, and organizational commitment. One of the strengths of transformational leadership theory is its focus on the positive impact leaders can have on followers and organizations. Transformational leaders are able to create a sense of purpose and meaning, foster a shared vision, and empower followers to contribute to organizational goals (Bass & Riggio, 2006). By inspiring and motivating others, transformational leaders can drive organizational change and innovation, leading to improved performance and outcomes.

1.1.6. Gender-Role Congruity Theory

Gender-role congruity theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002) posits that individuals' perceptions of leadership effectiveness are influenced by the alignment between gender stereotypes and the characteristics typically associated with leadership roles. According to this theory, a societal expectation exists that leadership roles are congruent with masculine traits such as assertiveness, dominance, and ambition. As a result, individuals who possess these traits are often perceived as more suitable for leadership positions, irrespective of their actual leadership abilities. Conversely, individuals who exhibit traits traditionally associated with femininity, such as warmth, empathy, and nurturing, may face barriers to leadership advancement due to the perceived incongruity between their gender and leadership roles.

Research studies have provided empirical support for gender-role congruity theory, highlighting the impact of gender stereotypes on perceptions of leadership effectiveness. For example, a meta-analysis by Eagly, Karau, and Makhijani (1995) found that both men and women were more likely to be perceived as effective leaders when they exhibited agentic traits (e.g., assertiveness, confidence) compared to communal traits (e.g., warmth, sensitivity). This suggests that adherence to masculine gender norms is associated with greater perceived leadership effectiveness, regardless of the leader's gender. Furthermore, experimental studies have demonstrated how gender stereotypes influence evaluations of leadership candidates. Moreover, research has examined the consequences of gender-role incongruity for women in leadership positions. Eagly and Karau (2002) conducted a meta-analysis of studies investigating the perceived effectiveness of female leaders, finding that women were often evaluated less favorably than men when occupying traditionally male-dominated leadership roles.

This suggests that women may face greater scrutiny and resistance when they deviate from gender norms in leadership contexts. However, it is important to note that recent research has also explored ways to mitigate the effects of gender-role congruity on leadership perceptions. For example, studies have examined the role of gender stereotypes in shaping leadership evaluations in different cultural contexts (e.g., Ayman & Korabik, 2010).

1.1.7. Relational Leadership Theory

Relational Leadership Theory (RLT) emphasizes the importance of relationships, connections, and interactions in the leadership process (Uhl-Bien & Ospina, 2012). Unlike traditional leadership theories that focus primarily on individual leaders or traits, RLT recognizes that leadership emerges from relational dynamics among individuals within a group or organization. One key aspect of RLT is the emphasis on building and nurturing relationships. Leaders who adopt a relational approach prioritize establishing trust, communication, and mutual respect with their followers (Uhl-Bien, 2006).

Research studies have provided empirical support for the effectiveness of relational leadership in various organizational contexts. For example, Carson, Tesluk, and Marrone (2007) conducted a study in which they examined the relationship between relational leadership behaviors and team performance in a healthcare setting. They found that leaders who engaged in relational behaviors, such as showing concern for team members' well-being and providing support and encouragement, were associated with higher team performance ratings. Furthermore, relational leadership has been shown to enhance organizational outcomes such as employee satisfaction, commitment, and engagement. A study by Dulebohn, Bommer, Liden, Brouer, and Ferris (2012) investigated the impact of leader-member exchange (LMX), a concept closely related to relational leadership, on employee outcomes in a diverse sample of organizations. The results indicated that high-quality leader-member relationships were positively associated with employee job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and performance.

1.1.8. Glass-Cliff Theory

Glass Cliff Theory suggests that women and minority leaders are more likely to be appointed to leadership positions during times of crisis or organizational turmoil, when the risk of failure is high (Ryan & Haslam, 2005). This theory contrasts with the traditional "glass ceiling" concept, which refers to the invisible barriers that prevent women and minorities from advancing to top leadership roles in stable or successful organizations. Research studies have provided empirical support for the existence of the glass cliff phenomenon. For example, a study by Ryan and Haslam (2007) analyzed data from the FTSE 100 companies in the UK and found that women were more likely to be appointed as CEOs of companies experiencing poor

financial performance compared to men. Similarly, a study by Bruckmüller and Branscombe (2010) examined the gender composition of corporate boards and found that women were more likely to be appointed to boards of companies with declining financial performance.

Moreover, experimental studies have demonstrated the psychological mechanisms underlying the glass cliff phenomenon. For instance, research by Ryan, Haslam, and Kulich (2010) found that participants were more likely to select a female candidate for a leadership position in a hypothetical scenario depicting organizational crisis compared to a scenario depicting organizational success. This suggests that individuals may perceive women as better equipped to handle challenging situations or may be more willing to take risks with female leaders when outcomes are uncertain. In conclusion, Glass Cliff Theory highlights the systemic biases and challenges faced by women and minority leaders in organizational contexts. By understanding the glass cliff phenomenon, organizations can work towards addressing gender and diversity disparities in leadership appointments and create more equitable opportunities for all individuals.

1.1.9. Inclusive Leadership Theory

Inclusive Leadership Theory emphasizes the importance of creating environments where all individuals feel valued, respected, and included in decision-making processes (Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006). This approach to leadership goes beyond diversity and representation to focus on fostering a culture of belonging and psychological safety, where diverse perspectives are welcomed and actively sought out. Research studies have highlighted the positive impact of inclusive leadership on organizational outcomes such as employee engagement, innovation, and performance. For instance, research conducted by Nielsen et al. (2017) revealed that leaders exhibiting inclusive behaviors—such as actively listening to various perspectives, fostering collaboration, and empowering team members—were linked to increased employee engagement and enhanced team performance. Similarly, research by Carmeli, Brueller, and Dutton (2009) found that inclusive leadership was positively related to team innovation and creativity.

Moreover, inclusive leadership has been shown to enhance organizational resilience and adaptability in the face of change and uncertainty. A study by Van der Vegt, Emans, and van de Vliert (2005) investigated the impact of inclusive leadership on team performance in dynamic work environments. They found that leaders who fostered a sense of belonging and psychological safety among team members were better able to navigate challenges and promote effective teamwork, leading to higher levels of team performance and adaptability. In conclusion, Inclusive Leadership Theory highlights the importance of creating inclusive and supportive environments where all individuals can thrive and contribute their unique perspectives and talents. By adopting inclusive leadership practices, organizations can foster a culture of collaboration, innovation, and resilience, ultimately driving organizational success.

1.2. Women in Leadership Roles

Despite the notable rise in female participation in the workforce, women encounter distinctive obstacles and inequities relative to men, notably in leadership roles. This phenomenon is conspicuous across various sectors, as evidenced by the persisting underrepresentation of women in leadership positions (Tariq et al., 2017). While women are joining the workforce at a faster pace than men, they still confront significant challenges in ascending to leadership roles. Despite the substantial presence of women in the workforce, the issue persists as to why they are not progressing into leadership positions. While explicit bias is declining, underlying structural and implicit biases among colleagues, supervisors, and organizational leaders may still impede the advancement of women (Carnes et al., 2015). The barriers hindering women's professional advancement can be classified into interpersonal, internalized, and structural factors (Bismark et al., 2015). Women encounter a diverse array of challenges stemming from social dynamics, internalized perceptions, and workplace environments. For example, socially, women may face exclusion from certain activities both within and outside the workplace, which can impact their opportunities (Tariq et al., 2017). Additionally, stereotypes pose significant obstacles despite women possessing the requisite skills and qualifications for leadership roles. These stereotypes contribute to a phenomenon known as stereotype threat, wherein women, both perceived by others and themselves, are deemed less capable of assuming leadership positions, thus dissuading their pursuit or hindering their success in such roles (Carnes et al., 2015).

The negative perceptions held by male colleagues toward women can significantly impede women's professional advancement. Desai et al. (2014) discovered that men married to non-working women tend to view their female coworkers less favorably compared to their counterparts who are unmarried or married to working women. Generally, women are often perceived as less competent, possessing lower abilities, and being less credible than men with similar qualifications (Bismark et al., 2015). Furthermore, women may encounter negative perceptions from male coworkers regarding their appearance, necessitating a heightened awareness compared to their male counterparts (Howard, 2018). Bismark et al. (2015) also observed that some men attribute women's absence in leadership roles to a perceived lack of interest or ambition on their part, although this explanation likely does not encompass all factors influencing women's career choices. Moreover, women bear a greater burden in managing familial responsibilities alongside their professional endeavors. Bismark et al. (2015) found that having a family is often viewed as a hindrance or distraction for women in their careers, with doubts raised about their ability to balance both. However, it's essential to recognize that women who juggle career and family responsibilities may still perceive themselves as achieving a satisfactory work-life balance (Hook et al., 2018). Gender bias and a lack of awareness among male supervisors regarding the additional challenges faced by women can result in fewer opportunities or inflexible policies for women starting or raising a family (Johns et al., 2013).

The effectiveness of leadership hinges on the leadership style adopted by the leader. Despite encountering hurdles in advancing up the corporate hierarchy, women can demonstrate considerable efficiency comparable to male leaders (Eagly, et.al, 1992). According to a recent report by Morgan Stanley on Women Leadership, women have the potential to foster workplace harmony, enhance employee retention, improve decision-making processes, and drive greater innovation. The diverse capabilities of women, encompassing roles such as caretaker, mother, cook, and household manager, equip them with a multitasking mindset that can be highly advantageous in a corporate environment. Women's adeptness at continually learning, coordinating, collaborating, delivering results, influencing others, sharing knowledge, and earning respect provides valuable insights into their

suitability for leadership roles. Additionally, women make significant contributions to organizational performance (Desvaux, et. al, 2008). This assertion is corroborated by research conducted across various sectors, including recreation clubs, government agencies, public transport companies, and educational institutions. Furthermore, women leaders are perceived as equally or more effective than male leaders, often generating higher levels of satisfaction among their subordinates.

Numerous studies have noted that women excel as leaders in traditionally feminine industries like service sectors, while men tend to thrive in masculine domains such as technical and manufacturing sectors. Women possess distinct characteristics that often pave the way for their advancement to higher career levels, including higher Emotional Intelligence (EI) compared to men], as well as traits such as empathy, caring attitudes, and a focus on building relationships (Perreault, 1996). Women frequently exhibit a preference for collaborative, cooperative, or democratic leadership styles, whereas men often lean towards directive, competitive, or autocratic approaches. This intentional divergence in leadership styles is often attributed to differences in personality among leaders. The adoption of collaborative methods is increasingly regarded as central to the concept of effective leadership.

1.3. Present Study

The present study seeks to explore the lived experiences of women in leadership roles within the context of Indian startups. The research questions are:

- In what ways do women in leadership roles in startups experience their lives as they relate to their professional roles and demands?
- How do women in leadership roles describe their experience(s) in dealing with subordinates?
- In what manner do women in leadership positions recount their experiences of facing and managing challenging circumstances?
- How do women leaders perceive the impact of their roles on both their personal fulfillment and professional advancement?

The present study holds the following objectives:

- To understand the lived experiences of women in leadership roles in startups and gain insight into the intersections between their personal lives and professional responsibilities.
- To investigate the perspectives of women in leadership roles regarding their interactions with subordinates, including their approaches to leadership, communication strategies, and methods for fostering teamwork and productivity within the startup environment.
- To examine the narratives of women in leadership positions regarding their encounters with adversity and their strategies for coping with and overcoming challenging circumstances.
- To delve into perceptions of women leaders understanding of the impact of their role on their personal well being and career development, including their sense of fulfillment, career satisfaction, and opportunities for growth and advancement within the startup ecosystem.
- For the purpose of this study the terms leadership role and startup have been defined as:
- *Leadership role*: A role within an organization that is paid and requires management, supervision, guidance and regulation of a workforce and the responsibility for the development and/or execution of policy within the organization.
- *Startup*: A newly founded business venture characterized by its commitment to innovation and entrepreneurial vision aiming to address unique challenges or capitalize on untapped opportunities. It is typically in the early stages of development and may lack established structures or procedures.

Methodology :

This study employs a qualitative research approach, focusing on the non-numerical analysis of women leaders' lived experiences. Qualitative research is particularly suited for exploring in-depth understandings of human experiences and social phenomena, and for that reason semi-structured interviews were conducted with the participants of this study. The method of analysis used was Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). IPA, a relatively new and swiftly expanding method of qualitative research, is dedicated to exploring how individuals interpret their significant life events. This approach utilizes core principles from phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography to investigate this process.

Originated by Edmund Husserl, phenomenology focuses on understanding how things present themselves to individuals through their experiences. It seeks to pinpoint the essential elements of phenomena or experiences that render them unique or distinct from other experiences. Phenomenological studies thus focus on how people perceive and talk about objects and events, rather than describing phenomena according to a predetermined categorical system, conceptual and scientific criteria. Husserl's ideas were expanded by his disciple, Martin Heidegger (1962), who integrated them into existential philosophy and hermeneutics. Heidegger focused on the ontological question of existence. Hermeneutics, derived from the Greek word meaning 'to interpret' or 'to make clear,' emphasizes understanding a person's mindset and language, which mediate their experiences of the world, to accurately convey their message (Freeman, 2008). Thus, IPA researchers attempt to understand what it is like to stand in the shoes of their subject and, through interpretative activity, make meaning comprehensible by translating it.

The third theoretical framework that IPA is based on is idiography. This involves a detailed examination of single cases and an exploration of the individual perspectives of study participants within their unique contexts. IPA relies on idiography, meaning that researchers focus on the particular rather than the universal (Smith, Harré, & Van Langenhove, 1995). The researcher can provide specific insights about study participants due to the detailed nature of case analysis. An IPA researcher typically begins by conducting an in-depth examination of one individual, resulting in a case study, and then proceeds with an equally thorough analysis of subsequent cases.

IPA serves as a suitable methodological approach for exploring the lived experiences of women in leadership roles within Indian startups due to its emphasis on understanding the subjective perspectives and meanings individuals attribute to their experiences. IPA acknowledges the complexity and depth of human experiences, focusing on how individuals make sense of and interpret their lived realities. In the context of this research, IPA allows for

an in-depth exploration of the unique challenges, opportunities, and perceptions faced by women in leadership positions, offering insights into the socio-cultural, organizational, and personal factors influencing their experiences. By adopting an interpretive stance, IPA enables researchers to uncover the nuanced narratives and underlying meanings embedded within participants' accounts, thus providing a rich and contextualized understanding of their experiences. Moreover, IPA facilitates reflexivity and engagement with the data, allowing researchers to acknowledge their own preconceptions and biases while remaining sensitive to the diverse voices and perspectives of the participants.

1.4. Inclusion Criteria

The inclusion criterion targeted 2 female participants currently holding and actively employed in leadership position within startup ecosystems, be it product, technology, or service-based ventures. It was made sure that the participants met the criteria of the operational definition of a startup: A newly founded business venture characterized by its commitment to innovation and entrepreneurial vision aiming to address unique challenges or capitalize on untapped opportunities. It is typically in the early stages of development and may lack established structures or procedures. This criterion aimed to incorporate perspectives from emerging leaders within dynamic and evolving entrepreneurial environments. To obtain the sample, non-probability sampling methods were employed, particularly purposive and convenience sampling methods.

1.5. Participant Sample

The two participants identified for this research met the inclusion criteria. The first participant is the founder of a brand consulting agency called Cinnamon which aims at brand identity, design, strategy, and marketing. The second participant for this study is the founder of an organic or a natural food based company, called Tuvai Nature. They work with farmers on the ground, helping them shift to sustainable farming practices, as well as establish market linkages connecting farmers with consumers.

Table 1 - Participant profile.

Designation	Nature of Startup
1. Founder	Service-based
2. Founder	Product-based

1.6. Data Collection

The data for this study was conducted through systematic selection of participants as per the inclusion criteria. The study consisted of a semi-structured interview method in order to gain a detailed picture of a respondent's beliefs about, or perceptions or accounts of the related topic. It involved the implementation of a number of predetermined questions which were also supplemented by probes and prompts for deeper exploration and used according to the responses received in the several brainstorming sessions, keeping in mind the aim and the research objectives of the study.

1.7. Data Analysis

IPA aims to demonstrate how participants make sense of the phenomena being studied while also documenting the researcher's interpretation. This process involves shifting between the emic (insider) and etic (outsider) perspectives. The latter is achieved by looking at the data through a psychological lens, interpreting it with the application of psychological concepts and theories which the researcher finds helpful to illuminate the understanding of research problems. Showing the emic perspective protects researchers from psychological or psychiatric reductionism. Conversely, analyzing data from an outsider's perspective allows for the development of broader theories and insights. Overall, IPA offers a set of adaptable guidelines that researchers can tailor to their specific research goals.

Step 1: Reading and Re-reading

The first stage requires repeatedly reading the transcript carefully. The audio recording was listened to a few times. This helped in immersing myself as a researcher in the data, recall the atmosphere of the interview, and the setting in which it was conducted.

Step 2: Exploratory Notes

In the next stage, initial notes on thoughts, impressions, initial sights from the data without imposing any theoretical framework were taken down. The exploratory notes can be unstructured, free flowing. They may take the form of handwritten notes, margin notes, post it etc.

Step 3 : Developing Experiential statements (ES) (earlier known as emergent themes)

In IPA, an experiential theme refers to a significant aspect of participant's lived experiences that emerges from the analysis of qualitative data. Experiential themes capture the subjective perceptions, emotions, beliefs, and meanings that individuals attribute to their experiences within a particular context. Experiential themes in IPA analysis generally constitute subjective and rich description of the participant's experience and their personal reflections, as well as an insight into their meaning making process and cultural embeddedness.

Step 4 : Clustering ES to form Personal Experiential themes (PETs) Earlier known as**Superordinate theme**

This is an iterative process of refining clusters and mapping the single case and tabulating the final arrangement of PETs in case level summary.

Step 5: Clustering cross case PETs into Group Experiential Themes (GETs) earlier known as superordinate theme

Commonalities within the two cases were looked for to find Group Experiential Themes.

1.8. Reflexivity

Reflexivity in the context of conducting interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) research involves a critical examination of the researcher's role, biases, and interpretations throughout the study process. As an IPA researcher, my engagement with the participants' narratives and the data collected necessitates an awareness of how my background, experiences, and perspectives may influence the research process and findings.

During data collection, reflexivity guides my interactions with the participants. I strive to maintain an open and nonjudgmental stance, recognizing that my values and beliefs could inadvertently influence the interview process. I acknowledge that my positionality as the researcher inevitably shapes the way I understand and interpret the participants' experiences and aim to approach the transcripts with an open mind, allowing the participants' voices to guide the analysis while being mindful of my preconceptions. This involves engaging in constant dialogue with the data, questioning my interpretations, and seeking alternative perspectives.

Results :**Table 2 – Personal Experiential Theme Table for Participant 1.**

Personal Experiential Theme	Experiential Statement	Sample of Quotes
Authenticity and Value Alignment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Driven by intrinsic fervour and passion for building something of one's own. -Disconnect between professional role and personal fulfillment, leading to dissatisfaction. -Entrepreneurship as a desire for creative expression and a sense of purpose. More than autonomy -Importance of authenticity in leadership, advocating alignment between personal values, identity, and professional conduct. - Values-driven approach to leadership. -Focus on a mindset of self-focus and individuality 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>-there has to be an aspect of your personal self which must translate into how you lead. The number one aspect becomes how to be authentic. That is the way you approach your work as well.</i> <i>- I always wanted to be an entrepreneur and when I was doing my MBA, this is what I shared with my father.. I did that for 4 years but I was not very happy doing it and it did not resonate with my inherent skill set or my personality.</i> <i>-Entrepreneurship for me was something that I always always wanted to do. And it has less to do with having ownership of your time or having authority, but more to do with the sense of creation and having purpose that you see translate into reality.</i> <i>-we just try to do our best. So that individuality, that uniqueness and that complicity is something that I always try to bring in how we approach our work.</i>
Effective and Efficient Communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Value for authentic and empathetic communication. -Transparent and inclusive communication practices help to foster team cohesion and personal development. -Not viewing arguments or disagreements as win-lose situations. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>-I communicate straight. I communicate very authentically. I also try to keep conversations light. I avoid using any strong language.</i> <i>-I'm very conscious of constantly communicating what we stand for, and what they bring to the table to build this up. But if there is a situation of conflict, I never let it become a win and lose situation.</i> <i>-We have internal communication channels. One of the most important things to do is a very simple thing which is to keep everybody in the loop. What we also do is that we hold these sessions called Tuesday Talkies, where we bring in a professional, somebody who's really had like a strong journey, you know, they've kind of shifted gears or they faced a lot of challenges and emerged from them and lead a value-driven life.</i>
Innovation and Strategic Thinking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -A strategic approach to her career trajectory. -Realised the complexities of integrating AI technologies. -She recognizes the unique mindset of Gen Z and Gen Alpha consumers and team members. -Recognizing the importance of scalability and sustainability. -Culture of skill enhancement and professional growth. --Futuristic Vision -Focusing on futuristic challenges -Looking at the broader aspect of a venture. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>-You know, there are certain things that definitely have to be process driven and monitored. So this is an area which is of profound importance to me, that we streamline this whole process in terms of when are we taking people, how are we taking them, how are we doing assessments, how are we going. We're trying to experiment both with certain online tools and staff policy making.</i> <i>-And so you could also play part therapist to them. You have got to like hear them out. You have got to give them a certain sense of authority. But also to let them know that there is a safety net for them.</i>
Resilience and Navigating Personal Challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -The entrepreneurial journey has been marked with a dynamic interplay of triumphs and tribulations. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>-When I was setting Cinamon, I went through many personal challenges. I was hospitalized for a month in Kerala at the peak of</i>

Empowering Leadership and Organizational Culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Remarkable resilience and strength in navigating personal challenges. -Despite facing adversity, including health crises and personal turmoil, she prioritized the integrity of her work and maintained professional boundaries. -She inspires and motivates her team through leading by example. -Perennial challenge of resource constraints. --Positive outlook -Viewing leadership as both a responsibility and a privilege. -Cultivating a positive and inclusive organizational culture. -A collaborative approach to client relationships, emphasizing partnership and mutual success. -truth and integrity through genuine connections. -importance of fostering a positive and healthy organizational culture -Acknowledging the disparities and challenges women face compared to men in entrepreneurship, while recognizing the power of mindset in overcoming obstacles. -Perennial challenge of resource constraints. -Acting as both mentor and therapist. -Futuristic Vision -Focusing on futuristic challenges 	<p><i>COVID and I was going through some very, very strict treatment out there. Yet there was, our clients just knew that I was away, but the work kept on happening and the deliveries kept on happening.</i></p> <p><i>- First of all, I would not deny that it is more difficult for women than it is for men.</i></p> <p><i>I feel as women in India who have set up their own business, there are a lot of cultural aspects and societal aspects and the whole man versus woman thing that you have to be a little more careful about.</i></p> <p><i>-it is in the way that I approach our client relationships and my biggest approach towards our work has been about having a collaborative mindset where we are very clear with even our clients that we are not your vendor or just a service provider, we are your partner.</i></p> <p><i>-I am very clear that we don't look at competition. There is no competition for us. I don't even know other people doing this stuff.</i></p> <p><i>-Culture is something that, like they say, it is strategy for breakfast and it's also the way things are all the time. So I was very, very particular about the fact that positivity is something I love. It will always be maintained in this place.</i></p> <p><i>-We also focus a lot on learning. So there are always the learning tools and resources being given to the team to access for them to upskill and update themselves also.</i></p> <p><i>-Leadership is a responsibility and it is a privilege in my mind. You have to be extremely grateful to be in a position to lead people.</i></p> <p><i>-And so you could also play part therapist to them. You have got to like hear them out. You have got to give them a certain sense of authority. But also to let them know that there is a safety net for them.</i></p> <p><i>- More than anything, it just gives me a very strong sense of self-esteem and it makes me more grateful for the mind that I have, for the insights that I have, for the thoughts that I have and the intuition that I have.</i></p>
Personal Growth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Importance of self-esteem as a fundamental attribute for success. -Appreciation for her intellect, insights, and intuition. 	

Table 3 – Personal Experiential Theme Table for Participant 2.

Personal Experiential Theme	Experiential Statement	Sample of Quotes
Value-Driven Leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Determined to work for a greater cause, that she couldn't achieve in a corporate setup. -Positive and optimistic stance -Value driven approach -Minimizing expectations and prepare for both best and worst outcomes to avoid getting overwhelmed. -A positive and collaborative mindset allows the leader to have greater sensibilities for team members. 	<p><i>-But having done the policy for almost, for a long time on the policy side, I decided to switch on the implementation to actually, because I noticed that there's a huge gap between what would we write and what actually happens. So, that sort of motivated me to start my own company.</i></p> <p><i>-And I think no issue is that that cannot be resolved. There's no conflict that can't be resolved.</i></p> <p><i>- um it actually, first um has taught me to not or minimize expectations from anybody. so it's fine that you have to expect the best but actually be prepared for the worst. if this doesn't work out what is the next step. so how to not get overwhelmed in this phase from one step to the next step, and see the next step will come whether you take it, whether you spend too much of time getting anxious about it building a lot of anxiety or not, the next step will come. so I learned to have the patience to hold on because you'll find you'll find an alternative</i></p>
Navigating Challenges	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Startup -Early stages of a startup and the lack of an organized system necessitates that a leader multitasks across various roles and motivates the team to adapt and manage with limited resources. -Transitioning from an established organization to founding one's own startup bring about grassroots challenges and the need to build everything from scratch with limited resources and support. -Systematic approach to managing challenges, confronting problems one by one as they arise -Constant challenge of keeping employees motivated and readiness for financial 	<p><i>-when you when you start something of your own, you're actually literally building everything, everything bit by bit. And in the beginning, one faces challenges of starting everything on your own. So you have limited resources, limited support, and also a lot of, I would say, not enough guidance at times.</i></p> <p><i>-you have to address every challenge as it comes its way.</i></p> <p><i>- I'm in the starting phase right now, there are too many ups and downs that happen. And you ultimately have to navigate these risks as an entrepreneur. And when they arise, and also have the appetite to absorb the risk when it happens, whenever the situation does come.</i></p> <p><i>- we don't have a very organized system in place in the beginning so even the work roles that are assigned, so everybody is handling multiple things being having a small team you are sometimes</i></p>

		<p>constraints.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Being prepared for various uncertainties and risks. -Fostering a proactive approach to challenges. - Being flexible in dealing with challenges -Flexible way to deal with uncertainties and risks. -Calculated approach to navigate risk and be prepared for challenges in the future -Futuristic mindset -As the team and resources grow, a more organized system develops, allowing for better time management despite the constant presence of work. 	<p><i>doing marketing sometimes you're into finance sometimes you spend the entire day just looking after operations</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>Eventually things settle and then you have your team in place you have your time in place and you know it it becomes a more systematic in that sense. but initially very frankly you have to juggle with your time like um you can take a break when you want to but there's always work by your side.</i> -<i>you have people committing to some task that is to be done,or it could also be financial and that does not really happen on time or does gets delayed completely or just gets cancelled, for that reason so you have to be prepared for these kind of adversities in this journey and especially related to financial resources, that is continuing to be a bit constraint.</i>
Effective Communication and Collaboration		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Effective leadership involves creating a transparent and well-communicated environment. -Clear distinction of roles and responsibilities. -A positive and collaborative mindset allows the leader to have greater sensibilities for team members. -Effectively managing diverse viewpoints -Clear and transparent two-way communication is essential -Incorporating feedback of the team is important and providing them with emotional support -Success of the venture relies on collective effort -Ensuring retention and fostering a collaborative environment -Modern leadership ensures valuing equal rights and respect for the entire team. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -<i>the style of leadership is also changing, earlier it was one person rules, but now we are getting more democratic in that sense so um that's that is something which must be kept in mind especially when you have to also make sure that in the beginning you invest a lot on your people, on your building your team and It's not like a hundred people company where somebody leaves, it doesn't matter. So you have to make sure that the retention is there. And for that, and especially for people who are really invested in you and your idea in the beginning, I think they must be given equal respect for that because as much as one entrepreneur takes a risk, the team is also taking the risk.</i> -<i>also it's not always like a one side approach but it can it and it should be interactive, whether you know, is your team uh thinking that you're demanding too much, so that interaction, that feedback mechanism has to be in place, that there's a reasonable time given to a task and once it's delivered in one time it's a task which is done successfully it's as simple as that but in the process if there is any kind of support including emotional support needed by the team member that must be always uttered into.</i> -<i>it's the ability to have uh things moving in a way which is clear, communicated well to your team and the rules and responsibilities are defined. everything is monitored um and actually tracked so that when the deliverables are given properly and the outcomes are measured, in advance then that sort of uh avoids any conflicts that may arise.</i> -<i>So the biggest challenge is that. But we are also learning with time as to,because in the beginning we come we think of that many ideas and we boil down to that one and then actually you have to really dig deep into that one thing that we want to solve so that takes a long time to streamline so and every time one must also be open to iterations one doesn't work move to the other so you have to be really flexible in order to learn that.</i>
Resilience and Navigating Personal Challenges			
Navigating Work-Life Balance	Work-Life	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Essential to set strict boundaries and dedicate specific time solely to oneself or loved ones. -Importance of work-life balance for avoiding burnout and maintaining motivation. -Disrupted work-life balance because of the pervasive integration of work activities into other spheres of life. -Not a sustainable way to handle things in the long term. -Significant personal and family sacrifices, such as reducing time for celebrations and making compromises in various aspects of life. -Planning for events ahead of time and taking margin time for breaks and other unavoidable events. -Effective time management and meaningful breaks <p>- Important to have an effective conflict resolution mechanism in place</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -<i>Okay there's nothing like personal and professional life once you start doing something because, even on sunday I missed your call because I just got lost in the work that i was doing so um i mean it's really um incorrect to say that you will have these two very distinct lives as you have otherwise at least in the initial years however i do not think that this is the way to go about it forever.</i> -<i>that happens all the time so to give you an example, like a simple thing like if i want to celebrate my anniversary there is no time for that, so yeah something that you would normally spend you know,one day for you spend two hours on so that is that kind of compromise has to be made with life and also with family so yeah that is and there are there are ample examples like that.</i> -<i>Eventually things settle and then you have your team in place you have your time in place and you know it it becomes a more systematic in that sense. but initially very frankly you have to juggle with your time like um you can take a break when you want to but there's always work by your side.</i> -<i>Yeah so at times you just have to draw a line that okay today or whatever next four hours or six hours you take up will be for yourself with your family or friends otherwise uh there is so much of spillover from one side to the other that it can get overwhelming it can also get very demotivating, so there's a lot of burdening so uh there is nothing except that you just shut your work and put a line, like a deadline to relaxing or spending time. this is the only hard way to do it</i> -<i>It is okay to take a break but because you know that some event has to take place, then you've got to plan accordingly, so that</i>

Effective Resolution	Conflict	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Regular conflicts necessitate open communication with all parties involved -Consistent focus on minimizing problems -Identifying root cause is important -Addressing conflict through joint effort and clear communication 	<p><i>break you take is also meaningful.</i></p> <p><i>That happens when there's no clarity or there is something which is overlapping, you know, into each other. So saying that, the first thing is that why do conflicts arise? It could be that from the senior management, the responsibility is not clear. It could also be that within the team, they may pick up on something. So once you get into the root cause, suppose if it is from the senior management side, that means the role was not assigned clearly. And that's why there's a reason for conflict to arise. If it is between two people because of, internally because of themselves, their own nature or reason or a situation, that has to be handled. And then you have to deal with it, talking effectively, communicating.</i></p> <p><i>-You have to talk to both parties and these are the things that happen sometimes.</i></p> <p><i>-So these are also issues that come around very regularly. But tension should also be to always minimize these conflicts</i></p> <p><i>-if there are conflicts, you have to have a conflict resolving mechanism also in place that would be like, okay, I mean, how many times can you let go? And how intense is that task which is not completed or, you know, so I think one should also have a very flexible approach. There is no one way of dealing with conflict. It it's not about just being hard or soft. You have to choose and adapt to situation. So every time you have, while keeping in mind, certain cores, core values that you set for your team, what is the culture you're bringing about? So all of that cannot be distorted, the things that you have set in the beginning.</i></p>
Systematically balancing Structure and Flexibility		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Focus on meeting deliverables and reducing conflict. -Focus on maintaining an orderly system, not vague. - Essential to clearly map activities and have measurable outcomes. -Respecting the core values and culture of the company established from the beginning. -Being flexible to iterations while upholding company's core values -Clear distinction of roles and responsibilities 	<p><i>-so you can't have very random duties or just you know, you have to go systematically. you have to plan map the activity, map the outcome and then measure it and that's the way you can have in metrics assigned to it whatever whatever however you want to measure any outcome and that clarity must be there from the beginning, so the expectations of roles and responsibilities very much comes into place.</i></p> <p><i>-it's the ability to have uh things moving in a way which is clear, communicated well to your team and the rules and responsibilities are defined. everything is monitored um and actually tracked so that when the deliverables are given properly and the outcomes are measured, in advance then that sort of uh avoids any conflicts that may arise.</i></p>
Empowering Independence and Responsibility		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Empowering the employees to handle situations independently -Intervening only when necessary -Minimize the need for constant task delegation and allowing limited interference. -Focus on making the employees independent and responsible -Successful task delegation and smooth functioning 	<p><i>-So we had this ,when we were actually starting with the first set of famers. The idea was to help them transition to leave chemical based farming practices or rather reduced it. So you know right from the beginning, the communication that was set from delegating the work from the entrepreneur to the to the next level of senior field staff to the field officers themselves so that the way it went from one channel to the other that was done systematically and ultimately we were able to get a good result where you know we were able to convince people and f women farmers particularly to sort of reduce their dependence on chemical inputs so yeah that was it.</i></p> <p><i>-Well, see, while the outcome can be one, of the whole team. But then, again, because sometimes it's not like always a delegation of responsibility from the senior to the team, or from the entrepreneur to the team. You can also just let it be, like give a situation, see how they're acting on the situation. See how much of interference is really required from your angle, from your end. Sometimes it just may work without too much of interference.</i></p>

Table 4 – Group Experiential Theme Table

Group Experiential Theme 1: Strategic Communication Optimization

Transparent and clear communications help to foster team cohesion and personal development

Participant 1: I communicate straight. I communicate very authentically. I also try to keep conversations light. I avoid using any strong language. I'm very conscious of constantly communicating what we stand for, and what they bring to the table to build this up.

Participant 2: also it's not always like a one side approach but it can be interactive, whether you know, is your team uh thinking that you're demanding too much, so that interaction, that feedback mechanism has to be in place, that there's a reasonable time given to a task and once it's

delivered in one time it's it's a task which is done successfully it's as simple as that but in the process if there is any kind of support including emotional support needed by the team member that must be always uttered into.

2. Empathetic communication style to promote equality among all

Participant 1: And I always try to find more effective words to communicate a strong point also. Sometimes they can very deeply affect the other person also and they can really shake that person's bearing or the confidence that individual has. And I am very confident of that. So I try my best to always communicate with more effective words than using, you know, stronger words to put my point.

Participant 2: It's not like a hundred people company where somebody leaves, it doesn't matter. So you have to make sure that the retention is there. And for that, and especially for people who are really invested in you and your idea in the beginning, I think they must be given equal respect for that because as much as one entrepreneur takes a risk, the team is also taking the risk.

Group Experiential Theme 2: Strategic Management of Risks and Challenges

1. Navigating risks with gratitude

Participant 1: I communicate straight. I communicate very authentically. I also try to keep conversations light. I avoid using any strong language. I'm very conscious of constantly communicating what we stand for, and what they bring to the table to build this up.

Participant 2: also it's not always like a one side approach but it can be and it should be interactive, whether you know, is your team uh thinking that you're demanding too much, so that interaction, that feedback mechanism has to be in place, that there's a reasonable time given to a task and once it's delivered in one time it's it's a task which is done successfully it's as simple as that but in the process if there is any kind of support including emotional support needed by the team member that must be always uttered into.

2. Resource limitations and team building in early-stage entrepreneurship

Participant 1: We always have a lot of challenges of wanting more resources to work with us, you know, wanting more team members. So I always think that it has a very good challenge to think that there's a lot of work that we have on our plate. And so we constantly need more team members to fulfill that work.

Participant 2: When you start something of your own, you're actually literally building everything, everything bit by bit. And in the beginning, one faces challenges of starting everything on your own. So you have limited resources, limited support, and also a lot of, I would say, not enough guidance at times.

3. Importance of structured processes and systematic planning

Participant 1: You know, there are certain things that definitely have to be process driven and monitored. So this is an area which is of profound importance to me, that we streamline this whole process in terms of when are we taking people, how are we taking them, how are we doing assessments, how are we going. There's work that we've already put into place and there is more work that we will do within this year.

Participant 2: So you can't have very random duties or just you know, you have to go systematically. you have to plan map the activity, map the outcome and then measure it and that's the way you can have in metrics assigned to it, however you want to measure any outcome and that clarity must be there from the beginning.

Group Experiential Theme 3: Navigating Personal Well being

1. Juggling between personal and professional lives

Participant 1: When I was setting Cinamon, I went through many personal challenges. I was hospitalized for a month and I was going through some very, very strict treatment out there. Yet there was, our clients just knew that I was away, but the work kept on happening and the deliveries kept on happening. This is pretty much when I started it. I was in a very abusive marriage and I went through a very difficult and painful separation. And there was not a single client who knew that. And in fact, my team also didn't know that. That this is what is happening in my personal life.

Participant 2: Okay there's nothing like personal and professional life once you start doing something because, even on sunday I missed your call because I just got lost in the work that i was doing so um i mean it's really um incorrect to say that you will have these two very distinct lives as you have otherwise at least in the initial years however i do not think that this is the way to go about it forever.

2. Setting up clear boundaries

Participant 1: If you do not want your clients, your team, your vendors to step into your personal space, it is also important for you as an individual to not allow personal challenges, personal beef, personal situations to percolate into what you are doing professionally.

Participant 2: Yeah so at times you just have to draw a line that okay today or whatever next four hours or six hours you take up will be for yourself with your family or friends otherwise uh there is so much of spillover from one side to the other that it can get overwhelming it can also get very demotivating, so there's a lot of burdening so uh there is nothing except that you just shut your work and put a line, like a deadline to relaxing or spending time. this is the only hard way to do it.

3. Personal growth through self-awareness and resilience

Participant 1: This is what I see that my work does to me. More than anything, it just gives me a very strong sense of self-esteem and it makes me, you know, it makes me more grateful for the mind that I have, for the insights that I have, for the thoughts that I have and the intuition that I have.

Participant 2: Firstly, um it has taught me to not or minimize expectations from anybody. So it's fine that you have to expect the best but actually be prepared for the worst. if this doesn't work out what is the next step. so how to not get overwhelmed in this phase from one step to the next step, and see

the next step will come whether you take it, whether you spend too much of time getting anxious about it building a lot of anxiety or not, the next step will come. So I learned to have the patience to hold on because you'll find an alternative eventually

Group Experiential Theme 4: Fostering Team-Oriented Mindsets and Collaboration

1. Adaptive conflict resolution and mediation

Participant 1: If there is a situation of conflict, I never let it become a win and lose situation. It will never be about, oh, this person was right on day one and this person was wrong. That is what I try to not, I mean, I ensure that that doesn't happen. What we try to do in that situation is that we hear out the individuals separately and I share with them when I feel is the right time, what is my assessment of the whole situation. And then I never become the, you know, arbitrator or the intermediary for them to have a conversation. I make sure that they have that conversation together also and, you know, sort out the whole matter.

Participant 2: There is no one way of dealing with conflict. It's not about just being hard or soft. You have to choose and adapt to situation. You have to talk to both parties and these are the things that happen sometimes. So these are also issues that come around very regularly. But tension should also be to always minimize these conflicts

2. Empowering employees with flexible delegation

Participant 1: Leadership is a responsibility and it is a privilege in my mind. You have to be extremely grateful to be in a position to lead people. And when you lead, you cannot look down. It is your responsibility to empower people, to take them along and uplift them. You have got to like hear them out. You have got to give them a certain sense of authority.

Participant 2: See, while the outcome can be one, of the whole team. But then, again, because sometimes it's not like always a delegation of responsibility from the senior to the team, or from the entrepreneur to the team. You can also just let it be, like give a situation, see how they're acting on the situation. See how much of interference is really required from your angle, from your end. Sometimes it just may work without too much of interference.

3. Motivating and respecting team members in evolving leadership styles

Participant 1: You have got to like hear them out. You have got to give them a certain sense of authority. But also to let them know that there is a safety net for them. So these are two ways that, you know, I ensure that they remain motivated. They always get the encouragement from me. And it comes to a lot of ownership.

Participant 2: The style of leadership is also changing, earlier it was one person rules, but now we are getting more democratic in that sense so um that's that is something which must be kept in mind especially when you have to also make sure that in the beginning you invest a lot on your people, on your building your team and It's not like a hundred people company where somebody leaves, it doesn't matter. So you have to make sure that the retention is there. And for that, and especially for people who are really invested in you and your idea in the beginning, I think they must be given equal respect for that because as much as one entrepreneur takes a risk, the team is also taking the risk.

4. Discussion :

The present study aimed to comprehend and delve into the lived experiences of women in leadership roles in Indian startups using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). The inclusion criteria were female participants currently employed in leadership positions within startups. The use of non-probability sampling methods, particularly purposive and convenience sampling, were used. The first participant was the founder of a brand consulting agency called Cinnamon which aims at brand identity, design, strategy, and marketing. The second participant was the founder of an organic or a natural food based company, called Tuvai Nature. Semi-structured interviews were deployed for data collection, allowing for flexibility in exploring participants' beliefs, perceptions, and experiences related to leadership roles within startup environments. The interview conduction was followed by its transcription and analysis through IPA.

The experiences of both the participants were first individually analysed using the said method. Upon doing a comprehensive analysis of the lived experiences of participant 1, a total of six Personal Experiential Themes (PETs) emerged as influential, as can be seen in Table 2. These were: Authenticity and Value Alignment, Effective and Efficient Communication, Innovation and Strategic Thinking, Resilience and Navigating Personal Challenges, Empowering Leadership and Organizational Culture and Personal Growth. The PETs emerged (Table 3) for participant 2 were: Value Driven Leadership, Navigating Startup Challenges, Effective Communication And Collaboration, Navigating Work-Life Balance, Effective Conflict Resolution, Systematically Balancing Structure and Flexibility, and Empowering Independence and Responsibility. Subsequently, some of the themes emerged as common in both the participants leading to Group Experiential Themes (GETs), for reference see Table 4. These were: Strategic Communication Optimization, Strategic Management of Risks and Challenges, Navigating Personal Well-being and Fostering Team-Oriented Mindsets and Collaboration.

The first theme of "Authenticity and Value Alignment" that emerged from participant 1's experiences reflects a deep-rooted connection between personal values, identity, and professional conduct. This theme underscores the intrinsic motivation and passion driving the individual towards entrepreneurship, stemming from a desire for creative expression and a sense of purpose, as stated by the participant, "*I always wanted to be an entrepreneur... it has less to do with having ownership of your time or having authority, but more to do with the sense of creation and having purpose that you see translate into reality.*" She emphasized that authenticity dictates how one approaches work and relationships with team members, vendors, and clients. This aligns with research findings that suggest authentic leadership fosters trust, commitment, and engagement among employees (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). When leaders display authenticity, they create a psychologically safe environment where individuals feel comfortable expressing

themselves and contributing to the organization's goals. Furthermore, her transition from corporate to entrepreneurial pursuits, as expressed in the verbatim, underscores the importance of value alignment in achieving personal fulfillment. Research indicates that individuals who perceive a disconnect between their values and their work experience lower levels of job satisfaction and higher levels of psychological distress. By pursuing entrepreneurship aligned with their inherent skills and personality traits, she demonstrates a proactive approach to enhancing well-being and satisfaction at work. She also highlighted the role of entrepreneurship as a vehicle for self-expression and purpose fulfillment. This resonates with self-determination theory, which posits that individuals are driven by intrinsic needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Entrepreneurship provides a platform for individuals to exercise autonomy, develop competence, and establish meaningful connections with others, thereby promoting psychological well-being and fulfillment.

The theme of "Effective and Efficient Communication" highlighted in Participant 1's narrative reflects a deep-seated commitment to fostering open, transparent, and empathetic communication within the organization. One notable quote from the verbatim is, *"I communicate straight. I communicate very authentically."* This statement underscores the participant's emphasis on authenticity and straightforward communication. Research in organizational communication emphasizes the importance of authentic communication in building trust and credibility within teams (Mortensen et al., 2020). Authentic communication fosters transparency and enables leaders to establish genuine connections with their team members, ultimately enhancing organizational effectiveness. Furthermore, the participant emphasizes the importance of inclusive communication practices by stating, *"One of the most important things to do is a very simple thing which is to keep everybody in the loop."* This quote underscores the significance of transparent communication in fostering team cohesion and ensuring that all team members feel informed and valued. Research indicates that transparent communication contributes to higher levels of trust and collaboration within teams, ultimately driving organizational success (Holtzhausen & Zerfass, 2015). The theme of "Innovation and Strategic Thinking" depicted in participant 1's narrative reflects a forward-thinking and visionary approach to leadership and organizational development. The verbatim provided offers insights into the participant's strategic mindset and their focus on fostering innovation and future-oriented thinking within the organization. One significant quote from the verbatim is, *"There are certain things that definitely have to be process-driven and monitored... we streamline this whole process."* This statement highlights the participant's strategic approach to organizational processes and their recognition of the importance of efficiency and optimization. Research in strategic management emphasizes the significance of process optimization in enhancing organizational effectiveness and competitiveness (Barney, 2018). Furthermore, the participant's focus on looking at the broader aspect of a venture and focusing on futuristic challenges highlights their visionary mindset and commitment to strategic thinking. Leaders who adopt a forward-thinking approach and anticipate future trends and challenges are better positioned to drive organizational growth and innovation (De Wit & Meyer, 2014). By proactively addressing future challenges and opportunities, organizations can adapt to changing market dynamics and maintain a competitive edge.

The themes of "Resilience and Navigating Personal Challenges" and "Empowering Leadership and Organizational Culture" depicted in Participant 1's narrative provide insights into their experiences and leadership style. These themes reflect the participant's ability to overcome adversity and cultivate a positive organizational culture, emphasizing collaboration, mentorship, and authenticity. The participant discussed her experience of facing personal challenges, including health crises, while maintaining professional commitments. The quote, *"When I was setting Cinamon, I went through many personal challenges... our clients just knew that I was away, but the work kept on happening and the deliveries kept on happening,"* highlights the participant's remarkable resilience and dedication to her work despite facing significant obstacles. Research suggests that resilience, defined as the ability to bounce back from adversity, is a crucial trait for effective leadership (Luthans et al., 2006). Leaders who demonstrate resilience can inspire and motivate their teams, fostering a culture of perseverance and determination. She also emphasized the importance of viewing leadership as both a responsibility and a privilege, as well as cultivating a positive and inclusive organizational culture. The quote, *"Leadership is a responsibility and it is a privilege in my mind... positivity is something I love. It will always be maintained in this place,"* highlights her commitment to fostering a supportive and empowering work environment. Research suggests that empowering leadership, characterized by trust, support, and autonomy, is associated with higher levels of employee engagement, satisfaction, and organizational performance (Arnold et al., 2000; Spreitzer, 1995). Finally, the theme of "Personal Growth" underscored the significance of self-esteem and personal development in achieving success and fulfillment. The participant emphasized the importance of self-esteem as a fundamental attribute for success, highlighting its role in fostering gratitude, self-assurance, and resilience. The participant reflected on the transformative power of her work in enhancing her self-esteem and gratitude for her intellect, insights, and intuition. The quote, *"More than anything, it just gives me a very strong sense of self-esteem... for the insights that I have, for the thoughts that I have and the intuition that I have,"* illustrates the profound impact of her professional journey on her self-concept and self-worth. Research suggests that self-esteem, defined as one's overall evaluation of oneself, is closely associated with psychological well-being, resilience, and adaptive coping strategies (Orth et al., 2010). Furthermore, the participant discusses the intrinsic nature of self-esteem and its development through overcoming challenges and adversity. The quote, *"Self-esteem is only built when you go through challenges... and yet you surmount those challenges,"* highlights the importance of resilience and perseverance in building self-esteem. According to self-determination theory (SDT), individuals have innate psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, which contribute to their sense of self-esteem and well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Overcoming challenges and achieving personal growth can fulfill these basic psychological needs, thereby enhancing self-esteem and overall psychological functioning.

Coming to participant 2, seven emerging themes as tabulated in Table 3, provide valuable insights into organizational dynamics, leadership strategies, and communication practices contributing to organizational effectiveness and employee engagement. The first theme of "Value-Driven Leadership", captures the essence of leading with purpose, where personal and organizational values align to drive meaningful change. Research indicates that value-driven leadership enhances organizational commitment, employee satisfaction, and overall performance (Fry & Cohen, 2009). In the participant's own words *"But having done the policy for a long time on the policy side, I decided to switch on the implementation, because I noticed that there's a huge gap between what we write and what actually happens. So, that sort of motivated me to start my own company,"* she exhibits a determination to work for a greater cause. Leadership theories like transformational leadership emphasize the importance of values and ethics in guiding leaders' actions (Bass & Avolio, 1994). Participant 3's focus on closing the gap between policy and implementation reflects a commitment to practical outcomes over theoretical ideals. This approach not only benefits the organization but also ensures that leadership is grounded in real-world impact rather than abstract principles. A positive outlook and resilience are crucial for effective leadership. Participant 3's belief that "no issue is that cannot be resolved"

underscores the importance of optimism in leadership. Research by Seligman (2006) on positive psychology suggests that optimistic leaders are more likely to inspire and motivate their teams, fostering a work environment where challenges are viewed as opportunities rather than obstacles. When asked about her takeaways from her role, she mentioned, *"First, um has taught me to not or minimize expectations from anybody. So it's fine that you have to expect the best but actually be prepared for the worst. If this doesn't work out what is the next step?"* Minimizing expectations and preparing for various outcomes is a strategy that helps in managing stress and avoiding burnout. Participant 3's approach of being prepared for both the best and worst outcomes aligns with the concept of emotional intelligence in leadership. Goleman (1995) emphasizes the importance of self-regulation and emotional stability, which are evident in her strategy to avoid getting overwhelmed by maintaining a balanced perspective on potential outcomes.

In the next theme, "Navigating Startup Challenges," the participant's experiences underscore the multifaceted nature of leading a startup, highlighting the necessity for flexibility, multitasking, and proactive problem-solving. This theme encapsulates the dynamic and often unpredictable environment of a startup, where leaders must constantly adapt and manage limited resources while fostering motivation within their teams. In the initial stages of a startup, leaders often need to multitask and manage various roles simultaneously due to limited resources and support. As the participant noted, *"When you start something of your own, you're actually literally building everything, everything bit by bit. And in the beginning, one faces challenges of starting everything on your own. So you have limited resources, limited support, and also a lot of, I would say, not enough guidance at times."* This aligns with the concept of entrepreneurial bricolage, where entrepreneurs make do by applying combinations of the resources at hand to new problems and opportunities (Baker & Nelson, 2005). The ability to wear multiple hats and adapt to different roles is crucial for the survival and growth of a startup. Financial constraints are a common challenge in startups, requiring leaders to be prepared for uncertainties and delays in funding. Financial unpredictability necessitates a high level of resilience and the ability to motivate the team despite limited resources. The concept of psychological capital, which includes self-efficacy, optimism, hope, and resilience, is particularly relevant here (Luthans et al., 2007). Leaders who exhibit high psychological capital can inspire their teams to persevere through financial hardships and remain committed to the startup's goals. Finally, flexibility and adaptability are critical traits for startup leaders. The ability to adjust to changing circumstances and navigate risks effectively is a key component of entrepreneurial success (Haynie et al., 2010). As the participant expressed, *"Eventually things settle and then you have your team in place you have your time in place and you know it it becomes more systematic in that sense. but initially very frankly you have to juggle with your time like um you can take a break when you want to but there's always work by your side."* This adaptive leadership style reflects the need to pivot when necessary and find innovative solutions to emerging challenges.

The next theme was "Effective Communication and Collaboration." Effective leadership is characterized by transparent communication and collaboration. The participant's experience highlights the evolution of leadership styles towards a more democratic approach: *"The style of leadership is also changing, earlier it was one person rules, but now we are getting more democratic in that sense."* This shift towards democratic leadership, where decision-making is shared and feedback is encouraged, aligns with modern leadership theories that emphasize inclusivity and employee empowerment (Northouse, 2018). Clear communication of roles and responsibilities is essential for minimizing conflicts and ensuring smooth operations: *"It's the ability to have things moving in a way which is clear, communicated well to your team and the rules and responsibilities are defined."* The participant also emphasizes the importance of incorporating feedback and providing emotional support to team members. This aligns with transformational leadership, where leaders not only provide direction but also support their followers' development and well-being (Bass & Riggio, 2006).

The fourth theme, "Navigating Work-Life Balance," poses a significant challenge for leaders, particularly in the startup phase. The participant highlights the blurring of personal and professional boundaries, noting, *"Okay there's nothing like personal and professional life once you start doing something because, even on Sunday I missed your call because I just got lost in the work that I was doing."* Research on work-life balance emphasizes the importance of setting boundaries to prevent burnout and maintain motivation (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). Her experience of having to make significant personal and family sacrifices, such as reducing time for celebrations, further illustrates the need for effective time management and planning: *"If I want to celebrate my anniversary there is no time for that, so yeah something that you would normally spend one day for, you spend two hours on."* Establishing strict boundaries and dedicating specific time solely to oneself or loved ones is crucial for avoiding burnout. As she notes, *"You just have to draw a line that okay today or whatever next four hours or six hours will be for yourself or with your family or friends."* This approach aligns with psychological theories suggesting that taking meaningful breaks and planning for events ahead of time can enhance overall well-being and productivity (Sonnentag & Fritz, 2015).

The fifth theme explores "Effective Conflict Resolution" as a vital skill for leaders to maintain a harmonious and productive work environment. The participant emphasizes the importance of having a conflict resolution mechanism in place: *"If there are conflicts, you have to have a conflict resolving mechanism also in place that would be like, okay, I mean, how many times can you let go?"* This statement highlights the necessity of addressing conflicts proactively and systematically. Theories of conflict resolution suggest that open communication and identifying the root cause of conflicts are essential steps in resolving disputes (Rahim, 2002). The participant illustrates this by stating, *"Once you get into the root cause, suppose if it is from the senior management side, that means the role was not assigned clearly. And that's why there's a reason for conflict to arise."* A flexible approach to conflict resolution is crucial, as rigid methods may not be effective in all situations. The participant acknowledges this by stating, *"There is no one way of dealing with conflict. It's not about just being hard or soft. You have to choose and adapt to the situation."* This flexibility is supported by research indicating that adaptive conflict resolution strategies are more effective in diverse organizational settings (Thomas & Kilmann, 1974).

The sixth theme "Balancing Structure and Flexibility" is essential for effective leadership in startups. Participant 2 emphasizes the importance of clear planning and mapping of activities to ensure measurable outcomes. This approach aligns with the principles of structured leadership, which advocate for setting clear goals and defining roles to enhance organizational efficiency (Mintzberg, 1979). Maintaining an orderly system and respecting core values while remaining flexible to iterations is crucial for reducing conflict and meeting deliverables. Flexibility in leadership is also vital to adapt to changing circumstances while upholding the company's core values. Participant 2 mentions, *"Being flexible to iterations while upholding company's core values,"* reflecting the need for adaptive leadership. Adaptive leadership theory suggests that leaders must be able to navigate complexities and adapt their strategies while maintaining the core mission and values of the organization (Heifetz & Laurie, 1997). Lastly, the theme of "Empowering Independence and Responsibility" illustrates the participant's approach towards task delegation. When asked about a key incident in her entrepreneurial

journey that led to significant success, she mentioned, *“The communication that was set from delegating the work from the entrepreneur to the next level of senior field staff to the field officers themselves... ultimately we were able to get a good result.”* Minimizing the need for constant task delegation and allowing limited interference fosters a sense of responsibility and independence among employees. The participant highlights the importance of this approach: *“You can also just let it be, like give a situation, see how they’re acting on the situation. See how much of interference is really required from your angle.”* This hands-off approach encourages employees to develop problem-solving skills and take ownership of their tasks, which is supported by research indicating that empowerment leads to higher job satisfaction and performance (Spreitzer, 1995).

A number of group experiential themes emerged (see Table 4), clubbing insights from the experiences of both the participants. These offer insights into key aspects of organizational dynamics, personal growth, and leadership, as shared by both participants. In “Strategic Communication Optimization,” both participants highlight the importance of transparent and empathetic communication in fostering team cohesion and personal development. Participant 1 emphasizes the need for clear, authentic communication and the use of effective language to convey strong points. Similarly, participant 2 underscores the necessity of interactive communication and feedback mechanisms to ensure that team members feel supported, both professionally and emotionally. This approach not only maintains clarity but also promotes equality and respect within the team, essential for retaining dedicated employees and fostering a collaborative environment. Moving to “Navigating Personal Well-Being,” both participants share their experiences of balancing personal and professional life and navigating challenges. Participant 1 shares their experience of managing significant personal challenges while maintaining professional commitments, highlighting the importance of setting clear boundaries. Participant 2 agrees, noting the difficulty in distinguishing between personal and professional lives in the early stages of entrepreneurship but emphasizing the need for boundaries to prevent burnout. Both participants stress the importance of personal growth through self-awareness and resilience, learning to manage expectations and maintain a positive outlook despite challenges. In “Strategic Management of Risks and Challenges,” participant 1 reflects on their entrepreneurial journey with gratitude, appreciating the challenges and the growth they brought. Participant 2 acknowledges the inherent ups and downs of entrepreneurship, emphasizing the need to absorb risks and remain adaptable. Both participants recognize resource limitations in early-stage startups and stress the importance of structured processes and systematic planning to manage these challenges effectively. The last common group theme that emerged was “Fostering Team-Oriented Mindsets and Collaboration.” Participant 1 focuses on resolving conflicts by ensuring all parties are heard and facilitating direct communication to find mutually beneficial solutions. Participant 2 supports this adaptive approach, emphasizing the need to tailor conflict resolution strategies to specific situations. Both participants advocate for empowering team members through flexible delegation and motivation, recognizing the importance of giving employees authority while providing a safety net. This evolving leadership style, shifting towards a more democratic and inclusive approach, helps build a strong, committed team.

Overall, these group experiential themes provide valuable insights into the interplay between communication strategies, personal well-being, and leadership dynamics within organizations. By embracing transparent communication, supporting employee well-being, and fostering inclusive leadership practices, organizations can create environments conducive to growth, collaboration, and success.

Reflexivity played a crucial role throughout the research process, guiding the researcher’s interactions with participants and interpretation of the data. By acknowledging their own biases, experiences, and perspectives, the researcher aimed to maintain an open and nonjudgmental stance, allowing the participants’ voices to guide the analysis while being mindful of preconceptions.

5. Conclusion :

This study offers valuable insights into the lived experiences of women in leadership roles within Indian startups, employing Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to explore their perspectives. Through semi-structured interviews with two participants, significant themes emerged, reflecting the challenges and successes encountered by women leaders in the startup ecosystem. The insights gained from this study can inform organizational practices, policies, and interventions aimed at promoting gender diversity and inclusive leadership within entrepreneurial environments, where women feel valued and empowered to contribute, can enhance organizational performance and innovation. Organizations can improve their competitiveness, sustainability, and social impact by addressing the unique challenges women leaders face and leveraging their diverse perspectives and talents.

Formal limitations are crucial to acknowledge in any research endeavor, particularly in a qualitative research study. The study may be constrained by a restricted number of participants, which could impact and may limit generalizability as well as credibility of the findings beyond the sample studied. The researcher’s level of expertise in qualitative research methodologies, IPA in particular, could influence the quality of data collection, analysis, and interpretation. Limited experience or training in conducting IPA studies may result in methodological errors, inadequate data synthesis, or misinterpretation of findings, potentially compromising the study’s credibility.

Future research could employ mixed methods approaches to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between women’s leadership and organizational performance. Future research should also explore the intersectionality of gender, race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status to better understand women’s leadership experiences. This will reveal the complexity of identity and unique challenges faced by women from diverse backgrounds. Longitudinal studies can provide insights into the long term effects of leadership positions on women’s career trajectories, personal well being, and organizational outcomes. Comparative research across different industries and cultural contexts can identify common trends and unique challenges. Qualitative studies focusing on male colleagues and organizational leaders can provide insights into gender relations within organizations and help identify strategies for fostering allyship.

6. Acknowledgements

I would like to extend my heartfelt gratitude to the International Journal of Research Publication and Reviews for considering and publishing my work, and allowing it to reach a broader audience.

I am deeply grateful to my university for providing the resources and support necessary to complete this research. My heartfelt thanks go to my professor, Ms. Pavani Tyagi, for her invaluable guidance, encouragement, and wisdom throughout this journey. Her mentorship has been instrumental in shaping this research.

To my parents, Mr. Rudhir Bhalla and Mrs. Shalu Bhalla, thank you for your unwavering love, support, and belief in me. Your encouragement has been my foundation. I am equally grateful to my brother, Aayan Bhalla, for his constant support and understanding.

Finally, a special thank you to my dear friend, Avnika Sharma, for always being there and bringing me participants for all my studies. Your friendship has been a pillar of support throughout this process.

Appendix A. Semi-Structured Interview Schedule

This is an exhaustive list of questions based on the objectives. Please keep in mind the following points while taking interviews:

- Phenomenological experiences based interviews are participant led
- Try not to rush in too quickly, tap the non verbal behavior as well
- Use minimal probes in btw a question
- Please frame probe words (Do this beforehand)
- Depending on the context of responses, the sequence of questions can be moderated

Schedule:

1. How would you like to describe your journey into leadership within the startup ecosystem?
2. How do you perceive the relationship between your personal life and your role as a leader in this startup?
3. Can you share any specific experiences where your personal life intersected with your professional responsibilities as a leader?
4. How do you navigate the balance between your personal life and professional responsibilities?
5. Can you describe any challenges or opportunities that have arisen from this intersection?
6. How do you approach leadership within your startup?
7. Can you describe your communication strategies when interacting with team members?
8. What methods do you use to foster teamwork and collaboration?
9. How do you handle conflicts or disagreements within your team?
10. Can you share experiences where your leadership approach has led successful outcomes?
11. Can you discuss any significant challenges or adversity you have encountered in your leadership role within the startup environment?
12. How did you cope with these challenges?
13. Can you share any specific strategies or resources you have utilised adversity?
14. How do you perceive the impact of your leadership role on your personal well being?
15. How do you view opportunities for growth and advancement within the startup sphere for women?

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