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HOW DO BULGARIAN FEMALE ENTREPRENEURS ADVOCATE FOR THEIR IDEAS?

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how Bulgarian female entrepreneurs advocate in high-stakes, challenging situations for their businesses and business ideas. By employing the critical incident technique (Flanagan, 1954), I interviewed 19 Bulgarian female entrepreneurs and found that these entrepreneurs use a combination of intrinsic (psychological constructs and emotions and feelings), as well as extrinsic (support networks and resources, and specific skills and approaches) levers to advocate for their ideas in interactions with others during high-stakes, challenging situations. Each advocacy episode resulted in an outcome - successful, unsuccessful, or mixed - that encouraged reflection, guiding how future efforts might adapt or refine their strategies. Notably, the reflective feedback loop for intrinsic levers appeared less explicit, as fewer participants expressed the wish to have applied different intrinsic levers, indicating that single-loop learning is more prevalent than double-loop learning among Bulgarian female entrepreneurs (Argyris et al., 1985).

Recent academic literature underscores the importance of intrinsic factors - particularly emotions - as a component in effective pitching for fundraising efforts (Duong and Brannback, 2024). When combined with established research emphasizing tangible, practical attributes (Boon, 1999; Dutton et al., 2001), these findings suggest that integrating both internal and external dimensions of female entrepreneurs' advocacy will likely gain prominence. This dual perspective opens new avenues for examining how mental constructs and emotional states influence decision-making and actions within the entrepreneurial-advocacy realm. In addition, the findings of this research highlight the need for Bulgarian female entrepreneurs to engage in both individual, introspective approaches and external developmental initiatives, so that they can more effectively enhance their self-awareness and refine their advocacy efforts. Consequently, these insights can inform the strategic alignment of training programs, enabling them to deliver more relevant and effective support to female entrepreneurs.

Key words: female entrepreneurship; advocacy; critical incident technique; Southeastern Europe; Bulgaria

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1. Context Overview

In recent years, entrepreneurs have attracted increasing attention among researchers (Shane and Venkataraman, 2000). Additionally, the proportion of female entrepreneurs has increased, along with their role and significance in the entrepreneurial ecosystem and society (Ramadani et al., 2015). While women remain underrepresented relative to their male counterparts, there is a growing scholarly focus on female entrepreneurship (Henry et al., 2016). Nevertheless, despite the expanding body of literature, studies examining the region of Southeastern Europe remain scarce (Ramadani et al., 2013).

Recently, investigations in the Southeastern European region, and particularly in Bulgaria, have risen in line with global trends (Yordanova and Davidkov, 2009; Georgieva, 2021a). Moreover, Sabarwal and Terrell (2008) report that, as of 2005, 36% of the country’s entrepreneurs were women, further justifying the research interest. These studies address a range of topics pertinent to female entrepreneurs, including networking and support (Manolova et al., 2007; Georgieva, 2021a), risk affinity (Yordanova and Alexandrova-Boshnakova, 2011), competitiveness (Georgieva, 2021b), entrepreneurial intentions (Yordanova and Tarrazon, 2010), entrepreneurial profiles and personal characteristics (Georgieva, 2021a), and comparative analyses of Bulgarian male and female entrepreneurs (Yordanova and Davidkov, 2009).

A comprehensive investigation that examines Bulgarian female entrepreneurs’ advocacy efforts - namely how they defend their ideas, negotiate, manage conflict, and communicate with others - while also providing practical guidance for their endeavors has yet to be undertaken. This research gap underscores the need for an in-depth exploration of how female entrepreneurs from Bulgaria, situated in the broader region of Southeastern Europe, advocate for their ideas, particularly regarding the strategies they employ, the challenges they face, and the various contributing factors involved when navigating high-stakes situations for their businesses.

1.2. Scope of Research

The research question guiding this study is: “*How do Bulgarian female entrepreneurs advocate for their ideas?*”. By employing the critical incident interviewing technique, as originally conceptualized by Flanagan (1954) but adapted here to prompt Bulgarian female entrepreneurs to identify a single high-stakes, challenging situation in their business - one requiring advocacy for their ideas within an interpersonal communication context, regardless of its outcome - I aim to uncover how these entrepreneurs navigate such events in terms of their advocacy. The objective is to identify the strategies, approaches, and additional factors shaping their advocacy efforts, and to indicate which practices are considered effective, which are considered ineffective, and which might have proven successful if applied in retrospect.

For this research, I interview a minimum of 15 individuals who identify as both Bulgarian and female. Although Southeastern Europe encompasses multiple countries, this study centers on Bulgaria in order to achieve a context-rich analysis. Consequently, the experiences of female entrepreneurs in other nations within Southeastern Europe (e.g., Romania, Serbia, Greece) lie beyond the scope of the present investigation. With respect to participant characteristics, there are no specific requirements concerning their industry sector, the length of their entrepreneurial tenure, or the developmental stage of their business. Additionally, participants are not required to restrict their operations solely to Bulgarian territory, as location-bound activities are not a prerequisite for inclusion in this study.

1.3. Research Significance

1.3.1. Academic Importance

My research contributes primarily to the academic literature on entrepreneurship and gender studies. By documenting and analyzing the experiences of female leaders in Southeastern Europe's entrepreneurship ecosystem - primarily in Bulgaria - through their advocacy efforts, I also lay the groundwork for continuous and much needed future research in the field. Furthermore, my study opens opportunities for scholars, and other professionals, to investigate similar issues in other regional or sectoral contexts within this ecosystem, thereby broadening theoretical and practical frameworks and fostering cross-cultural comparisons in the study of female advocacy and entrepreneurship.

This research investigates the distinct approaches to advocacy and the challenges involved, with a special emphasis on gender, within the Bulgarian landscape in particular. By examining Southeastern European region-specific dynamics, this study also reveals the barriers and opportunities that women may encounter within this part of Europe's entrepreneurship ecosystem as they engage in advocacy. This study not only illuminates local dynamics but also contributes to the global discourse on gender and leadership, revealing how regional experiences align with or diverge from broader global trends, specifically those observed between Western and Eastern contexts. Such efforts are in line with the observation by Bowles et al. (2022) that the majority of research on gender and negotiation is carried out within individualistic cultural contexts, particularly in the United States. In addition, the insights aim to be crucial for future research on advocacy and women's leadership in Southeastern Europe, taking into account the region's historical and contemporary influences from both Eastern and Western sources.

1.3.2. Practical Importance

By identifying successful advocacy strategies, this study can provide practical guidelines for emerging female entrepreneurs from Bulgaria, helping them navigate challenges, build confidence, and enhance their communication and negotiation skills. Additionally, showcasing the stories and successes of female entrepreneurs can serve as inspiration and role models, encouraging more women from Bulgaria to pursue entrepreneurship and effectively advocate for their ideas.

Furthermore, the research touches on how female leaders respond to gendered norms and expectations in interpersonal interactions. Evaluating whether they conform to, challenge, or resist these norms provides perspectives into how diverse leadership behaviors can be recognized and valued, potentially fostering more inclusive environments. Assessing the strategies employed by female leaders in high-stakes situations offers valuable information on effective leadership behaviors and supports the creation of a dynamic and innovative culture within the entrepreneurship ecosystem in Southeastern Europe.

1.4. Structural Outline

In Chapter 1, I introduce the research topic, explain the significance of this qualitative study, and discuss my personal interest in addressing this area. I also outline the research question and provide the structure of the entire dissertation. In Chapter 2, I review the current literature relevant to my research question, highlight theoretical frameworks, and identify gaps that justify the need for this qualitative study. In Chapter 3, I explain the qualitative approach used in this study, describe my data sampling, collection, and analysis procedures, and address measures taken to ensure trustworthiness and ethical conduct. In Chapter 4, I present the primary, secondary, and tertiary themes that emerged from the data analysis, supported by excerpts from participant interviews. In Chapter 5, I interpret the findings in light of relevant literature and theoretical frameworks, discuss the study's contributions to knowledge, outline its implications and limitations, and provide recommendations for future research. In Chapter 6, I summarize the entire study, reflect on its significance, and provide concluding thoughts on the broader implications of the research.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Chapter Overview

In this literature review, I first center the discussion on female entrepreneurship in Bulgaria, situating it within both historical and contemporary contexts beginning in 1944, when Bulgaria came under socialist influence. This initial section examines the development of female entrepreneurship over time and explores prevailing trends. Subsequently, I provide an overview of the existing literature, offering a critical analysis and identifying the gaps that emerge from the current academic discourse.

The chapter then moves on to define the concept of advocacy in an entrepreneurial context. Building on this definition, I identify and integrate the theoretical frameworks underpinning this study, focusing specifically on advocacy, issue selling, and negotiation. In particular, because my research focuses on high-stakes, challenging business situations faced by Bulgarian female entrepreneurs, the final portion of this chapter examines the negotiation literature most relevant to these contexts. The chapter concludes by synthesizing key points and outlining how they collectively inform the dissertation as a whole.

2.2. Female Entrepreneurship in Bulgaria

2.2.1. Historical and Current Context

Over the past three decades, Bulgaria and other countries from the Southeastern Europe region have undertaken extensive reforms aimed at democratizing their societies and liberalizing their economies (Yordanova, 2011). As a direct result of these developments, a private business sector took shape, alongside the emergence of a distinct entrepreneurial demographic. It should be noted that entrepreneurship was not entirely absent in Bulgaria from 1944 to 1989; rather, it took a different form and was present on an almost negligible scale. Specifically, it existed in limited proportions (less than 1%) at the micro level - among artisans and merchants - and within the agricultural sector (Simeonova-Ganeva and Yordanova, 2022). Additionally, Simeonova-Ganeva and Yordanova (2022) indicate that the proportion of female and male entrepreneurs during the socialist period remained largely balanced.

Focusing on more recent developments, in the Introduction chapter, Sabarwal and Terrell (2008) are cited as indicating that, in 2005, 36% of Bulgaria's entrepreneurs were women. Although certain Bulgarian media outlets have continued throughout 2024 and into 2025 to report a specific figure - 30% - for female entrepreneurs in Bulgaria, this number was not verified by or traced to the National Statistical Institute or Bulgarian Registry Agency (which serve as the authorized collectors and administrators of business information). An official data request submitted to the Bulgarian Registry Agency resulted in the following written response: "*Please note that the information you are seeking is not structured in the databases of the Registry Agency in the manner requested. The Commercial Register and the Register of Non-Profit Legal Entities' information system does not include a field where the gender of the person can be specified.*"

Furthermore, other researchers - including Manolova (2006), Radović-Marković (2015) and Davidkov (2022) - have likewise relied on earlier data, with Manolova (2006) referencing information predating 2005, Radović-Marković (2015) citing Sabarwal and Terrell (2008) and Davidkov (2022) drawing on data from 2011. Although Davidkov (2022) presents more recent statistics, these were not employed in the present research due to the inability to confirm them through the cited official source.

These circumstances highlight a substantial gap in the availability of current, reliable statistics on female entrepreneurship in Bulgaria, thereby underscoring the need for interdisciplinary research to address this shortfall. The lack of data, in turn, hinders a clear understanding of both the scope and nature of the academic research required and the practical support needed by Bulgarian female entrepreneurs.

2.2.2. Overview of Existing Literature

Despite these data-related challenges, the body of research focused on Bulgarian entrepreneurship continues to evolve and expand. A review of the literature on female entrepreneurship in Bulgaria identifies several key themes. Georgieva (2022) underscores the importance of segmenting female entrepreneurs in Bulgaria to examine the factors influencing their management practices, identifying three distinct clusters based on their motivations, characteristics, and managerial approaches. These motives include pursuing independence and, out of necessity, avoiding unemployment (Georgieva, 2022), while the typical Bulgarian female entrepreneur is over 40 years old, holds a higher education degree in economics or technical sciences, and regards effective communication, relationship-building, adaptability, risk aversion, and intuition as core strengths (Georgieva, 2021a).

Comparative studies extend these findings by examining shared and distinguishing characteristics of women entrepreneurs in Bulgaria compared to the United States, discussing variations in motives, challenges, and resource access (Nikolova, 2021). Additional comparisons with other Southeastern European countries, notably Serbia, indicate that female entrepreneurs in Serbia and Bulgaria - like those in other transition economies - encounter similar social, political, and economic challenges linked to the transition process (Radović-Marković, 2015).

Investigations into gender differences focus on entrepreneurial intentions (Yordanova and Tarrazon, 2010), risk-taking behaviors (Yordanova and Alexandrova-Boshnakova, 2011), and the utilization of human capital and networking (Manolova et al., 2007), frequently contrasting male and female entrepreneurs to highlight distinct obstacles and opportunities (Yordanova and Davidkov, 2009).

Research also addresses competitiveness of businesses founded and run by women, underlining the importance of specialized training and essential knowledge for successfully founding and managing enterprises (Georgieva, 2021b). Family and social factors also play a critical role, given that cultural norms and family responsibilities significantly shape women's entrepreneurial decisions and trajectories (Manolova et al., 2007). Finally, Manolova et al. (2007) highlight that growth expectations represent a key concern, focusing on how human capital and networking influence the potential for business expansion.

2.2.3. Commentary and Identified Gaps

Although existing research addresses the personal traits, skills, motivations, and approaches of Bulgarian female entrepreneurs - along with some challenges they face - and compares them with male counterparts as well as women in other contexts, it appears to lack a cohesive framework that integrates these elements and seems more focused on answering the "what" rather than the "how" and "why". In particular, there is a lack of a practical, implementable toolkit that links these traits, skills, and motivations with appropriate support mechanisms and strategies, thus enabling entrepreneurs to effectively overcome identified challenges. This trend may be partly attributable to the comparatively recent emergence of most of the available research on Bulgarian female entrepreneurs, which has been published primarily within the past twenty years and has only recently begun to gain momentum, resulting in a noticeable increase in academic publications in recent years. Notably, the earliest studies date back to the early 1990s. These earlier works focus on the "new" role of women in Bulgaria's entrepreneurial ecosystem and provide preliminary insights into their economic function and value in the emerging post-socialist context of the region (Nikolova, 1994a; Nikolova, 1994b).

Another observation worth mentioning is that almost all research papers addressing the topic located relied primarily on survey-based data collection methods, varying from 40 to more than 500 participants being surveyed. Earlier studies pre-2000 applied statistical data obtained from official sources. In his paper 'Some Methodological Problems Associated with Researching Women Entrepreneurs', Stevenson (1990) highlights survey design as a methodological limitation, arguing that it lacks the richness characteristic of more in-depth qualitative approaches and may introduce preconceived notions that women are expected to conform to the structured questions posed.

A further point worth noting is the repeated presence of a particular group of scholars within the Bulgarian academic literature on female entrepreneurship. While their sustained focus on this topic is undoubtedly beneficial, the limited variety of authors is not inherently problematic but highlights the potential value of including a broader range of perspectives. Such diversity could enrich analytical approaches, foster more comprehensive insights, and ultimately accelerate academic progress in this area.

Over the past several decades, research on female entrepreneurship has centered around entrepreneurial characteristics, financing, management and strategy, and performance, with the majority of studies conducted in developed economies (Poggesi et al., 2016). As noted in subsection 2.2.2., Bulgarian academic literature generally aligns with these trends, except for the relatively limited attention to financing. In recent years, new lines of inquiry in female entrepreneurship have highlighted intersectional and context-based analyses (Poggesi et al., 2016), the role of digital technologies (Ughetto et al., 2020), comparative analysis bridging developed and developing countries, focusing on emerging themes yet to be fully explored and consolidated (Poggesi et al., 2016; Sendra-Pons et al., 2022), and social entrepreneurship (Rosca et al., 2020; Jeong and Yoo, 2022). While Bulgarian research appears to be moving in a similar direction, it has yet to fully keep pace with these emerging themes.

For instance, the existing discourse has only recently begun to devote attention to digital entrepreneurship, particularly in the context of female entrepreneurs (Zaharieva, 2023). Regarding social entrepreneurship, although substantial research has been conducted in Bulgaria (Ilieva-Koleva and Dobreva, 2015; Terziev and Georgiev, 2018; Angelova, 2019), it typically addresses entrepreneurship in general rather than focusing specifically on women entrepreneurs. However, in the context of cross-country comparisons, there are indications of progress, expanding beyond developed and developing contexts (Nikolova, 2021) to include Southeastern European countries that share similar historical and social profiles (Radović-Marković, 2015). Nonetheless, the shift from an emphasis on gender differences (Yordanova and Tarrazon, 2010; Yordanova and Alexandrova-Boshnakova, 2011) to an intersectional analysis has yet to be fully realized.

Finally, although existing academic literature examines Bulgarian female entrepreneurs' motivations, demographics, and challenges - and has recently gained momentum on various female entrepreneurship topics - there remains limited discussion of the specific mechanisms these entrepreneurs employ to foster business growth and, simultaneously, further their ideas, motivations, and beliefs. Moreover, the use of in-depth approaches to obtain data also appears underexplored, leaving open questions about how the identified findings intersect with and reinforce their entrepreneurial endeavors.

2.3. Advocacy in an Entrepreneurship Context

2.3.1. Defining Advocacy

In continuing this examination, it is important to begin by clarifying the concept of "advocacy" and its relevance to the everyday experiences of female entrepreneurs. The term "advocacy" carries a degree of ambiguity and complexity, making it both widely applicable in contemporary language across and challenging to analyze. Spanning across various fields from law and business to nursing and education - "advocacy" has also adopted numerous urban nuances, further complicating the task of identifying the precise behaviors and concrete actions it encompasses.

Firstly, it is necessary to set aside "advocacy" as a noun describing the role of an advocate (Oxford English Dictionary, n.d.) - since this usage does not serve as the primary focus of this paper. Rather, the emphasis is placed on "advocacy" as a verb, which constitutes the core focus of the discussion. Examining the roots of the term "advocacy" points to the Latin "advocare", which translates as "call to one's aid" (Almog-Bar and Schmid, 2014).

The Cambridge Dictionary defines "advocacy" as "public support for an idea, plan, or way of doing something". The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary adds another key component with their definition: "advocacy (of something) (formal) public support that somebody gives to an idea, a course of action or a belief". According to Mickelson (1995), advocacy can be described as actively representing, defending, intervening, supporting, or proposing a particular course of action on behalf of - and in partnership with - specific groups, with the overarching goal of advancing or preserving social justice. Beyond simply lobbying to influence social policies, advocacy entails a broad range of activities such as organizing communities, bringing people together, conducting analyses, offering education, carrying out interviews, undertaking research, mobilizing constituencies, drafting written materials, sharing information, and other related efforts (Donaldson, 2007).

In keeping with the definitions outlined above, it is crucial to recognize that "advocacy" can be undertaken by both individuals and organizations. It is not restricted to interpersonal interactions alone, which inherently broadens its scope of influence and content. Almog-Bar and Schmid (2014) illustrate this point by noting that participation in advocacy is not confined to organizations and should therefore be examined as a broader activity.

Given its breadth and depth of meaning, “advocacy” has become both valuable and prevalent in multiple domains, including public discourse, research, and policy. Journalists, activists, academics, lawyers, government officials, nonprofit representatives, and entrepreneurs each employ the term differently within their professional contexts to advance specific aims. Moreover, as shown by the Oxford English Dictionary’s historical and modern frequency series, the usage of “advocacy” continues to grow, indicating that it will remain a significant concept moving forward.

Drawing on the previously listed definitions and integrating Christian Fouloy’s (2013) perspective - recognized as an authority in public policy advocacy, lobbying, public affairs, and government relations - this paper advances the following synthesized and explicit definition of advocacy. Specifically, “advocacy” encompasses a broad spectrum of individual or collective expression or action undertaken publicly to support a cause, idea, policy, or belief, either on one’s own behalf or on behalf of others. Terms frequently associated with “advocacy”, and often used interchangeably, can further illuminate its meaning. These include defending, influencing, sensitizing, interviewing, effecting change, engaging in decision-making, persuading, selling an idea, generating exposure, lobbying, communicating, negotiating, and attracting attention (Fouloy, 2013).

In the entrepreneurial context - where business ideas, plans, and beliefs must be clearly conveyed and defended to secure support from a variety of stakeholders (including clients, investors, employees, family, friends, and financial institutions such as banks) - “advocacy” emerges as the most fitting term, encompassing all the essential elements required to mobilize action.

Lobbying is often used in everyday discourse, rather than in a strictly academic context, to refer to an individual’s public expression or action supporting a cause, idea, policy, or belief. Nonetheless, lobbying represents only one subset of advocacy, focusing specifically on influencing policy formulation or modification. Entrepreneurs frequently employ lobbying strategies to cultivate a favorable business environment; however, although all lobbying constitutes advocacy, not all advocacy activities qualify as lobbying.

Hence, I have adopted the term “advocacy” to examine how women defend, influence, persuade, promote, lobby for, expose, communicate, and secure support (including through negotiation) for their entrepreneurial causes, ideas, plans and beliefs.

2.3.2. Integrating Theory

2.3.2.1. Examining Advocacy

In exploring frameworks and theories for effective advocacy, Argyris et al.'s (1985) concept of **advocacy-inquiry** is particularly well-suited, as it emphasizes balancing one's own positions with a genuine curiosity about others' perspectives. In this context, "*advocacy refers to stating one's views; inquiry refers to asking questions*" (Arthur, 2014a, pp. 27). Together, these practices foster mutual understanding and more productive dialogue - a critical aspect for female entrepreneurs navigating challenging, high-stakes discussions with various stakeholders.

A key tool for examining how assumptions shape communication is Argyris' **ladder of inference**, which suggests that individuals often select data, assign meaning, form assumptions, and act on conclusions without realizing how these steps shape their perceptions (Arthur, 2014b). For Bulgarian female entrepreneurs, bias may stem from deeply ingrained cultural assumptions regarding women's social roles or their perceived capacity for entrepreneurial success. Recognizing each "rung" of the ladder helps female entrepreneurs and stakeholders question whether these assumptions are fair and evidence-based.

The concept of **single- and double-loop learning** further illustrates how individuals - and organizations - adapt to and reflect on challenges (Argyris et al., 1985). Single-loop learning targets behavioral adjustments without challenging underlying norms. For instance, a female entrepreneur might tweak her pitch to appeal to potential investors. Double-loop learning, however, questions the fundamental assumptions and values prompting such changes (Arthur, 2014b). This process could involve challenging beliefs about women's self-perception, as well as cultural and business-related norms.

Argyris et al. (1985) further highlight the gap between "**espoused theory**" - what individuals claim to believe - and "**theory-in-use**" - the beliefs that actually guide their actions. Recognizing this disparity is crucial for Bulgarian female entrepreneurs, as they may espouse inclusive or innovative practices but still default to more limiting assumptions when under pressure. By aligning their theories-in-use with their professed values, they can more effectively leverage single- and double-loop learning to foster genuine dialogue and drive meaningful change.

Left-hand column work (Argyris et al., 1985) provides a practical method for surfacing hidden thoughts, fears, or judgments. In a challenging conversation - such as negotiating funding - what is said ("**right column**") may differ from what is felt or thought ("**left column**"). By acknowledging and reflecting on both "columns", female entrepreneurs can become more aware of how unexpressed beliefs and emotions influence discourse. This honest self-examination could be particularly impactful for Bulgarian women entrepreneurs seeking to advocate effectively while navigating various challenging situations and business expectations.

Taken together, these concepts offer a powerful toolkit for understanding and enhancing advocacy strategies. By combining advocacy-inquiry, awareness of the ladder of inference, and the reflective practices of single- and double-loop learning - particularly left-hand column work - Bulgarian female entrepreneurs could engage in more meaningful dialogues, challenge their own entrenched assumptions, and ultimately foster a more inclusive entrepreneurial ecosystem.

Yet, while Argyris et al. (1985) focus on how introspection and reflection enhance one's advocacy, another important consideration is how advocacy itself is structured and performed in practical terms. In this regard, frameworks from the legal domain can provide valuable insights, as the term "advocacy" is historically grounded in legal terminology (Oxford English Dictionary, n.d.). For example, in his book Advocacy, Andy Boon (1999) outlines a structured approach intended to help legal professionals develop and refine their advocacy capabilities - a model that can be instructive in broader contexts as well. While Boon's framework has its roots in law, its principles of systematic research, clear messaging, and strategic persuasion transcend the courtroom. Legal advocacy often encompasses high-stakes negotiation, stakeholder management, and the need for credibility and trust - dynamics that are equally critical in entrepreneurial contexts. Although Boon's framework is primarily tailored to legal settings, the present study omits elements focused exclusively on legal practice and instead adapts the framework to a business environment - particularly entrepreneurship - thereby emphasizing several key competencies.

In the context of "**presenting to persuade**", according to Boon (1999) effective communicators must engage in systematic research and planning, establish a clear structure and organization for their message, remain aware of their own communication style, and pay close attention to both verbal and nonverbal cues - such as word choice, emotional dynamics, and body language. In a legal environment, these elements ensure clarity and credibility before judges and juries; in entrepreneurship, they help founders convincingly pitch ideas, secure investments, and mobilize support. In addition, professional **conduct** remains paramount, involving conflict resolution, diplomacy, and strategic relationship building. Thorough **planning** also proves essential, prompting practitioners to prepare and anticipate various scenarios in advance. Furthermore, effective **questioning**, including the use of open-ended questions, can generate valuable insights in one-on-one interactions and broader stakeholder surveys. Finally, Boon (1999) advocates ongoing **evaluation and reflection**, underscoring the importance of extracting lessons from each experience to fuel continuous improvement. However, when compared with the reflection process conceptualized by Argyris et al. (1985) in their single- and double-loop learning framework, the reflection introduced by Boon (1999) can be regarded as single-loop learning, given that it centers on behavioral adjustments without questioning the underlying norms.

As defined in subsection 2.3.1, in its broadest sense, “advocacy” refers to actions undertaken to influence or persuade others regarding a particular cause, idea, or beliefs. Consequently, the advocacy framework proposed by Andy Boon (1999) centers on how individuals formulate strategies to advance their interests, garner support, and ultimately achieve their goals, thereby providing practical, actionable guidance. Adapting these legal strategies to the entrepreneurial field highlights how thorough preparation, persuasive communication, and professional conduct are equally vital to business success. For instance, entrepreneurs - especially those in challenging environments - can benefit from a legal advocate’s ability to build compelling arguments, address conflicts, and engage in high-stakes negotiations.

In the context of advocacy, this study adopts the concepts discussed by Argyris et al. (1985) for their holistic and reflective perspective, as well as an adapted version of Boon’s advocacy framework for its practice-oriented focus. Together, these frameworks integrate both the intrinsic and extrinsic dimensions of advocacy (as highlighted by Argyris et al., 1985) and the tactical, individual facets (as illustrated by Boon), ultimately providing a comprehensive rationale for examining how Bulgarian female entrepreneurs advocate for their ideas.

As discussed in Subsection 2.3.1, the concept of “advocacy” encompasses a range of related terms (e.g., persuade, defend, influence) that collectively capture its scope and significance. In order to ensure that this literature review addresses both the breadth and depth of these concepts, the subsequent subsections (2.3.2.2 and 2.3.2.3) will examine *issue selling* within organizational contexts and *negotiation* efforts in securing funding for female entrepreneurs, respectively.

2.3.2.2. Examining Issue Selling

Dutton et al. (2001) introduce issue-selling as a strategic process through which individuals draw attention to critical issues and ideas, with the goal of instigating organizational change. Central to this process are three key components: **packaging**, which involves how an issue is framed and presented; **involvement**, which refers to who is included in the issue-selling effort and how they participate; and **process**-related elements, which concern the formality, preparation, and timing of the issue-selling process. Together, these factors ensure that decision-makers perceive issues as both urgent and relevant. In addition, Dutton et al. (2001) underscore the significance of social and political contexts, as well as the relational, normative, and strategic knowledge essential for successful issue-selling.

Building on these insights, Dutton et al. (2001) examine a context characterized by a bureaucratic, formal structure and limited competition. Such an environment may not perfectly align with entrepreneurship, which is often considered dynamic, fast-paced, and lacking formal processes and procedures. Consequently, although issue-selling highlights how individuals can effectively navigate hierarchical systems, applying these concepts to entrepreneurial settings requires further investigation. However, the variety of advocacy contexts - from large, bureaucratic organizations to entrepreneurial ecosystems - presents a valuable opportunity for cross-context analysis and the development of comprehensive advocacy strategies and approaches. In addition, it is worth noting that in entrepreneurial environments, traditional hierarchies may be replaced or supplemented by networks, partnerships, and volatile market conditions. These factors could necessitate the adaptation of influence and persuasion strategies, potentially leading to approaches that diverge from those outlined by Dutton et al. (2001).

By comparing the experiences of Bulgarian female entrepreneurs with the earlier insights on issue-selling, this research may offer a clearer understanding of how formal versus more informal contexts shape the advocacy of ideas. This comparison will help determine whether core principles of issue-selling maintain relevance across diverse settings or whether entrepreneurial environments call for unique methods of championing new initiatives.

2.3.2.3. Examining Negotiation within Female Entrepreneurship

A considerable body of academic work has examined the fundraising activities of female entrepreneurs, particularly in comparison to their male counterparts (Carter and Rosa, 1998; Brooks et al., 2014; Stošic Panić, 2017). Over the past three decades, their ability to attract capital has remained a prominent focus of scholarly inquiry, as evidenced by a steady flow of research. This progression is illustrated by academic sources ranging from Buttner and Rosen (1989) through Carter et al. (2003) and Swarz et al. (2016), culminating in more recent works by Villaseca et al. (2020) and Zhao et al. (2021). These investigations reference multiple funding mechanisms - such as venture capital (Chen et al., 2009), crowdfunding (Geiger and Oranburg, 2018), and angel investment (Amatucci and Sohl, 2004) - in relation to women’s access to capital.

For instance, Nelson et al. (2009) examine how female entrepreneurs, when seeking venture capital financing, must manage a “shadow negotiation” shaped by gendered assumptions about risk-taking, confidence, and legitimacy. Their findings highlight four principal components of negotiation strategies, encompassing the cultivation of strong professional networks, leveraging previous entrepreneurial experience, effectively relating to investors, demonstrating confidence and a willingness to take risks, strategic planning, and reflecting on one's own gendered identity. Nelson et al. (2009) argue that by aligning more closely with established norms - often shaped by male-dominated venture capital environments - female entrepreneurs may enhance their likelihood of securing investment.

Similarly, Amatucci and Sohl (2004) underscore the importance of prior experience and networking in the lead-up to negotiation, positioning detailed preparation as essential to establishing credibility and authority. In line with this perspective, Chen et al. (2009) emphasize that such thorough preparation is also a defining characteristic in the financing decisions of venture capitalists.

Building on this, Amatucci and Sohl (2004) further point out that engaging external expertise and fostering robust relationships with potential investors can help level the playing field. During the negotiation process itself, they suggest that female entrepreneurs who strive for mutually beneficial outcomes, demonstrate a command of quantitative data, and communicate assertively are better positioned to manage conflicts and meet investor expectations.

While negotiation and investor relations are central to these studies, recent work has broadened the focus to include pitching behaviors in both male and female entrepreneurs. Duong and Brannback (2024), for example, discuss "gender performance" at entrepreneurial pitching events, showing that across genders, entrepreneurs are generally expected to convey assertiveness, confidence, and competence by responding deftly to investors' inquiries and illustrating control over their ventures. Crucially, Duong and Brannback (2024) also identify empathy and emotional expression as key elements of effective pitching - dimensions that can enrich the storytelling process and make a compelling case for the entrepreneur's vision.

Taken together, these studies illuminate how female entrepreneurs, in particular, employ various strategies - ranging from carefully planned negotiations and risk-taking displays to the projection of empathy and authenticity - to operate effectively in predominantly male-oriented venture capital contexts. Moreover, they collectively suggest that while adopting assertive, data-driven communication styles can enhance credibility, balancing these tactics with relationship-building skills and emotional resonance may be equally vital.

A review of this extensive literature underscores the critical importance of advocacy for female entrepreneurs, especially when pitching their ventures to secure financing from diverse stakeholders. On the one hand, the concentrated scholarly focus on this specific context may prove beneficial, offering insights into effective positioning strategies and highlighting potential challenges for both emerging and established female entrepreneurs. However, drawing from personal experience within the ecosystem - both in venture capital and within various start-ups - it appears there are additional, equally pivotal domains in which female entrepreneurs also require significant advocacy and support, yet appear to be largely underexamined.

2.3. Why Advocacy of Bulgarian Female Entrepreneurs

Existing literature on entrepreneurship continues to emphasize gender distinctions (Adachi and Hisada, 2017; Hmieleski and Sheppard, 2019; Villanueva-Flores et al., 2021), a focus that aligns with the growing number of female entrepreneurs and the corresponding rise in academic attention to female entrepreneurship (Henry et al., 2016). In the Southeastern European region, and in Bulgaria specifically, research on female entrepreneurship has gained traction over the past two decades, contributing to broader theoretical and practical understandings of the field both in general and within the regional context (Nikolova, 2021; Georgieva, 2022).

However, as highlighted previously in Section 2.2., the topic of advocacy - particularly as it relates to female entrepreneurship - remains notably underexamined among Bulgarian researchers. This gap limits both broader academic discourse and the practical benefits available to Bulgarian female entrepreneurs, whose exact representation in Bulgaria and the region has yet to be clearly established. More broadly, the discourse on advocacy has largely concentrated on fundraising activities, a trend that has persisted for several decades and continues to be a focal point (Buttner and Rosen,1989; Nelson et al., 2009; Duong and Brannback, 2024).

Within this context, several critical questions arise: whether additional interpersonal dynamics warrant deeper investigation regarding advocacy of Bulgarian female entrepreneurs; whether Bulgarian female entrepreneurs apply strategies and approaches similar to or distinct from the established literature; and, finally, how these Bulgarian female entrepreneurs effectively communicate their ideas, beliefs, and business cases. Addressing these questions may offer valuable insights into the role of advocacy in female entrepreneurship and help bridge existing research gaps, thereby enhancing both theoretical understanding and practical applications.

In emphasizing the “how”, this dissertation does not intend to offer a single, uniform strategy for effectively navigating various advocacy scenarios. Rather, it aims to provide Bulgarian female entrepreneurs with foundational knowledge and tools to manage their advocacy efforts in a more focused and intentional way. In turn, this approach may serve as a starting point for other scholars to investigate similar dimensions and extend research-based support to female entrepreneurs in different regions worldwide.

CHAPTER 3: METHODS

3.1. Research Methodology

To address the research question, *"How do Bulgarian female entrepreneurs advocate for their ideas?"* I employed semi-structured interviews to gain an in-depth understanding of how these entrepreneurs promote their ideas and navigate challenges in their business environments. As noted in the preceding literature review chapter, previous academic studies on Bulgarian female entrepreneurs have predominantly relied on survey-based data collection methods. The decision to utilize semi-structured interviews was primarily driven by the desire to capture the interviewees' perceptions and attitudes, while also allowing for a degree of flexibility during the interview process (Galletta, 2013).

3.1.1. Critical Incident Technique

After consulting with my tutor, Dr. Marc Thompson, reviewing multiple sources extensively, and engaging in careful consideration, I have decided to employ the critical incident interviewing technique for my interviews. As outlined by Flanagan (1954, pp. 327), "*the critical incident technique consists of set of procedures for collecting direct observations of human behavior in such a way to facilitate their usefulness in solving practical problems and developing broad psychological principals*". Flanagan (1954) further emphasizes that the focus of critical incidents is on extreme behavior, rather than on the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of the intended objective.

3.1.2. Reflective Learning Cycle

I incorporated Gibbs' (1988) reflective learning cycle to structure my questionnaire – see Figure 1. The decision to adopt this framework was primarily influenced by the scarcity of clear instructions and detailed examples I encountered during my research regarding the critical incident interviewing technique. Existing literature appeared to concentrate on initiating and concluding interviews, providing limited guidance on the processes that occur in between. Given that the critical incident technique is inherently reflective, I found Gibbs' reflective learning cycle appropriate for this purpose.

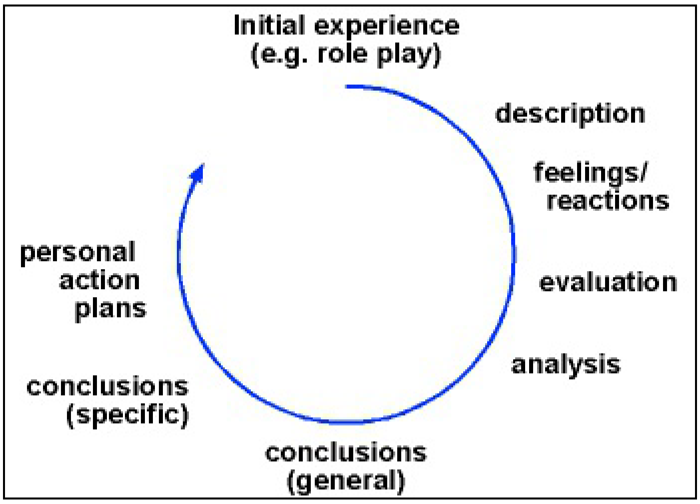

Figure 1: Reflective Learning Cycle (Source: Gibbs, 1988)

3.2. Sampling

3.2.1. Sample Selection

In October 2024, I contacted 36 Bulgarian female entrepreneurs - of these, 24 accepted my invitation, 3 declined, and 9 did not respond. Ultimately, I conducted interviews with 19 participants, as some individuals were unable to attend due to scheduling conflicts and other pre-year-end commitments.

I recruited the participants through multiple channels - I directly approached three entrepreneurs at a networking event where I had prior acquaintance; I secured a significant number of participants through personal recommendations and referrals from my contacts; and I attracted further interest via a public LinkedIn post. Additionally, I reached out to a few individuals through direct messages on LinkedIn as part of a cold outreach effort.

Initially, I intended to recruit no more than 15 participants; however, I was pleasantly surprised by the considerable interest in my study as well as the interviewees' readiness to introduce me to other female entrepreneurs who could make valuable contributions to the study and also from their willingness to be transparent about their participation. The latter was particularly evident from the direct responses I received on my public LinkedIn post, even though I had explicitly requested that interested individuals contact me via private message. During the interviews, many participants expressed that this area of research is significant and that there is a lack of information and focus on entrepreneurship in the Southeastern region, particularly regarding female entrepreneurs from this part of the world. Almost all interviewees also requested to receive a copy of the dissertation upon its completion.

3.2.2. Sample Characteristics

Among the interviewees, the majority (53%) were aged between 35 and 39, followed by those aged 40-44 (21%) and 30-34 (16%), with only a small proportion over 50 (10%). In terms of entrepreneurial experience, most participants had operated their businesses for 6-10 years (42%) or 3-5 years (21%). Additionally, over half were first-time business owners (53%), had co-founders (63%), and were in the growth stage of development of their business (53%).

Although the study did not focus on a specific industry, the interviewees came from a variety of sectors, with the largest group representing for-profit businesses and only one participant affiliated with a non-profit organization. Their responsibilities within the business extended beyond their roles as Founders or Co-founders, as many also held positions such as CEO, CFO, or CTO, depending on their technical expertise. Regarding business longevity, 37% of the companies were in operation for 3-5 years and another 37% for 6-10 years. Furthermore, 85% of the businesses were based in Bulgaria, and 89% maintained an international presence - engaging in activities such as selling products or services abroad, operating international offices or branches, or forming partnerships with foreign companies. Finally, a majority of the participants reported being active members of multiple professional networks and entrepreneurial groups (74%), and 58% indicated that they were currently receiving mentorship from established entrepreneurs or business leaders.

3.3. Data Collection

3.3.1. Interview Setup and Scheduling

I conducted all interviews online via Google Meet during November and the first week of December 2024, scheduling them primarily based on the availability of each participant. Several interviewees needed to reschedule their sessions due to unforeseen circumstances. Additionally, two interviewees missed their interviews as they had forgotten about them. In response, I began sending email reminders to each participant a day before their scheduled interview. Many interviewees later noted at the start of our conversation that these reminders were helpful in keeping track of their upcoming commitments.

Each session spanned between 60 and 90 minutes. On average, the interviews lasted approximately 1 hour and 22 minutes, with the longest extending to 1 hour and 39 minutes and the shortest lasting 56 minutes. Interviewees were informed at the beginning of each interview and beforehand with the one-page document provided in advance to the interview (see Appendix 1), that they will be recorded (audio only) and that the interview will be conducted in English. I gave them the opportunity to decide whether they would like to organize the interview in Bulgarian, if this is their preference. Only two interviewees requested to conduct their interviews in Bulgarian.

3.3.2. Questionnaire Design and Adaptation

The questionnaire was organized into the following stages, as defined by Gibbs (1988): Description (or context-giving about the critical incident), Feelings (the emotions and feelings experienced during the incident), Evaluation (an assessment of what went or did not go well during the critical incident), Analysis (a reflection on the factors that influenced the outcome), Conclusion (a focus on lessons learned and exploration of potential alternative approaches that could have been employed during the critical incident), and Action Plan (a future-oriented outline of the approach to be taken in subsequent situations).

It is important to note that I did not strictly adhere to the prescribed sequence of stages; instead, I used them as a guiding framework throughout the interview process. I recognize that rigidly following this structure could have led to overlooking important themes and issues that emerged during the conversation, thereby diminishing the inherent flexibility of the critical incident technique. Consequently, I allowed for the stages to be integrated as appropriate, adapting to the needs of the interviewees and the progression of the discussion regarding their critical incidents.

The questionnaire was not shared beforehand, so interviewees did not have the opportunity to prepare in advance. The initial version spanned four pages, each containing multiple questions corresponding to different stages of the process. However, the decision to include or omit specific questions was guided by the natural flow of each conversation. Over the course of the interviews, the questionnaire was revised and evolved into its final form, as presented in the Appendix 2. Each of the listed questions was either asked directly or naturally addressed by the interviewee at some point during our conversation.

3.3.3. Interview Process

At the start of each interview, I reviewed the information from the one-page document, which had been shared in advance in Bulgarian, with each interviewee – see Appendix 1. I then initiated the conversation in English by asking demographic questions to provide context about the interviewees and their businesses. I deliberately chose not to distribute surveys in advance to avoid overwhelming participants and to allow time at the start of each session for a brief introductory conversation. This approach helped build rapport and create a comfortable environment for the interviewees. The demographic section took approximately 7 minutes per participant, with the longest lasting around 11 minutes and the shortest about 4 minutes. This method proved effective, providing flexibility in cases where interviewees chose to discuss a critical incident related to a previous business or, in instances where they managed multiple businesses, allowing me to gather demographic details relevant to the specific business they referenced during the interview.

In the subsequent section of the interview, I facilitated a smooth transition and ensured clarity by reiterating the purpose of the discussion, followed by providing instructions on the next steps. It concluded with a request from my side for the participants to recall a particularly high-stakes, challenging event in their business where advocating for their ideas played a crucial role. Within the context of my research question, the term "critical incident" - also interchangeably referred to as a critical event or situation during the interview process - was defined to the interviewees as a high-stakes, challenging situation in their business in which advocating for their ideas was crucial. The purpose and goal of the interviews were explained to each participant at the beginning, after which I asked them to identify a single incident for in-depth exploration, chosen at their discretion, during our conversation - see Appendix 2. I also clarified that the incident did not need to have an exclusively positive or negative outcome and encouraged them to share as much detail as they were comfortable with about the situation, including their thoughts, feelings, and motivations.

During my discussion with Interviewee A, it became clear that additional clarification regarding the instructions was needed. The matter raised was whether interviewees should focus exclusively on advocacy involving interpersonal communication - whether verbal or written - or if intrapersonal communication should also be included. Given the structure of my questionnaire and the research I conducted in advance, I clarified that the emphasis should be on interpersonal interactions rather than on internal conversations. This instruction was also conveyed to the remaining interviewees.

*"It (the situation) was also perhaps an internal advocacy, if you can call it that. Like there is an internal conversation that you have to have with yourself and to advocate even with yourself about something… Although it's an interesting thing that now I realize that advocacy can happen internally as well, like you might need it internally." (**Interviewee A**)*

In my review of the literature on the critical incident technique, Cassel and Symon (2004) highlight the potential challenge of interviewees struggling to recall a specific critical event on the spot. To address this, I incorporated their recommendation by designing a visual aid in Microsoft PowerPoint - a double-arrow-headed timeline - allowing interviewees to map and position critical events that occurred within a five-year timeframe, with the starting point being the present moment, corresponding to the month in which our interview was conducted - see Appendix 3. None of the 19 interviewees encountered difficulties in identifying a single critical event to discuss. Most initially presented two or three incidents, and I then guided them through targeted questions to narrow the focus to one.

3.3.4. Data Recording and Processing

All interviews were recorded and later transcribed in either English or Bulgarian using the Fireflies AI note-taking app. While the English transcriptions were of high quality and required only minor adjustments, the Bulgarian transcriptions necessitated significant revisions, often requiring a near-complete rewrite. No technical issues were encountered regarding the sound quality of the recordings. The transcribed interviews collectively amounted to 338 pages (font: Times New Roman, font size 10), with an average of 18 pages per interviewee.

The interviews conducted in Bulgarian were subsequently translated into English using BgGPT (https://bggpt.ai/). To ensure accuracy, I reviewed all interviews alongside their respective transcriptions in the original language, anonymized them, and translated them into English when necessary. Additionally, I carefully examined the translations for any errors or omissions and cross-checked them against the original transcriptions to maintain accuracy and consistency. It is also worth noting that approximately two-thirds of Interviewee G's session was conducted in English. Around 58 minutes into the conversation, I suggested switching to Bulgarian, as I found it challenging to guide the discussion in English and focus Interviewee G's attention on a single critical event for in-depth exploration. This adjustment proved beneficial, as it allowed me to better structure the interview in our native language and collect relevant data.

3.3.5. Participants' Feedback and Process Evaluation

To assess the effectiveness of combining the critical incident interviewing technique with the reflective learning cycle in my approach, I relied on feedback shared by some participants at the conclusion of their interviews. Regardless of how they ended the conversation - whether on a positive or negative note - their responses provided sufficient insight to indicate that the approach was effective in engaging them in reflection. Determining whether this results in substantial change or improvement is beyond the scope of this research.

*"I'm actually glad that it happened right now because, you know, our daily routine is so fast paced, and it was kind of like, I felt it a bit as some sort of coaching session. Because on my own, I wouldn't have allocated so much time and resources to analyze what happened to me, so it helped me too." (**Interviewee N**)*

*"I feel like I don't feel well. I feel like I need some food and drinks after our call." (**Interviewee S**)*

3.4. Data Analysis

3.4.1. Coding Process and Themes Development

I conducted a thematic analysis in accordance with Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase model. Once the final version of the English transcripts was finalized, I uploaded them into Quirkos, a qualitative research software, for further examination. Initially, I conducted a thorough reading of the interviews to gain a deeper understanding of the data without rashly coding it. During this review, I observed that the dataset was particularly rich; interviewees devoted substantial time of their sessions to discussing their respective critical incident in detail, as well as reflecting on lessons learned, considering alternative actions, and exploring what they might do if faced with a similar situation again. Additionally, participants provided examples beyond the narrative of their critical incident and offered broader insights from their experiences with advocacy.

Consequently, I decided to code only the data directly related to the critical incidents, disregarding any content not directly relevant to the events. My decision was primarily shaped by two reasons. First, each critical event account offered extensive insights with numerous references to the interviewees' beliefs, biases, values, and emotions - attributes that prompted me to conduct a more in-depth examination. Second, the responses to an impromptu question I posed to several interviewees further informed my decision. I asked, *"Why did you identify this situation as a critical event for your business?"* to better understand the rationale behind their choice of event. Their answers largely reflected beliefs they held, as well as their values and emotional states at that moment.

*"Yeah, because the type of services that we provide, it's very important because we are a service provider. So, it's very important that the service we provide is top quality and we aim to satisfy our clients and their needs… As I said for us, we just pride ourselves with providing quality service. So, it's one of our values if you wish to provide good service." (**Interviewee F**)*

*"Yeah, maybe just because this was the first time that I thought that based on the reference we have, I was sure that we will have this customer with us." (**Interviewee K**)*

*"Because probably for me it was one of the most emotional cases lately…" (**Interviewee N**)*

*“So, I've been with this business for 14 years and at that time, everything that was related to the business and how it was supposed to function in the future, I was taking it quite personally because I did care about what will happen with the business. I even had a difficult time to part with the business emotionally.” (**Interviewee O**)*

Within the next two readings of the transcripts, I systematically coded the data, refining the codes with each pass. This process yielded a substantial set of codes that were subsequently consolidated into key, secondary, and tertiary themes. Two additional rounds of transcript readings were conducted with several objectives: to review and refine existing codes and their categorization within respective themes, and to ensure that no additional themes were overlooked. Finally, to enhance the reliability of my analysis, I engaged a psychologist, who is also an academic from the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, to independently code a randomly selected transcript (Church et al., 2020). The resulting codes from both efforts were compared, revealing no significant discrepancies. The final list of key, secondary, and tertiary themes is provided in Appendix 7.

Throughout the coding process, several additional themes emerged that were not directly related to my research question. Due to their frequent recurrence, I subsequently transferred them to an Excel spreadsheet. These themes are further examined and discussed in the Discussion chapter of this research paper.

3.4.2. Data Framing

During the last two of the four rounds of transcript readings, I conducted separate coding in Quirkos to capture participants’ mentions of the identified themes. However, this time, following the approach of Dutton et al. (2001), I coded instances where a particular secondary theme (or its associated tertiary themes) was not applied, as well as cases where participants expressed a wish that it had been applied – see Figure 2. These responses were categorized under "did not apply" and "wish had applied", respectively. Additionally, the data directly associated with the critical incidents - and instrumental in forming the key and secondary themes from the codes - was classified as “did apply” in accordance with Dutton et al. (2001).

Figure 2: Screenshot from Quirkos by Veronika Stoyanova - Trendafilova, February 10, 2025

If an interviewee referenced a specific secondary theme or its corresponding tertiary themes - whether implicitly or explicitly - multiple times during our critical incident discussion, I recorded it as a single mention and assigned it a code of 1 as part of the data refinement process for its final presentation in Appendix 9. For the purposes of this research paper, an explicit mention occurs when an interviewee directly states a secondary theme or its associated tertiary themes, whereas an implicit mention occurs when a secondary theme (or its associated tertiary themes) is derived from contextual cues or indirect language.

When coding, if an interviewee expressed a desire for the application of a particular secondary theme or the tertiary themes connected with it, I coded it solely as “wish had applied” rather than also as “did not apply”. For the question “*Were there any specific resources or support systems that you relied on during that high-stakes situation? If so, please elaborate*”, a negative response resulted in all secondary themes under key theme “Support Networks and Resources” receiving an additional designation of “did not apply”. Furthermore, when interviewees confirmed the use of a specific secondary theme (or its associated tertiary themes) within "Support Networks and Resources" in response to the latter question but did not explicitly mention the remaining secondary themes, I assigned an additional code of 1 to those themes under "did not apply".

In accordance with Dutton et al. (2001), I categorized the critical incidents into 'Successful', 'Unsuccessful', and 'Mixed' in Quirkos, based on the outcomes reported by each interviewee. As a final step, I exported all data from Quirkos using the software's pre-defined templates and then reworked it into its final form in Excel - see Appendix 9.

I employed this approach to incorporate data that had been excluded during the initial coding phase - data related to questions on lessons learned, alternative actions, and potential responses to similar situations - since omitting these additional data points could restrict the scope and potential benefits of this research. Moreover, this approach allowed for the emergence of new secondary themes - reflecting interviewees' wishes for their application - that had not been apparent during the initial coding. I consolidated these new secondary themes under "WISH HAD APPLIED – NEW" in Quirkos.

3.5. Ethical Considerations

Each participant was provided with a formal one-page document outlining the research study, the interview process, and the relevant confidentiality and ethics protocols prior to the interviews - see Appendix 1. I distributed this document via a private LinkedIn message or email to ensure that they were well-informed about the study and its ethical specifics. In the absence of a signed consent form, I interpreted each participant's written expression of interest in taking part as their informed agreement to the terms of the interview.

Separately, at the conclusion of one of my interviews, a participant exhibited signs of distress related to the critical incident we had discussed and her subsequent reflection on it. To safeguard her well-being, I chose to provide additional support by spending extra time with her after the interview, ensuring she was in a more stable emotional state before leaving.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

4.1. Introduction

The aim of this research is to uncover how female entrepreneurs from Southeastern Europe, and in particular from Bulgaria, navigate high-stakes, challenging situations in their business where advocating for their ideas is crucial. By exploring a significant event identified by each interviewee, I gained deep understanding of the strategies these entrepreneurs used, the challenges they faced, and the influence of various factors on their advocacy efforts. The research question guiding this investigation was "*How do Bulgarian female entrepreneurs advocate for their ideas?*".

In this chapter, the data are systematically organized into four overarching key themes – "Psychological Constructs", "Emotions and Feelings", "Support Networks and Resources" and "Specific Skills and Approaches" - each comprising secondary themes that offer a nuanced understanding of the participants' unique experiences and perspectives. Tertiary themes are also presented.

First, I outline the profile of the critical events discussed in the interviews, providing context and insight into the origins of these themes. Subsequently, I examine the intrinsic levers of advocacy - namely "Psychological Constructs" and "Emotions and Feelings" - by presenting their key, secondary, and tertiary themes. Then, I discuss the extrinsic levers of advocacy - "Support Networks and Resources" and "Specific Skills and Approaches" - along with their underlying themes. Finally, I briefly present the other themes that emerged from my data analysis.

Throughout the presentation of results, I treat the differences in how these levers are mentioned in the critical incidents – classified by the interviewees as successful, unsuccessful, or mixed based on their outcomes - as partial indications of what genuinely works, does not work, or might have worked if the interviewees had applied them. In this way, these accounts function both as conceptual frameworks for understanding effective and ineffective practices in this context and as retrospective interpretations of successful and unsuccessful actions or approaches (Dutton et al., 2001). Separately, identifying which practices might have been successful if implemented by interviewees offers insight into their tendencies for future behavior modification and helps determine whether specific secondary themes correlate with successful outcomes. These findings could, in turn, prove valuable to other entrepreneurs seeking to enhance their advocacy efforts.

4.2. Overview of Critical Incidents

The critical incidents described by the interviewees revolved around several interpersonal dynamics, including those with clients, vendors, investors, peers, teams, co-founders, and government, business, and European Union ('EU') stakeholders – see Appendix 6. Notably, client interactions emerged as the most prominent, appearing in more than half of my interview sessions. This finding was surprising to me when I compiled the results, especially given the extensive literature that discusses interactions with investors during fundraising processes and underscores their critical importance, as discussed in the literature review chapter. A substantial number of participants immediately identified only one critical incident to share, whereas those who initially presented multiple options also referred to earlier fundraising efforts. However, none of the interviewees who presented multiple options, one of which involved investor-related interpersonal dynamics, ultimately chose to elaborate on that particular situation. Of the nineteen participants, only one opted to discuss a conversation with an investor.

Several interviewees appeared uncertain about the relevance of their experiences to the study's objectives. Some invited me to determine whether their incidents aligned with the study's focus or were most appropriate, as illustrated by statements such as, "*And you can tell me if this actually fits what you're thinking" (**Interviewee H***) and "*Maybe you can choose*" (***Interviewee Q***). This uncertainty also emerged in comments like, *"I don't know if this will be in the direction that interests you…"* (***Interviewee P***) and "*So, I don't know which is the one that actually you're going to be interested and it's going to be most helpful for you*" *(**Interviewee M**).* Moreover, one participant proposed that their experience might hold a unique value, as indicated by ***Interviewee O***'s remark: "*I assume that not many people talk about this one and this could be interesting for the research*".

During our interviews, some participants offered their perspectives on what constitutes a critical incident. They primarily linked the event's criticality to the possibility of halting business operations. For instance, one participant observed, "*And it was very critical if we survived at all at our business because we really couldn't face such a delay with so many orders*" *(**Interviewee C**)*. Another clarified, "*I put into the meaning of critical that if something happens or doesn't happen in that given moment and it would cost the existence of the business. For me, that's critical, everything else isn't critical*" *(**Interviewee P**)*. Likewise, one of the interviewees emphasized, "*When you say critical in my head, it is something that is critical for the business to close the business or to continue the business" (**Interviewee S**).*

Additionally, a variety of critical incident themes emerged concerning interpersonal dynamics with clients, including prospective client talks, payment terms disagreement, customer complaint, customer insolvency, and relationship management. Among these, prospective client talks were the most frequently mentioned, followed by the payment terms disagreement. The remaining critical incident themes were each addressed by one interviewee.

Interpersonal dynamics with vendors were marked by critical incidents involving equipment malfunction and cybersecurity attack, while those with investors revolved around fundraising. Interactions with peers primarily focused on defending the business idea. Regarding team dynamics, the emphasis was on employee termination, budget reviews and leadership succession. Co-founder dynamics involved ownership conflict and business continuity planning. Finally, interactions with government, business, and EU stakeholders centered on lobbying efforts.

An unexpected aspect arose during one participant's interview when, at the conclusion of our discussion, an additional layer of interpersonal dynamics naturally surfaced as the most critical focus. Specifically, the participant described interactions with her co-founders that influenced the initially discussed team dynamics. As she explained:

"*But it was like in my startup entrepreneurial experience, the biggest problem was not all the things that I said right now. It was that I felt like we were not a real team so we couldn't face a lot of challenges together. And they're like these small moments, but they pile up. And at the end of the day, are you aligned with your co-founders, where to go, how to go there? … And we were on a very different mindset." (**Interviewee S**)*

During the interviews, participants detailed their critical incidents and classified their outcomes as successful, unsuccessful, or mixed. When discussing successful outcomes, ***Interviewee I*** described the incident as "*a success, but we had to meet somewhere in the middle*", while ***Interviewees J*** and ***L*** were more emphatic in their assessments - "*Oh, definitely a success. Definitely a success*" (**Interviewee J**) and *"It was a success" (**Interviewee L**)*.

In contrast, those who considered their incidents unsuccessful spoke of falling short of expectations. ***Interviewee B*** acknowledged, "*So far, it is not a success for me*", while ***Interviewee M*** explained, "*I don't think this conversation was a success at all. So definitely I was supposed to react in a different way. So not a success. I would say it was more of a failure for me*". Similarly, ***Interviewee P*** noted, "*Failure, because these people didn't join, that is, we failed to retain them... from the point of view of our big mission, it's a failure because we can't make lasting change in this company if they only participate in this survey once*".

Finally, several participants expressed more nuanced perspectives, characterizing outcomes as mixed. ***Interviewee F*** referred to the situation as "*a work in progress thing*" whereas ***Interviewee K*** pointed out, "*We didn't attract the customer, which could be a failure. But if this customer is a kind of problematic, maybe it's a success*". ***Interviewee Q*** summed up a similar sentiment: "*Not a success, but the success is that it was not a failure*".

A considerable portion of the critical incidents discussed took place within the last two years. Additionally, three incidents occurred between three and five years ago, and two happened between six and ten years ago. Only one interviewee recalled an incident dating back more than a decade. Notably, one interviewee explicitly acknowledged that she might be biased in her choice of incident to share: "*You know, because we have this proximity bias where we choose the last one. This is just how our brain works*" (***Interviewee S***).

4.3. Intrinsic Levers of Advocacy

With respect to "Intrinsic Levers of Advocacy", the analysis revealed numerous references to the women's internal experiences: their beliefs, biases, and values, their motivations during the critical incidents they described, and a variety of emotions and feelings they encountered throughout these events. In this part of the chapter, beliefs, biases, values, and motivations are categorized under "Psychological Constructs", while positive and negative feelings are placed under "Emotions and Feelings".

Additionally, the data framing approach used to analyze the interviews yielded only a very limited number of mentions, either regarding participants wishing to apply a particular theme or subtheme or clearly indicating instances where they did not employ "Psychological Constructs" or "Emotions and Feelings".

4.3.1. Psychological Constructs

4.3.1.1. Beliefs and Biases

The identified beliefs and biases encompassed those pertaining to self-perception, gender, business related, cultural factors, advocacy, and other related attitudes, with beliefs about the self emerging as the most prominent overall. It is noteworthy that all interviewees, during their respective sessions, made reference to their beliefs and biases – see Appendix 9.

Beliefs about Self

Several interviewees expressed distinct beliefs about their self-perceptions. Some highlighted tolerance or persuasiveness as central to their self-view, as illustrated by statements such as, "*And in my opinion, I'm too tolerant to such situations, which probably put in my life some situations of losing*" (***Interviewee B***) and "*I was, I am quite persuasive. So that's my job, to make sure things happen. So, I've been very persuasive. But again, I tend to think of myself as a very polite and well-mannered person*" (***Interviewee D***). This emphasis on personal traits also emerged in comments like, “*All right, first, I'm extremely persuasive. And second, I'm ridiculously positive*” (***Interviewee L***).

Beliefs and Biases – Gender

Beliefs and biases about gender were the second most frequently mentioned subtheme by interviewees. Some participants reflected on ways in which women’s perspectives and behaviors may differ from those of men, as illustrated by statements such as, “*Because we as women we were much more gentle with the machine than for example, my husband or some other electrician that came to see the machine*” (***Interviewee C***) and “*I don't have research, but women simply have a lower credit of trust*” (***Interviewee E***). Additional views on feminine empathy emerged in comments like, “*But maybe this always feminine empathy played a big role. Women can put themselves in others' shoes. Men rarely do that. They have a lot of ego. And in disputes, that usually comes to the forefront. While we're empathetic*” (***Interviewee G***).

While coding the data, I noted overlaps in some of the interviews between beliefs and biases about gender and other subthemes. This overlap was exemplified by ***Interviewee A***’s account, which shows beliefs about both gender and business: “*But I haven't been able to change the narrative and the conversation with the finance guys or with any of those guys. And I felt disappointed back then because as a person, like you not fight like, as a person there is a, like they just don't take you seriously. They are kind of, you know, you're the lost lamb, the little girl that doesn't know what she's doing*”. Another example related to beliefs about gender, business, and cultural context emerged in ***Interviewee N***’s statement: “*It's overwhelming and then you don't have time to actually develop the product itself you know. So, this early stage, especially for us, for women, because we know that very few women are supported by investment due to various reasons and especially women from our region. So, it makes it almost equal to impossible*”.

Beliefs and Biases – Business

The third most common secondary theme, beliefs and biases related to business, encompasses three key areas: beliefs about entrepreneurship, industry bias, and organizational beliefs. References to industry bias emerged in ***Interviewee D***’s remark: “*And as you can imagine, that's kind of weird to go and tell agencies, especially in an industry event management industry is quite tech ignorant I would say unfortunately*”. Organizational beliefs were illustrated by ***Interviewee M***, who observed, “*You know, when you're doing business, obviously you have conflicts. You* *cannot escape from conflicts*". Lastly, beliefs about entrepreneurship were exemplified by ***Interviewee N***'s statement: "*So, at a certain stage we are facing our runaway meaning that we've made the risk to dedicate our efforts because a lot of investors are looking for you know serious entrepreneurs who are full time committed*".

Beliefs and Biases – Cultural

Cultural beliefs and biases also emerged as a significant tertiary theme within the data. Several interviewees offered perspectives on how cultural context influences trust, management styles, and openness to certain topics. For instance, ***Interviewee D*** commented, "*Well, people have more trust in the UK than in Bulgaria, which is absolutely normal*". ***Interviewee G*** observed, "*In Bulgarian businesses, if I have to be honest, let's not say in recent years, but in general, big decisions are made emotionally. Especially when talking about Bulgarian management, and that's a very bad thing*". Meanwhile, ***Interviewee H*** described a particular stance toward mental health in some Bulgarian companies: "*In my experience so far, doing this work and being in contact, companies that are purely Bulgarian, as I said, founded by Bulgarians that are, especially if they're older, 20 years already, they only operate in Bulgaria. They don't have an international market. They are a lot less open to the topic of mental health. They come to these meetings with a lot of more stigma associated with it, with a lot of old, very popular in Bulgarian culture jokes about mental health. Even meeting with us, they already started with, oh, should we offer this service? Because the employees will think we hate them or that we think they're crazy. They come with all this fear and all this attitude, and they're also very. I find them to be very aggressive. And they also don't value the service that we offer.*"

Beliefs about Advocacy

Connected to the research question, some interviewees offered their views and beliefs on advocacy. ***Interviewee J*** remarked, "*For the advocacy, it's really important to know people and to be able to just even to navigate through systems or just to tell you, hey, you do this*". ***Interviewee O*** stated, "*I honestly believe that again, when we speak about advocacy, we stand up for ourselves and our ideas and we do our best to you know transmit them in the best way possible*". Meanwhile, ***Interviewee Q*** commented, "*I guess advocacy you have with a strong team, a strong support network, money in the bank if that helps. And just persistence and obviously relativizing things always helps as well*".

Beliefs and biases - Other

Finally, I classified various mentions of beliefs and biases not captured under the previous themes as "other". For instance, ***Interviewee D*** observed, "*Because people buy from people like them*". ***Interviewee M*** noted, "*And in most cases, you know, people do not value the cheap stuff*".

4.3.1.2. Values

Less than a quarter of the interviewees referenced their values, though those who did identified a range of personal and professional principles – see Appendix 9. These included affinity to non-violence, career advancement, hard work, prudence, honesty, trust, belief, and commitment to delivering quality service. ***Interviewee A***, for instance, commented, "*And obviously we shared values such as hard work, career progression, ladder climbing and so on and so forth*". Similarly, ***Interviewee I*** stated, "*So, we have values that we listed officially our company values a bit later… So, the first one is believe and the second one is trust. You know, these two things are extremely important*".

4.3.1.3. Motivations

More than three quarters of the interviewees discussed both intrinsic and extrinsic motivators related to advocacy – see Appendix 9. The most prominent motivator was a belief in the business, followed by financial considerations ("money") and a sense of having "no choice" in pursuing advocacy. Other motivators included the team, job satisfaction, mission-driven work, project purpose, perceptions of injustice, encouragement from a spouse, belief in oneself, personal survival, ongoing and engaging interaction, as well as an enabling environment and existing relationship.

For instance, ***Interviewee H*** highlighted financial incentives, stating, "*Money. I wanted their money (laughs), and that's the only thing*". ***Interviewee K*** focused on the importance of belief in the business, commenting, "*Well, the things that I do in [COMPANY NAME], I believe in them, and I try to express them and to explain to the others what we do on the right way*".

4.3.2. Emotions and Feelings

With regard to the key theme of "Emotions and Feelings", I examined the data and found that, regardless of whether participants identified their outcomes as successful, unsuccessful, or mixed, all but one (Interviewee G, whose outcome classification was mixed) reported experiencing various negative emotions and feelings when recounting their critical events. Although nearly half of the interviewees mentioned positive emotions, these references were relatively rare and did not characterize the majority of emotional expressions. To capture the breadth and nuances of the negative emotions and feelings, I conducted additional analysis and grouped them into several categories, including those related to pressure and fear, self-worth, sadness, shock, confusion, and stagnation. Moreover, nearly all interviewees reported experiencing negative emotions and feelings, and over half also noted using emotional control and regulation when managing their advocacy externally. Finally, among the positive and negative emotions and feelings presented in the following subsections, interviewees frequently exhibited a combination of different emotional states throughout the critical events they described.

4.3.2.1. Positive

Primarily, participants referenced feelings of happiness, excitement, and curiosity. They also described other positive emotions and feelings, such as calmness, pride, motivation, relief, fearlessness, and similar affirming states.

"*I was very excited because I could hear him, how he speaks about us.*" (***Interviewee N***)

"*And I was calm the whole time.*" (***Interviewee R***)

4.3.2.2. Negative

Pressure and Fear

Under this category I grouped feelings and emotions such as pressure, anger, tension, fear, insecurity, struggle, irritation, nervousness, annoyance, frustration, anxiety, stress, worry, and experiences of being bullied. Of the nineteen interviewees, sixteen reported experiencing these emotions and feelings – see Appendix 9.

"*I really felt kind of pressured to do something and I felt really kind of took ownership of something that I'm not really. It wasn't my fault that there was nothing happening in Bulgaria until then.*" (***Interviewee J***)

*"Definitely I was nervous, I was scared. So definitely that's the emotions that I was feeling." (**Interviewee M**)*

Self-Worth

Negative emotions and feelings linked to individuals' self-worth include self-doubt, inadequacy, feeling not capable, feeling small, underappreciation, undervaluation, failure, self-criticism, powerlessness, defeat, a sense of being lost, and insignificance. Of the nineteen interviewees, twelve reported experiencing these emotions and feelings – see Appendix 9.

"*And this situation, unfortunately, even all the experience that I have, even all the advocacy I was giving to many many people, sometimes you feel not very capable of doing whatsoever*." (***Interviewee B***)

"*Well, at the end the feeling was like I was not good enough, that I failed, that it wasn't that I could have been better*." (***Interviewee N***)

Sadness

This category encompasses emotions and feelings such as sadness, being sour, dissatisfaction, disappointment, feeling unhappy, feeling bad or unwell, loneliness, and low vibrations. Among the nineteen interviewees, eleven reported experiencing these states – see Appendix 9.

*"I had to swallow that sourness that we had to lose that much money at that time." (**Interviewee L**)*

"*I was nervous and sad, and I don't know, I was really motivated for this project and I was really sad when I understood how the things are going and that they wouldn't happen.*" (***Interviewee R***)

Shock

Negative emotions and feelings associated with shock identified by the interviewees included shock, surprise, and feeling shaken. Of the nineteen interviewees, four reported experiencing these states – see Appendix 9.

*"I was shocked that she's asking this question and who this woman is. Shocked from the essence of the meeting, I thought it would be something else." (**Interviewee H**)*

*“I was surprised because I didn't think that this would be brought to the table, but just surprised, not worried or concerned or anything.” (**Interviewee O**)*

Confusion

In this category, I grouped the emotions and feelings of confusion, uncertainty, unawareness, being at a loss, hesitation, and awkwardness. Of the nineteen interviewees, five reported experiencing these states – see Appendix 9.

*“Afterwards, I was confused in the moment.” (**Interviewee H**)*

*“Because at the end I was really hesitant...” (**Interviewee N**)*

Stagnation

The final category of stagnation-related emotions and feelings encompasses feeling stuck, frozen, lacking choice, obligation, and indifference. Among the nineteen interviewees, four reported experiencing these states – see Appendix 9.

*“And it also was good, is that I, even if I was frozen and angry and scared, I did manage to say, we offer a service and it's different and it's worth money, and I want that money because I'm working for it (laughs), that I still manage to communicate and advocate for myself, even through all these emotions.” (**Interviewee H**)*

*“I felt like I had no choice.” (**Interviewee I**)*

4.4. Extrinsic Levers of Advocacy

Overall, the secondary themes related to support networks and resources were not unexpected. However, I anticipated a stronger presence of these elements throughout the critical incidents described. For instance, with regard to “Support Networks - External” and its underlying themes – “Professional Network” and “Mentors” - I expected more frequent references to these support systems among interviewees, particularly given the large number of female entrepreneurs who noted in the demographic section that they belong to such groups and receive mentorship. Separately, as shown in Appendix 9, participants who classified their outcomes as “unsuccessful” were more likely to express a desire for support networks in retrospect, compared to those who described their outcomes as “successful” or “mixed”, especially for internal support networks such as their team or co-founders.

When considering specific skills and approaches, I did not encounter any significant surprises. Although I initially hoped to uncover perspectives that I had not previously considered, the analysis did not reveal anything entirely new. I did anticipate references to communication styles and approaches, yet the relatively low occurrence of “Relationship Building” and “Experience and Repetition” as secondary themes was somewhat unexpected. Conversely, I was pleased to observe how prevalent emotional intelligence and resilience were among the interviewees’ responses.

Fewer than half of the participants indicated that they had used any support systems during their critical incidents – see Appendix 9. Among the available resources, tools and platforms were applied most often, followed by expert help and legislation and regulation.

4.4.1. Support Networks and Resources

4.4.1.1. Support Networks – Immediate

This secondary theme encompasses mentions of family and friends as primary sources of support identified by the interviewees during their discussions. ***Interviewee I***, for instance, described seeking her father’s advice when faced with uncertainty: “*When I have a problem or something that I'm unsure of, I always go, and I take advice from him. So, in this case, the first person that I called when I found myself in this difficult situation is called my dad*”. ***Interviewee M*** noted her husband’s role in conflict resolution: “*And my husband was the one that helped me to get out of the conflict*”. Likewise, ***Interviewee Q*** highlighted the emotional support her husband provided: “*Obviously, I had my husband who was there when I was crying in the evening and then support system*”.

4.4.1.2. Support Networks – Internal

The secondary theme “Support Networks – Internal” refers to mentions of co-founders or team members offering assistance during the critical incidents described by the female entrepreneurs. For example, ***Interviewee C*** explained, “*Well, something that was really, that really helped was that inside the team everyone was bringing the others up when they can*”. Likewise, ***Interviewee E*** noted, “*Her role (co-founder) was also very significant because she generally balanced well in parts where I didn't talk about technical details. She talked about strategy, business, overall positioning of the company after having such a cool and green office. So, she contributed to that part which was unnatural for me at that stage*”. ***Interviewee H*** stated, “*Her role (team member) was first to support me in that situation*”.

4.4.1.3. Support Networks – External

Support Networks – External emerged as a secondary theme, with interviewees predominantly referring to support from external partners, followed by instances involving investors and vendors. Other types of external support mentioned included clients, professional networks, external advisors, and mentors. ***Interviewee E***, for instance, referred to an external partner, commenting, "*It felt like the chance of not winning was very high, and actually, bringing in a man who came to the meeting to advocate for us, we called him for a small part that we said he would perform, related to irrigation systems, but he added weight and said, 'Yes, I have experience from X number of years, you can rely on me.' And so, I think that was the game-changer. Maybe, maybe it could have happened differently, but the man contributed simply by being there and saying, 'You can rely on me' (laughs)*". ***Interviewee J*** noted help from a vendor: "*And I had to find an external service to help me in making sure that I've written something adequate*". Meanwhile, ***Interviewee Q*** cited investors as a support system: "*I mean obviously the investors are a support system*".

4.4.1.4. Resources – Expert Help

"Resources – Expert Help" emerged as a secondary theme encompassing involvement of both expert consultants and government representatives. ***Interviewee R***, for example, noted, "*And I had a team of six people who I've reached for the project very with high expert level professors and PhDs and very yes experienced people*". She also referred to a government representative: "*I found a woman which is in charge of in Plovdiv in government I don't know institution which is approving menus for the toddlers' kindergartens taking care. Yes, and I contacted her, and she said yes, no problem, tell your client to contact me*". ***Interviewee Q*** described seeking professional advice on financial fraud, stating, "*Well, I had, I was working then back then in a co working space and somehow by chance in this co working space there was an expert in financial fraud who had been an expert in financial fraud. So, he told me to what to check, what to look for*".

4.4.1.5. Resources – Tools and Platforms

Interviewees referenced presentation, reports, templates, forums, Excel spreadsheets, artificial intelligence, and VR gadgets as tools and platforms they used as resources during their advocacy efforts. ***Interviewee C***, for instance, remarked, "*We used, actually we used a lot of AI in the process. Yeah, we used AI to find what can be wrong with the machine. What can we do to protect our rights, which are the right regulations, because we are not lawyers. And it helped a lot. It even helped with finding out that the electricity that we use is very unstable because we're not using industrial electricity, but like our office is in a living building*". ***Interviewee J*** stated, “*And so pretty much whilst we were using those templates or kind of messages, we had to adapt them for our purposes*” while ***Interviewee D*** noted, *I did a Canva presentation showing him the roadmap of the product development*”.

4.4.1.6. Resources – Legislation and Regulation

Legislation and regulation were the least applied resources in the advocacy efforts of female entrepreneurs.

*“I have sent them some articles from the Bulgarian labor code where when you say gross salary or full renumeration.” (**Interviewee B**)*

*“And we also managed to find law. I'm not sure. EU regulation that stipulated we had right for refund and so on. So, we also send the legal framework to them.” (**Interviewee C**)*

4.4.2. Specific Skills and Approaches

4.4.2.1. Communication Style

Within the broader theme of “Specific Skills and Approaches”, “Communication Style” emerged as the most prominent secondary theme, consistently appearing in the critical incidents shared by the interviewees. Nearly all female entrepreneurs referenced their style both implicitly and explicitly, with proactive and assertive communication cited most often, followed by passive, diplomatic and respectful, aggressive, and professional. In addition, explicit mentions of communication style arose when participants discussed their wish to have employed a different communication style in their advocacy.

Moreover, over half of the participants demonstrated a blend of multiple communication styles during their advocacy efforts - for instance, assertive and passive, assertive and aggressive, assertive and diplomatic and respectful, or assertive and professional. Throughout the course of our conversations, some even described integrating three approaches, such as assertive, diplomatic and respectful, and professional, or assertive, aggressive, and passive - in that exact order. Among those who relied on a single style, most indicated using either an assertive or a diplomatic and respectful mode of communication.

Regarding proactive and assertive communication, ***Interviewee C*** noted, “*I mean, we were really pushy, not aggressive, but we really wrote them emails to ask them to help us because it was crucial for our business. And I think the thing that made them a bit angry was that we were pushy, but also, I think we had the right to be as a client. We* *weren't aggressive*". ***Interviewee O*** further illustrated assertiveness, explaining, *"The thing that went well was that I have established quite clear boundaries in terms of what is my job, what I'm doing here, how can I be helpful? And I was functioning with these boundaries. And I did not allow anyone to cross my boundaries neither I stepped out of these boundaries. Okay. I did not overstep them myself".*

In contrast, some participants described adopting a passive style. ***Interviewee M*** commented, "*What happened was I was silent, agreeing on some stuff which I didn't want to agree on*", while ***Interviewee N*** similarly observed, "*Because at the end I was really hesitant because when he said it's a no, you know, I kept quiet*".

Others focused on being diplomatic and respectful. ***Interviewee E***, when asked how she would describe her communication, stated, "*It was very respectful, very respectful, and I believe yes, it was respectful and non-discriminatory*", and ***Interviewee L*** remarked, "*But I was very respectful to him, and he was very respectful to me and said, it's just how life happens, and we have to deal with that*".

Several interviewees highlighted moments of aggression. ***Interviewee H*** noted, "*And perhaps my answers were also a little bit maybe agitated, aggressive, or like stern*", while ***Interviewee Q*** recollected, "*And I think the thing that really turned the tables, I'm not sure I need to find it because I start to forget I threatened them*".

A professional style was underscored by ***Interviewee C***, who shared, "*Everything was most of the time professional and polite and with nice attitude*", and ***Interviewee S***, who concluded, "*It was kind of a very professional conversation*".

4.4.2.2. Communication Approach

Similarly to the secondary theme "Communication Style", various communication approaches were referenced by almost all female entrepreneurs. These approaches provided insight into the specific methods participants employed when interacting with others. Participants addressed the following during our sessions: describe and explain, facts and evidence, consistent communication, personal interaction, and asking questions as key.

With regard to describe and explain, ***Interviewee K*** underscored the importance of providing clear details, noting, "*And I explained them what we can do. But these are in details. It's not only, okay, I will solve your problem and you will be happy. Actually, during the conversation, I explained them what we can do in order to minimize the effort that they do*". Participants who favored this method often emphasized thorough explanations as a means of establishing transparency.

Concerning facts and evidence, several interviewees stressed the importance of grounding discussions in verifiable information. ***Interviewee C*** mentioned, "*So, I gave* *them evidence that we didn't break anything*", while ***Interviewee F*** added, "*We were talking about the facts and what happened and what hasn't happened*".

In terms of consistent communication, some participants reported benefits associated with ongoing dialogue. ***Interviewee C*** observed, "*It was inevitable if we hadn't been consistent in our communications*".

Turning to personal interaction, ***Interviewee F*** conveyed a preference for direct engagement, commenting, "*It's not great to hear someone complain, but I prefer to deal with these kind of like in person or at least online with cameras on*".

Interviewee K emphasized the role of inquiry, explaining, "*Actually I start asking questions in order to help him to solve his situation*".

4.4.2.3. Preparation

Preparation emerged as an approach cited by over half of the interviewees, encompassing five tertiary themes: research and review, planning and agenda, prep discussions, mental conditioning, and personalized and targeted preparation – see Appendix 9. Similarly, nearly half of the female entrepreneurs noted they wished they had utilized one or more of these preparation strategies before their critical event, anticipating an improved outcome.

With regard to research and review, ***Interviewee E*** described obtaining specific terminology to prepare for an English-language discussion, noting, "*I knew the interview would be in English, so if any terminology was missing, I got it. Because it's a specific thing that needs to be spoken in technical English in the field of landscaping*".

Turning to planning and agenda, ***Interviewee G*** emphasized detailed planning and anticipating potential scenarios, stating, "*I always prepare for strategic conversations with my partner at least several days in advance with different scenarios of what if one proposes something, how the other will react*".

For prep discussions, ***Interviewee F*** shared her process of talking through the situation with team members and a co-founder: "*So, the first thing was to talk about the situation with my employee. The second thing was to actually discuss it with my co-founder. Just so I run through what I think, what I expect to happen, and then potentially get some third person, like someone else's opinion on how I should deal with it*".

Regarding mental conditioning, ***Interviewee P*** highlighted a personal technique for staying calm and focused, explaining, "*I did something like a mini practice, meditation before the meeting, to raise my vibrations a bit higher*".

Personalized and targeted preparation was illustrated by ***Interviewee J*** who described adapting her messages to specific audiences, noting, "*So yeah, so were just trying to adapt the messages according to the receiver*".

4.4.2.4. Experience and Repetition

"Experience and Repetition" emerged as a secondary theme among three of the interviewees, who specifically emphasized building on prior knowledge, refining approaches through repeated practice, and drawing on personal expertise – see Appendix 9.

Interviewee G explained, "*In this situation... the resource is more based on our experience with the team and the market so far, not something specific, in the sense of research and system*". Similarly, ***Interviewee R*** noted, "*I think that my personal experience saved us because otherwise we will have big loss from this project*".

4.4.2.5. Relationship Building

Out of the themes identified, "Relationship Building" emerged as a subtheme encompassing four tertiary themes - effective communication, personal alignment, relationship oversight, and prioritizing relationships - and was reported by only five of the nineteen female entrepreneurs – see Appendix 9.

Interviewee A highlighted prioritizing relationships over advocating for an idea, stating, "*I kind of probably let it go and prioritize the relationship rather than going full on advocating for an idea*". In discussing relationship oversight, ***Interviewee F*** noted, "*I was overseeing the relationship a bit closer*", when asked about the key factors influencing the outcome. Personal alignment was illustrated by ***Interviewee H***, who described having a "partnership understanding" with an HR assistant: "*She felt on our side, and she understood us, and she advocated also for us afterwards, with all these people*". Finally, effective communication was underscored by ***Interviewee B***, who remarked, "*It was good that at least we could communicate. You know, sometimes when you are in a cooperation or a project or a business relation with someone and you are the only one who is communicating, you know, this is definitely not functioning well. So, what is good is that we have communicated*".

4.4.2.6. Problem-Solving

Problem-Solving emerged as a subtheme reported by more than half of the participants, encompassing three key areas: finding solutions, negotiation and win-win, and leverage – see Appendix 9.

Several interviewees stressed the importance of proposing options to overcome challenges in their advocacy efforts. ***Interviewee I*** noted, "*I was trying to find solutions, trying to share different solutions that I have thought about*". Likewise, ***Interviewee R*** added, "*I was suggesting her to, not suggesting, but told her that this with the size of the food is the products in the food is not a problem, everything can be solved*".

Other participants described prioritizing mutual benefit within their problem-solving strategies. ***Interviewee I*** reflected, "*It was a success, but we had to meet somewhere in the middle*". Finally, ***Interviewee Q*** highlighted negotiation as one of the key factors influencing the outcome of her critical event, stating, "*Persistence, network, negotiation. That's it. Maybe*".

Some female entrepreneurs mentioned leveraging external factors or potential risks to strengthen their position. ***Interviewee Q*** illustrated the latter by noting, "*I figured out that we could make a procedure with the European regulator for SEPA payments in fact which could then potentially, like, you know, make a trouble for them because they can retract their permission to operate in Europe, this kind of payments and so on. So, there was a different track. So, we found basically, and I think there was a turning point in that discussion*". ***Interviewee E*** also highlighted leveraging the expertise of a male colleague, noting, "*Well, the man in this case participated little in the meeting. He participated in the part where he was responsible, but we chose him, I would say, for stability, for greater stability and weight on our side, nowadays we might use the word diversity (laughs), but that's why we chose him, and he already had more experience than us over the years as a company, but I knew him for years.*"

4.4.2.7. Emotional Intelligence ('EQ') and Resilience

More than three quarters of the nineteen entrepreneurs implicitly or explicitly referred to emotional intelligence and resilience – see Appendix 9. This secondary theme includes four tertiary themes: emotional control and regulation, empathy, resilience, and being focused and centered.

Several participants underscored the importance of remaining calm and composed during critical events. ***Interviewee I*** stated, "*And keeping my calm when someone is really bullying me, and someone is. Yeah, being like a dictator and not really listening to everything that I have to say is very difficult for me. But at that stage, I managed*". Meanwhile, ***Interviewee O*** noted, "*I just needed to stay sane and not to be swamped by the negative emotions and the training stories and the, you know, the nightmares of the other people in the room*", and ***Interviewee R*** remarked, "*I managed to stay calm and talking calm and yes, didn't give up to my emotions*".

Other interviewees highlighted the role of empathy in their advocacy efforts. ***Interviewee G*** stated, "*And this is exactly what we've always maintained this tone of* *mutual empathy for what's important for the other, how they see themselves*". Similarly, ***Interviewee P*** explained, "*Well... I always try, and in this situation, I acted by showing that I understand how this person feels. I said that I understand, right... and that I'm grateful for this feedback, to show in some way that he's heard, understood, that I can put myself in his shoes*".

Several participants described their ability to persevere under challenging circumstances. ***Interviewee B*** noted, "*I liked that I was very resilient*". In the same vein, ***Interviewee O*** commented, "*And the funny thing was that my resilience level at that time most likely had been quite low, but during that specific conversation, I was like a rock"*.

Some participants emphasized maintaining clarity, purpose and concentration during their interactions. ***Interviewee A*** explained, "*It made me a little bit more, you know, centered in the way I was communicating, why something was valuable*". ***Interviewee O*** similarly observed, "*I remained focused on the budgets and the numbers, and I did not allow myself to get sucked into that other discussion that was taking the place under the surface*".

4.5. Other Emergent Themes

4.5.1. Within the Scope of the Research Question

In responding to questions related to lessons learned, alternative actions, and potential responses to similar situations, any interviewee statement that did not align with the key, secondary, or underlying tertiary themes outlined in Appendix 7 was labeled "WISHED HAD APPLIED - NEW" and treated as an additional emergent theme. Two interviewees offered such responses. One introduced a new resource – marketing - exemplified by ***Interviewee K***, who noted, "*In general, maybe I can go outside and have more marketing on behalf of [COMPANY NAME], just for the other people to make sure that I exist and I'm recognizable*". The other highlighted a communication approach that does not involve acting as an intermediary, as ***Interviewee I*** reflected, "*Maybe allowing the technical person to speak to the partner directly*".

4.5.2. Beyond the Scope of the Research Question

During the data analysis, two key themes emerged - "Power Dynamics" and "Coping Mechanisms - Other" - that were not directly relevant to my research question. Consequently, I coded them separately and documented them in an Excel spreadsheet. Due to time constraints, I did not further categorize coping mechanisms (e.g., into positive or negative). However, power dynamics were relatively straightforward to categorize, drawing on the additional analysis I conducted regarding interpersonal dynamics for each critical incident. This process revealed instances of power dynamics between clients and founders, co-founders, founders and team members, founders and investors, peers, and founders and vendors. Notably, some participants also mentioned power dynamics they observed within the parties with whom they were communicating - for example, within an investor group or a client's team. Of the nineteen Bulgarian female entrepreneurs, ten mentioned power dynamics, and seven referenced coping mechanisms.

Appendix 10 provides examples with citations for both themes: coping mechanisms and power dynamics.

4.6. Conclusion

Overall, the results from the interviews show that Bulgarian female entrepreneurs employ a combination of intrinsic levers (psychological constructs, and emotions and feelings) and extrinsic levers (support networks and resources, and specific skills and approaches) to a largely comparable extent when advocating for their ideas in interactions with others. As illustrated in Figure 3 - presented here as a high-level representation rather than a formal framework - each advocacy episode culminates in an outcome (successful, unsuccessful, or mixed) that can inform subsequent actions through reflection.

This reflective process, which feeds back into both types of levers and is highlighted in participants' mentions of lessons learned, alternative actions, and potential responses to similar situations, may guide how future advocacy efforts incorporate or adapt these intrinsic and extrinsic levers. Due to the limited number of mentions by interviewees that they wished they had applied a particular intrinsic lever, the feedback loop directed toward intrinsic levers is represented by a dashed line, rather than the solid line used for extrinsic levers – see Appendix 9.

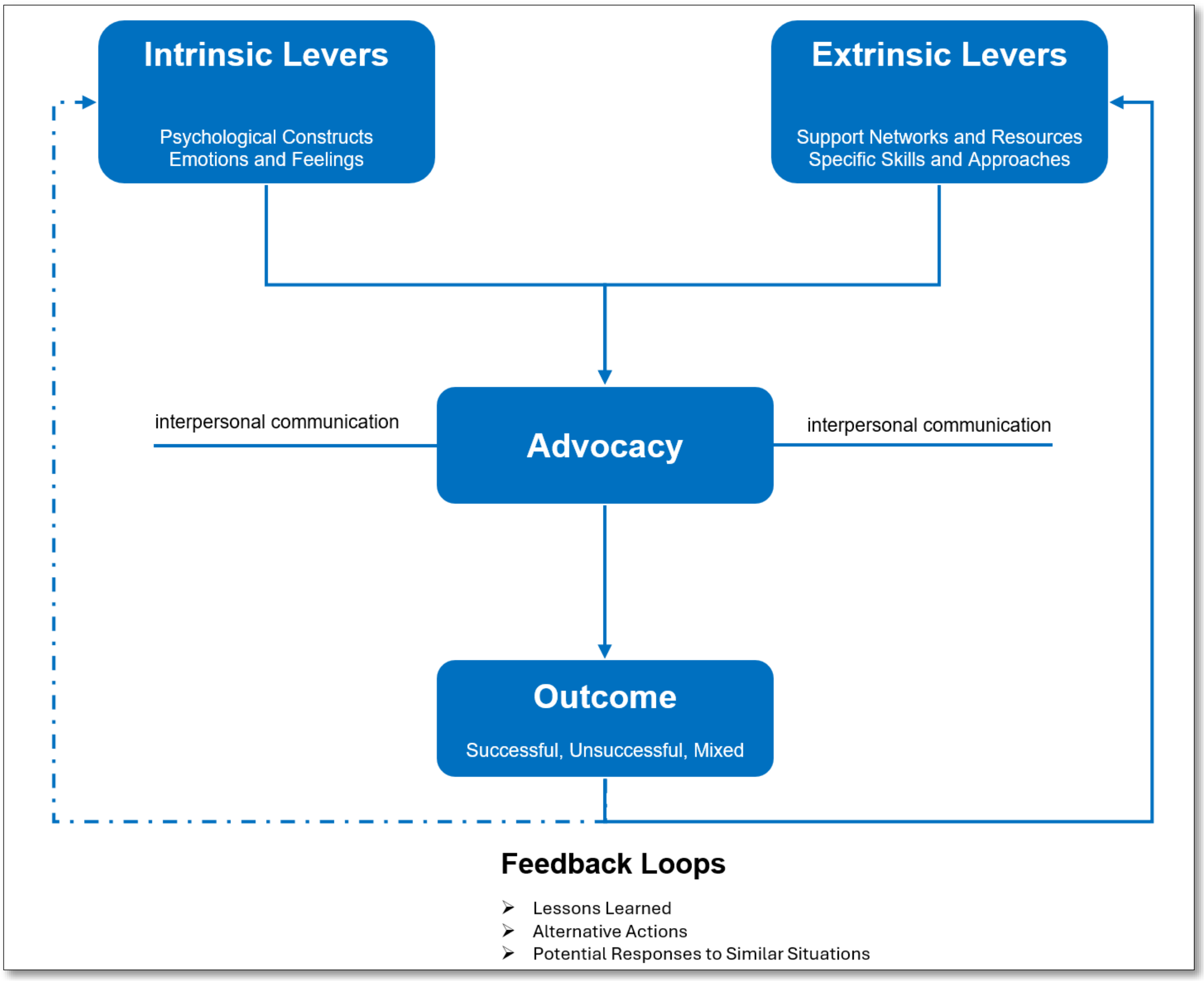

Figure 3: Diagram – High-Level Representation of Findings

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

5.1. Overview of Findings

Bulgarian female entrepreneurs use a combination of intrinsic levers (psychological constructs and emotions and feelings) and extrinsic ones (support networks and resources, and specific skills and approaches) to advocate for their ideas in their interactions with others during high-stakes, challenging business situations. Each advocacy episode results in an outcome - successful, unsuccessful, or mixed - that encourages reflection, guiding how future efforts might adapt or refine their strategies. Notably, the reflective feedback loop for intrinsic levers appears less explicit, as fewer participants expressed the wish to have applied different intrinsic levers.

5.2. Interpretation of Findings

5.2.1. In relation to the Profile of Critical Incidents

Most reported **critical incidents** emphasize the **interpersonal dynamics** between the entrepreneurs and their **prospective or current clients**. This finding appears particularly noteworthy, given the extensive body of research addressing interactions between female entrepreneurs and investors and the acknowledged significance of those relationships (Carter et al., 2003, Chen et al., 2009, Swarz et al., 2016). One possible explanation for the observed discrepancy may relate to the development stage and growth trajectory of the ventures in question, as well as the current needs of these businesses. Another contributing factor may be the industry focus and the extent of product or service readiness that these female entrepreneurs have attained. Consequently, it would be beneficial to examine the similarities and differences among female entrepreneurs' interactions with clients, investors, and other interpersonal dynamics identified in this research. Future studies could advance this line of inquiry by establishing tailored frameworks to guide female entrepreneurs' strategic decisions and behaviors in these distinct relational contexts.

5.2.2. In relation to Intrinsic Levers of Advocacy

Drawing on the concepts of single- and double-loop learning articulated by Argyris et al. (1985), these findings indicate that **single-loop learning is more prevalent than a double-loop one** among Bulgarian female entrepreneurs. In their reflections on lessons learned, alternative actions, and potential responses to similar situations, participants tend to concentrate on refining or adjusting extrinsic levers in direct response to the situational outcome. By contrast, double-loop learning - which involves a more profound examination and potential reconfiguration of underlying assumptions, beliefs, and biases - is reported less frequently. Specifically, as indicated by the dashed line in Figure 3, only a small number of entrepreneurs report a thorough reshaping of their psychological constructs. Consequently, these results suggest that while Bulgarian female entrepreneurs do engage in single-loop learning by modifying external tactics, they less often pursue the fuller double-loop process that critically evaluates and transforms the deeper assumptions informing their advocacy.

The mental constructs and emotional states shared by the participants, which informed the emergence of the key themes "Psychological Constructs" and "Emotions and Feelings", largely reflect the female entrepreneurs' espoused theories. However, as the results show, **these espoused theories may contradict their theories-in-use** during high-stakes, challenging situations. For example, during one of my conversations with an interviewee - ***Interviewee L*** - she initially stated, "*I have never been in my professional life angry at somebody because of an issue. I've been trained not to attack the person, but to try to deal with the situation. So, I was never angry at him (the "client")*". As we delved deeper into her critical incident, however, she shared more intense feelings: "*I was very worried. I was angry. I was worried. I was desperate*". Subsequently, when reflecting on the situation we discussed, she noted, "*So, I don't think it's going to happen again, but if it happens again, so oh my God, not again. Most probably I'll be more angry than the first time*".

Thus, what she initially espoused contradicts her theory-in-use within the critical event she described. Moreover, since ***Interviewee L*** reaffirms that she would "*most probably be more angry*" if a similar situation were to occur again, this suggests that the underlying assumption – never become angry in professional settings - remains unquestioned. Although this is only one illustrative example, the observed contradiction further reinforces that single-loop learning predominates over double-loop learning among Bulgarian female entrepreneurs.

In line with Argyris et al. (1985), many participants also revealed an **"unspoken" dimension to their emotional or psychological states**. Although they rarely voiced these feelings explicitly, the latter emerged throughout the interview process (e.g., doubts, fears, and self-limiting beliefs), illustrating the kind of internal conversation Argyris et al. (1985) describes in left-hand column work.

The rest of the literature on advocacy in the legal domain (Boon, 1999), issue-selling (Dutton et al., 2001) and negotiation of financing in female entrepreneurship predominantly focus on practical, actionable strategies to be implemented in different advocacy contexts. In these works, any mention of reflection and/or evaluation of actions and behaviors references single-loop learning. The latter is consistent with the results of the present study, which indicate that reflection and evaluation typically center on refining actions without challenging underlying assumptions.

Although Boon (1999) briefly alludes to recognizing "ulterior motives" in others, there is minimal acknowledgment of self-awareness from an internal standpoint, indicating an external rather than introspective orientation. This does not imply that the author disregards emotions and feelings entirely; rather, his focus centers on emotional control being utilized in advocacy contexts (Boon, 1999). In addition, a recent academic contribution on female entrepreneurship fundraising (Duong and Brannback, 2024) highlights both empathy and emotions as dimensions that can enrich storytelling and bolster an entrepreneur's vision. However, based on the literature reviewed, this emphasis on these dimensions does not appear to be prevalent within the body of literature on the topic.

In their findings, Dutton et al. (2001) address how issue sellers attempt to link an issue with other priorities - such as profitability, market share, corporate image, and stakeholder concerns. This emphasis indicates that issue sellers must possess certain awareness of what the organization and its subunits deem significant and valuable, as well as an understanding of the psychological constructs shaping the perspectives of those involved in the issue-selling process. Although the paper does not explicitly address these dynamics from an issue-seller viewpoint, it appears to engage with the internal processes of the other participants involved.

A worthwhile direction for future research involves adopting methodologies that capture both the practical, tangible strategies of advocacy and the internal dimensions - such as beliefs, biases, values, and motivations - of female entrepreneurs. While pragmatic approaches represent one side of the coin, understanding how internal factors shape and contribute to advocacy efforts is equally critical for a comprehensive investigation of female entrepreneurship.

5.2.3. In relation to Extrinsic Levers of Advocacy

When comparing the findings from this research with both the existing literature on female entrepreneurship fundraising efforts, Boon's (1999) adapted framework, and Dutton et al. (2001), an observation emerges: the absence of the secondary theme "**Problem-Solving**" (under key theme **"Specific Skills and Approaches"**) and its associated tertiary themes. Because interpersonal dynamics in the context of this research predominantly involve interactions with clients, vendors, co-founders, and teams rather than with investors, the need for explicit problem-solving within fundraising efforts appears to be less pronounced.

Although Boon's (1999) framework - which focuses on the legal profession - provides clear and actionable approaches to advocacy, it does not explicitly address problem-solving as a component of effective advocacy. Because this research is conducted within an entrepreneurial context, the interpersonal interactions it examines may differ from those in a strictly legal setting.

Additionally, despite the emergence of “**Resilience**” (encompassed within “EQ and Resilience” under the key theme “**Specific Skills and Approaches**”) as a prominent subtheme in the present study, the concept remains somewhat absent from the literature reviewed, including Dutton et al. (2001), Boon’s (1999) adapted framework of advocacy, and academic discussions on fundraising by female entrepreneurs. It is possible that resilience serves as an unspoken or underlying quality in these works - implicitly assumed rather than explicitly articulated. This omission may stem from a disciplinary tendency to regard perseverance and the management of setbacks as baseline attributes in business contexts, thereby reducing the perceived need for a dedicated discussion.

By foregrounding resilience as a critical component in the advocacy efforts of Bulgarian female entrepreneurs, the findings of this study extend and complement existing literature, emphasizing the significance of resilience in navigating the uncertainties and pressures of both advocacy and entrepreneurship. Moving forward, it is recommended that future research incorporate explicit measures or frameworks for analyzing resilience in high-stakes contexts, particularly those involving female entrepreneurs facing challenging or high-pressure situations.

With respect to the themes and subthemes identified in this study - specifically those categorized under “**Support Networks and Resources**” and “**Specific Skills and Approaches**” (with the exception of the subthemes “Problem-Solving” and “Resilience”) - the existing literature appears to address them comprehensively, yielding no unexpected insights.

In this study, participants reported a mixture of **communication styles**, though they predominantly highlighted proactiveness and assertiveness applied in their advocacy efforts. Correspondingly, the literature on female entrepreneurs’ fundraising (Nelson et al., 2009; Duong and Brännback, 2024) similarly emphasizes proactive and assertive communication as integral to effective advocacy. In addition, Boon (1999) stresses the importance of both assertive and respectful communication, a dual emphasis that also emerged in the present data. Similarly, Dutton et al. (2001) refers to persistence in issue selling activities suggesting that managers who engage in issue selling need to be proactive in identifying and promoting issues.

Furthermore, the significance of **support networks** - evident in Dutton et al. (2001) as well as in existing research on female entrepreneurs’ fundraising (Amatucci and Sohl, 2004; Nelson et al., 2009; Villaseca et al., 2020) - aligns with the findings reported here. Boon (1999) likewise acknowledges all of the **resource**-related subthemes identified in this study. Because Boon’s (1999) “Advocacy” book is specifically tailored for legal professionals, the secondary theme “Resources - Legislation and Regulation” features prominently in both his work and the present findings, illustrating how a disciplinary focus can influence which resources receive particular emphasis.

5.3. Implications for Theory and Practice

Although the results can be analyzed through the lenses of advocacy concepts and frameworks (Argyris et al., 1985; Boon, 1999), as well as through related terms such as issue selling (Dutton et al., 2001) and negotiation (Amatucci and Sohl, 2004; Nelson et al. 2009), the **broader significance of these findings** does not derive from directly aligning each theoretical component with the data. Instead, it emerges from adopting a broader, dual perspective, recognizing that advocacy among Bulgarian female entrepreneurs arises from the interplay of both intrinsic and extrinsic elements.

Recent research in the field of negotiation (Duong and Brannback, 2024) underscores the importance of intrinsic factors - such as emotions – as an independent component in effective pitching for fundraising efforts. Combined with the contributions of Amatucci and Sohl (2004), Chen et al. (2009), and Nelson et al. (2009) - whose works collectively emphasize tangible, practical attributes such as preparation, assertive communication style, relationship building, prior experience, and networking - this development suggests that an integrated consideration of both internal and external dimensions of female entrepreneurs' advocacy will likely assume greater prominence in future research. Such an approach provides additional avenues for researchers to investigate how mental constructs and emotional states influence decision-making and actions in advocacy contexts.

While it is possible to observe, identify, and evaluate the effectiveness of concrete advocacy strategies in practice, the extent to which female entrepreneurs acknowledge and accept their own internal experiences may prove more challenging to address. Given the predominance of single-loop over double-loop learning among Bulgarian female entrepreneurs, it appears that further attention to self-reflection and individually focused work is necessary. Such efforts would not only facilitate more accurate recognition of their emotional or psychological states but also foster a more effective application of this awareness in their advocacy efforts. By employing the left-hand column work tool (Argyris et al., 1985) - specifically, by recording what they really think or feel but do not say - female entrepreneurs could become more open to feedback (i.e., increase inquiry) and better identify and challenge these less visible elements. In doing so, they can discern how emotional or psychological factors may influence or even undermine their efforts, ultimately laying the groundwork for more effective advocacy.

The findings of this study highlight the need for Bulgarian female entrepreneurs to engage in both individual, introspective approaches - such as identifying and acknowledging personal values, beliefs, biases, and emotions (especially if the latter are recurring); questioning their origins; reflecting on various situations and actions; and practicing mindfulness - and external developmental initiatives, including working with a professional and participating in tailored training programs, so that they can more effectively enhance their self-awareness and refine their advocacy efforts. Consequently, these insights can inform the strategic alignment of these training programs, enabling them to deliver more relevant and effective support to female entrepreneurs.

5.4. Research Refinement

Reflecting back, in refining the research design, I would incorporate additional sampling criteria to enhance the consistency and comparability of interviews and subsequent findings (Robinson, 2014). For instance, I could limit participation to female entrepreneurs who either have no co-founders (i.e., solo entrepreneurs) or those who do, ensuring that all participants can contribute relevant critical incidents. Another potential refinement would be to focus the study on a specific stage of business development - such as startup or growth - to examine whether certain types of critical incidents (e.g., interpersonal dynamics with clients or investors) tend to cluster at particular phases.

Finally, I would also modify the data collection process by conducting in-person interviews instead of relying on online sessions. This adjustment would allow for the observation of nonverbal cues, body language, and potentially foster stronger rapport with interviewees, thereby yielding richer insights (Curasi, 2001).

5.5. Limitations of the Research Study

5.5.1. Scope Limitations

While the limited number of critical incidents examined may not exhaust the advocacy strategies and approaches of female entrepreneurs from Bulgaria and the broader Southeastern European region, this analysis does offer a structured exploration of fundamental advocacy efforts. However, future research would benefit from a larger pool of participants to confirm data saturation – what Butterfield et al. (2005, pp. 487) describe as “the point at which new categories stop emerging from the data”, which indicates “the domain of the activity has been adequately covered” - and to build a more comprehensive understanding of all advocacy factors and levers at play.

5.5.2. Linguistic and Cultural Dimensions

Because most of the interviews were conducted in English, a language that was not the interviewees' native tongue, the depth and accuracy of the collected data may have been constrained (Marschan-Piekkari and Reis, 2004). This could have reduced expressiveness and nuance, thereby limiting participants' ability to convey culturally specific or emotionally layered meanings. Furthermore, there is an increased risk of misinterpretation, especially in cases where interviewees referenced idiomatic expressions - such as ***Interviewee L***'s comment, "*We say in Bulgaria, if you're afraid of the bears, you don't go to the forest*" - or relied on subtle linguistic cues that do not translate seamlessly. An example is ***Interviewee E***'s use of "*абе*" [abe], a versatile Bulgarian interjection lacking a direct English equivalent and carrying multiple meanings depending on context and intonation. These language-related challenges can ultimately affect both the validity and the richness of the data.

5.5.3. Presence of Biases

The critical incidents discussed might be affected by recency bias (Murdock, 1962), meaning they may not be the most critical to share but merely the most recent ones participants can recall. Indeed, it is worth noting that the majority of interviewees described an event that occurred less than two years ago - see Appendix 6. This, in turn, has the potential to limit the depth and breadth of the data collected.

5.5.4. Resource Limitations in Coding

Additionally, one limitation of this study is the lack of independent coders, which may have introduced researcher bias and affected to an extent the coding process (Church et al., 2020). Although one of the interviewee transcripts was coded independently by an external researcher, as detailed in Chapter 3, this measure alone remains partial to fully address potential blind spots and to ensure robust coding procedures.

5.5.5. Questionnaire Structure

A limitation in the questionnaire's structure has been identified regarding the collection of relevant data for the key themes "Psychological Constructs" and "Emotions and Feelings". As highlighted in Appendix 9, the current structure and related questions do not focus sufficiently on capturing information about situations in which participants did not employ or wished they had employed one of the identified themes and/or their respective secondary themes. Future research could address this gap by reformulating existing questions or introducing additional ones to reach deeper in the experience of the subjects.

Although the structure of the semi-structured interviews was in line with existing theory and literature (Witt, 2004; Kickul et al., 2007; Galbraith et al., 2014), it is possible that including specific questions about preparation, and support systems and resources contributed to the emergence of the “Support Networks and Resources” key theme and the “Preparation” subtheme under “Specific Skills and Approaches”. Future studies could adapt or omit these questions to determine whether these themes arise organically under different conditions.

5.6. Future Research

One recommendation for future research is to expand the understanding of female entrepreneurship in Southeastern Europe by replicating this study in other countries within the region, thereby enabling cross-country comparisons and facilitating broader cross-cultural comparisons with other parts of the world (Moreira et al., 2019).

Another avenue is to investigate in greater detail the key themes that emerged from this study but were beyond its scope - namely “Power Dynamics” and “Coping Mechanisms - Other”. For instance, future studies could explore how power dynamics influence female entrepreneurs’ advocacy efforts and examine the strategies they use to cope with stress and uncertainty in advocacy.

Since this study focuses exclusively on advocacy through interpersonal communication, it may also be beneficial to consider intrapersonal communication in subsequent research.

Furthermore, it could be advantageous in future work to integrate the critical incident technique with the repertory grid technique (‘RGT’) to gain more nuanced insights into participants’ cognitive structures and perceptions. On the one hand, the critical incident technique facilitates the identification of pivotal events and the collection of rich data concerning those events (Flanagan, 1954); on the other hand, RGT, grounded in personal construct theory, enables the mapping of how individuals construct meaning around those events (Kelly, 1955).

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

6.1. Summary of Key Findings

Recognizing a notable gap in scholarly attention concerning advocacy in the specific context of Bulgarian female entrepreneurship, I aimed to explore the strategies, approaches, and factors shaping these entrepreneurs' high-stakes interactions with others. By employing the critical incident technique (Flanagan, 1954), I examined how advocacy manifests in high-stakes, challenging situations. The research demonstrated that Bulgarian female entrepreneurs draw upon a combination of intrinsic levers - encompassing psychological constructs, emotions and feelings - and extrinsic ones - comprising of support networks, resources, and specific skills and approaches - to advocate for their ideas in interactions with others during high-stakes, challenging situations for their business.

In the first part of my findings, I underscore the significance of **intrinsic levers of advocacy** - categorized under "Psychological Constructs" (beliefs, biases, values, and motivations) and "Emotions and Feelings" (predominantly negative emotional states). Whether facing successful, unsuccessful, or mixed outcomes, many participants often described intense negative emotions (e.g., anger, anxiety, self-doubt) and personal beliefs (e.g., regarding their self-view, gender, culture) in their advocacy efforts. The second part of my findings highlights the **extrinsic levers of advocacy** - structured within "Support Networks and Resources" and "Specific Skills and Approaches". Many of the strategies identified (e.g., preparation, assertive communication style, emotional control and regulation, leveraging different types of networks) are consistent with existing literature. Nevertheless, participants also highlighted underexamined practices, such as problem-solving and resilience, as elements that enabled them to navigate or manage challenging advocacy contexts.

Unexpectedly, most **critical incidents** involved interactions with current or prospective clients rather than investors. This finding departs from much of the prevailing literature on female entrepreneurs, which mostly focuses on women's interactions with investors. My findings therefore draw attention to a broader range of high-stakes situations - beyond fundraising - where advocacy proves equally vital.

Lastly, my interactions with these female entrepreneurs provided an opportunity for them to **reflect** on how they might adapt or refine their advocacy strategies going forward. The analysis revealed fewer instances in which participants wished they had applied different intrinsic levers, compared to extrinsic ones, indicating that single-loop learning is more prevalent than double-loop learning among the interviewees (Argyris et al., 1985). In summary, my research suggests that both the internal and external levers of advocacy could be improved through ongoing, purposeful refinement.

6.2. Value and Contribution of the Study

By presenting a variety of interpersonal dynamics among female entrepreneurs during their advocacy efforts, this dissertation extends the scope of female entrepreneurial research beyond the conventional focus on investor interactions. The study concentrates on Bulgarians and by extension on Southeastern Europe - a region often underrepresented in entrepreneurship research - thus offering a novel perspective and laying a foundation for subsequent comparative or cross-cultural investigations. While existing literature highlights specific advocacy strategies (Boon, 1999; Dutton et al., 2001) and introspective learning processes (Argyris et al., 1985), this research underscores the intersection of the two. By examining both intrinsic and extrinsic elements, the study offers a more comprehensive roadmap for understanding how advocacy unfolds among female entrepreneurs.

The findings indicate that effective advocacy requires not only the understanding and implementation of practical, tangible strategies, the presence of strong networks and access to resources, but also the cultivation of self-awareness and deeper insight into one's internal processes (including but not limited to understanding the role of values, beliefs, motivations and emotions). Bulgarian female entrepreneurs can incorporate the latter into their routines and practices to foster ongoing self-reflection and refinement of their thought processes. Additionally, various training programs can be tailored to encompass both the external dimensions of skill development and the internal cultivation of self-awareness, emotional intelligence, and resilience among female entrepreneurs.

6.3. Concluding Remarks

The primary purpose of this study is not to propose a universal set of strategies for female entrepreneurs to employ in their advocacy efforts. Rather, it seeks to highlight the interplay between entrepreneurs' perceptions (including emotional dimensions) and their behavior in advocacy contexts - that is, the influence of both internal and external factors on advocacy. Although much of the existing literature focuses on practical, tangible measures, this research highlights the equally critical roles of introspection, emotional fluency, and reflexive learning. As academic research and practical support for female entrepreneurs continue to expand - particularly in underexamined regions such as Southeastern Europe - these findings provide both direction and inspiration, encouraging more in-depth examination of how women in business can effectively champion their ideas and thereby foster innovation, resilience, and growth.

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APPENDICES

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Should you have an interest in exploring this valuable paper, please consider contacting the researcher and author, Veronika Stoyanova-Trendafilova.