

Role enactment in resource acquisition: ‘...*I am the boss, but I am also the salesman, negotiator, fixer...*’

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Abstract

This study investigates resource acquisition behavior in the context of growth strategies for entrepreneurial ventures. We focus on the influence of entrepreneurs’ business and personal networks and their role enactment to realize resources from their networks through social network analysis. We conducted a qualitative analysis to examine the network structure of our participants, focusing on key network characteristics of size, tie strength, density, and brokerage opportunities to identify their influence on participants’ role enactment to access resources. We identified three core (ambassador, co-creator, and mediator) and five specialist roles (expert, orchestrator, trader, negotiator, and gatekeeper). Our results indicate that network structure is extraneous when performing core roles but affects the enactment of specialist roles as these roles are deliberately enacted to achieve desired outcomes.

Keywords: Role enactment, resource-seeking, social networks, entrepreneurs

Introduction

Acquisition of network benefits requires action and interaction with network members, assuming multiple roles with deliberate intentions to achieve planned outcomes (Adler and Kwon, 2002; Callero, 1994). The ability to perform multiple roles is crucial in achieving planned outcomes, as role stress, in the form of role conflict and ambiguity cannot be underestimated, and can cause effective as well as undesirable outcomes (Biddle, 1986; Andersén, 2017). Structural network characteristics influence not only how opportunities are captured but also how individuals act and perform different roles in acquiring crucial network resources (Adler and Kwon, 2002).

This study investigates resource acquisition behavior in the context of entrepreneurial ventures pursuing growth strategies. We emphasize the influence of entrepreneurs’ business

and personal networks and their role enactment to realize resources from their networks. Entrepreneurs' resource-seeking behaviors permeate all stages of their ventures (Adomako et al., 2018; Boafo et al., 2022; Clough et al., 2019a). Initially, the focus of resource-seeking behavior is on the survival of the firm (Honig and Samuelsson, 2014). As a venture evolves, entrepreneurs may choose to adopt a product- or market-focused growth approach (Ansoff, 1958). A product-focus approach emphasizes developing new technology and products, while a market-focus approach focuses on creating new domestic and internal markets, thus increasing their customer base to increase sales and revenue (Zhou et al., 2020). Understanding which approach to adopt has implications for entrepreneurs' resource-seeking efforts, the networks they need to connect with, and the roles they need to perform to acquire resources.

Studies indicate that entrepreneurs' resource acquisition starts with their personal and business networks, as these provide resource opportunities, leading to initial discoveries and innovations (Gronum et al., 2012), and venture formation and performance (Watson, 2007). Most research highlights the benefits of networks to entrepreneurs; however, only some studies (Adomako et al., 2018; Battilana and Casciaro, 2012) have examined the proactive behaviors and roles entrepreneurs need to play to effectively capture network benefits. We examined the interplay of role-related behaviors within entrepreneurs' networks by focusing on three key aspects: 1) the network structural characteristics influencing entrepreneurs' interactions while pursuing resource opportunities, 2) enactment of multiple roles by entrepreneurs to capture resources, and 3) interaction between network structure and actor agency. Therefore, we build on the social network literature (Borgatti and Halgin, 2011; Burt, 1980) and role enactment studies (Biddle, 1986; Jacobides and Tae, 2015) to investigate entrepreneurial ventures' resource acquisition behavior in the context of pursuing growth strategies. We examined data collected through in-depth, face-to-face interviews with nine entrepreneurs in the medical devices and health supplements sector, a dynamic operating environment where entrepreneurial creativity, product innovation, and resource-seeking opportunities are the key.

Our findings contribute to existing literature in several ways. First, we integrate social network structure and entrepreneurial role enactment demonstrating that resource acquisition depends on entrepreneurs' behaviors and actions to perform multiple roles within their social network, past studies tend to focus on potential resources that networks provide but rarely explore the role enactment required to capture these resources. Second, our findings identify the core and specialist roles that entrepreneurs perform while pursuing resources. The three

core roles ('ambassador,' 'co-creator,' and 'mediator') are enacted intuitively by the entrepreneur as a leader and decision maker of the entrepreneurial firm, while the five specialist roles ('expert,' 'orchestrator,' 'trader,' 'negotiator,' and 'gatekeeper') are performed with purposeful intentions and motivated by acquiring resources to achieve desired outcomes for business growth. Third, the findings reveal that specialist roles are dynamic and can change according to entrepreneurs' resource situations, revealing a nuanced 'do what it takes' attitude from entrepreneurs—an attitude that influences their behaviors for enactment of distinct roles, given the challenges in resource acquisition.

Entrepreneurs' social network structure

Most network scholarship offers theoretical and empirical understanding into the structural features that enable or constrain resource collaboration and exchange (Brass, 2022; Kwon et al., 2020). Structural features mostly include network size, density, tie strength between actors, and brokerage potential. For example, in smaller and denser networks, the entrepreneur (ego) and other actors in the entrepreneur's network (alters) are connected directly and/or indirectly through strong ties (Coleman, 1988). Such cohesive networks encourage affection, trust, open communication, problem-solving, and tacit knowledge and information sharing (Hoyte et al., 2019; Tortoriello et al., 2012a). In contrast to small, dense networks, entrepreneurs cultivating large, sparse networks comprising diverse sets of actors are advantaged differently because heterogeneity presents distinct skills and resources (Granovetter, 1973; Martinez and Aldrich, 2011). Moreover, sparse networks where actors are connected by non-redundant ties contain more 'structural holes' with bridging and brokerage opportunities that are efficient in connecting non-connected actors. Such network structures are conducive for entrepreneurs seeking novel connections and product and market growth opportunities (Boafo et al., 2022; Burt, 2004). However, the extent to which network structural characteristics influence entrepreneurs' role behaviors for entrepreneurs to fully capitalize on network benefits remains unclear.

Most studies on entrepreneur networks indicate the benefits and resource opportunities provided by networks. For example, network relations help entrepreneurs to launch new ventures (Newbert et al., 2013) and establish legitimacy and reduce liability of newness (Boafo et al., 2022; Deeds et al., 2004). In the growth stage, well-developed network ties can assist venture performance, including connections to reduce supply and distribution costs (Boso et al., 2013; Shaw et al., 2017). Prior studies mostly indicate several benefits provided

by network relations to entrepreneurs seeking resources; however, they do not investigate the enactment of multiple roles by entrepreneurs to capture these network benefits.

Role enactment

Role enactment involves acting and performing in ways that create new opportunities for actors (Biddle, 1986). It is a deliberate and purposeful behavior to achieve intended outcomes. Entrepreneurs demonstrate this by orchestrating resources to drive growth in their new ventures. Such tasks require entrepreneurs to purposefully interact and perform distinct roles with multiple actors with deliberate intentions to acquire resources for their venture growth (Andersén, 2017; Jacobides and Tae, 2015; Lynch, 2007). Roles are performed based on perceptions of change because ‘...actors interpret things in different ways and act according to their intentions’ (Anderson et al., 1998: 183). In this sense, they follow an interactionist approach to situation-specific scenarios based on intentions, constantly enacting different roles in creative and constructive ways to achieve desired outcomes (Anderson et al., 1998; Callero, 1994).

Role enactment is defined as ‘a ... framework for understanding oneself that is formed and sustained via social interaction’ (Gioia, 1998: 19). The essence of role enactment requires deliberate interactions with others to achieve the intended outcomes. The role enactment discourse is often linked to role identity theory, which concerns a set of values, behaviors, and goals cued by one’s role (Ashforth et al., 2008). For example, Cardon et al.’s (2009) study on entrepreneurial passion links three distinct role identities to entrepreneurial activities: inventors, founders, and developers. It indicates that the emphasis on each role’s identity tends to change with venture development, as the ability to change is instrumental to venture success (Cardon et al., 2009). Mathias and Williams (2018) describe this change in role identity as ‘giving up the hats’ as entrepreneurs transition among different role identities, such as entrepreneurs or founders. Regarding role identity transitions, Hoang and Gimeno (2010) highlight the challenges that founders encounter as they traverse from a central founding role identity to other more functional role identities. They indicated that individual characteristics influence how the challenges of role transition can be overcome, thereby affecting successful venture outcomes. Anderson and Warren’s (2011) study indicates that leaders have character narratives (role identity), how they identify with being a leader, and behavior narratives (role enactment), how they act with the intention to motivate, teach, persuade, or mentor.

Other studies draw on social identity theory, being the aspect of a person's self-concept of perceived value and societal importance associated with belonging to a social group (Tajfel, 1978: 63). Weller et al. (2023) applied this theory to volunteer work and found that volunteer workers construct narratives of their social identity to give meaningfulness to their service in volunteer projects. For example, some volunteers may identify as helpers or heroes. Fauchart and Gruber (2011) explore the social identity of 49 venture founders and find that the values and meanings attached to their social role identities influenced the decision-making and outcomes of founders' new ventures. In a longitudinal study on how and why founders' social role identities change, Scholars suggest that social role identity is shaped at a nascent stage and reshaped at the growth stage of the venture (Powell and Baker, 2017). Founding entrepreneurs may need to explore different role identities to fit their individual self-concepts and, at times, may question their behavior in shaping social norms and culture in a new venture (Anderson and Warren, 2011). However, as a new venture progresses, the role identities of the founding individuals transform into founding group identities with shared values and goals.

Networks and roles

Role enactment occurs in a network of actors. Management studies have shown that the structure of network environments empowers different role behaviors (Van Wijk et al., 2013). Bertels et al. (2014) identify portals and coordinators as key structurally distinct brokerage roles. Portals actively bring others together for problem-solving and are highly connected actors with strong local heterogeneity, whereas coordinators commonly act as information brokers on behalf of others and have a high degree of local homogeneity. Actors with brokerage roles enhance their social capital because they are in structural positions enabling them to control the flow of information and resources (Burt, 2000). Management studies have explored the role enactment of gatekeeper for power and discretion in disseminating information and resources, thus placing individuals in more advantageous positions (Jacobides and Tae, 2015; Mason and Botelho, 2016; Tushman and Katz, 1980).

Entrepreneurs' social and business networks provide rich resources. On the one hand, an appreciation of structural network characteristics provides insights for entrepreneurs to be more agile in approaching other network actors. On the other hand, entrepreneurs require skills and knowledge to perform different roles and capture the benefits of network resources. However, the interplay between network structure and role-related behavior remains unclear.

Our aim is to explore this gap in how network structures and actor agencies interact to provide better insights for resource-seeking entrepreneurs.

Method

Our study uses a qualitative approach to address calls for more methodological diversity in entrepreneurship research (Cogan et al., 2022; Shepherd, 2015). We conducted an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) (Cope, 2005) which has been increasingly adopted in entrepreneurship studies (Cogan et al., 2022; Pret et al., 2016; Shaw et al., 2017; Williams et al., 2021; Zou et al., 2016). Unlike the positivist approach, IPA provides an interpretive perspective to explore role enactment for resource acquisition (Cope, 2005).

Phenomenological research explores participants lived experience through their subjective interpretations offering insights into their personal and social networks (Eatough and Smith, 2017). This systematic approach transitions from descriptive to interpretative analysis (Smith and Osborn, 2008), allowing us to examine the meaningful experiences and strategies associated with different situations in detail (Smith et al., 2009).

Context and sample

To understand role behavior and resource acquisition behavior, we studied entrepreneurs in a sector where innovation and survival require external support and collaborative networks (Almeida et al., 2011; Fuentelsaz et al., 2018). Our focus was on entrepreneurs in Australia's medical device and health supplement sectors. This sector, comprised start-up firms (Austrade, 2021), is science-intensive, knowledge-based, and R&D-driven (Powell et al., 2005). Success here depends on continuous innovation and transformative technologies (AMGC, 2022b), requiring creativity, innovation, flexibility and risk-taking (Afsar et al., 2017).

Using the IPA methodology, which involves detailed individual analyses and typically small sample sizes (Larkin et al., 2006: 46; Smith and Osborn, 2008; Lindebaum et al., 2016), we included nine entrepreneurs from the Australian health and well-being sector. They were chosen based on their roles as founders or co-founders and their active decision-making involvement. Reid et al., (2005) and Smith, et al., (2012) suggest a maximum of 10 interviewees for an IPA study and advise researchers to be pragmatic in choosing participants, particularly when the topic under investigation is distinctive and issues of accessibility and willingness to participate are problematic (Zou et al., 2016).

Data collection

We collected data through unstructured interviews, non-participant observation and documentation, with interviews as the primary source. A total of 23 face-to-face interviews were conducted with nine respondents, including follow-up and supplementary interviews. The interviews aimed to capture variations in participants' understanding of their realities and limitations of resources, including questions on their organizations and social networks (Marsden, 1990). Respondents identified network members and described relationship types and (Borgatti et al., 2018; Marsden, 1990).

Interviews were audio-recorded, resulting in 893 contact minutes and 583 pages of transcripts and notes. Summarized reports were emailed to participants for accuracy.

Table 1 describes the study participants and their firms (to ensure confidentiality, each participant was provided with an alias).

Table 1: Description of participant entrepreneurs and their ventures

Participant	# of years' experience in the industry	Firm's product	Firm size	Duration of interviews
Ryde CEO, scientist and academic. Specialist in radioisotopes and lung imaging	35	Radiopharmaceutical and nuclear medicine	25	106 minutes 73 pages double-spaced
Forest Founder/CEO. Scientist, academic and specialist in proteomics.	30	Immunoassay kits and proteomics	8	87 minutes. 62 pages double-spaced
Dale Founder/CEO. Design Engineer	17	Scientific, military, and medical devices	10	60 minutes 62 pages double-spaced
Cove Founder/CEO. Trained engineer and academic	18	Medical devices	30	172 minutes 85 pages doubled-spaced
Mere Head of Technical R&D. Trained in design and manufacturing specializing in contrast injection system	8	Contrast injection system and consumables in radiology	21	80 minutes 74 pages double-spaced
Mury CEO, Chartered Accountant	15	Medical devices	35	101 minutes 74 pages doubled-spaced
Action Co-founder and CEO. Previous experience in healthcare systems and academia	23	Flow control medical devices	4	100 minutes 49 pages double-spaced
Mel Founder/CEO. Background in health food retail marketing	26	Health supplements	3	91 minutes 53 pages double-spaced
Silver Co-founder and CEO. Trained in information technology	15	Health supplements	25	96 minutes 51 pages double-spaced

				Total: 893 minutes, 583 pages
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The two columns in Table 1 merit further investigation. The third column shows the rich and extensive industry experience contributed by each participant to their entrepreneurial ventures. An exemplar expression is from Ryde:

‘I was heading two [government research centres) for about 20 years and then was approached to start this new venture.... fitted very well with my background and with what I was doing. From an entrepreneurial point of view, what drives me is to see an implementation of what appears to be a good idea, and seeing it used in humans and used for the benefit of society. So, that’s what drives me.’

The fourth column shows firm size in terms of the number of staff. Mel has only three full-time employees, whereas Action has four. Both firm sizes are well below the average firm size of the 18 firms from the other participants. Further investigation of interview data from Mel and Action suggests that both express their strategic focus on their firms’ core strength of innovative product development and outsource as many operational areas as they can to focus on their key strength, as expressed by Mel:

‘My partner and I... have been in health products retail for years and years. We know the retailers, the customers, the market so for us now, we just concentrate on coming out with new products, work with external parties like nutritionists and manufacturers... and outsource all other operations... it also has to do with costs.’

Before and after the face-to-face interviews, we collected unobtrusive data from each entrepreneur (Webb et al., 1966). These included role-based artifacts (e.g., LinkedIn profiles), image-based representations (e.g., Twitter accounts, company Facebook pages), and background-related (e.g., documents (e.g., company websites). These data increased the internal validity through triangulation and reduced retrospective bias (Struminska-Kutra and Kołodkiewicz, 2018). They also help engage informants in discussions about roles and network relationships (Corley and Gioia, 2004).

We directly observed entrepreneurial activities to gather insightful data pertaining to role behaviors. Detailed field notes were taken during the observations, capturing relevant

items. For example, participants displayed individual or company awards in public areas of their workplaces to highlight significant achievements and their roles in these accomplishments.

Data analysis

Data analysis in an IPA study is concerned with producing both a ‘coherent and psychologically informed’ description of ‘what the phenomenon is like’ according to participants, and an interpretation of ‘what it means for the participants to have made these claims, and to have expressed these feelings and concerns in this particular situation’ (Larkin et al., 2006: 104). For coding, the data transcriptions of the audio recordings and extensive notes taken during interviews were imported into NVivo 10 software (QSRInternational, 2012). Our qualitative analysis followed Gioia et al.’s (2012) method of establishing first- and second-level themes before aggregating them into theme dimensions (Table 2). The first-level category reflected the voices of the participants as much as possible, as shown in the exemplary quotes in Table 2.

Table 2: Data Structure

Exemplary transcripts	First-level themes	Second-level themes	Aggregate dimensions for themes
‘Of course, we need to grow...otherwise we will be stagnant... our Lab is always testing new products, but I think for us international market is easier. That’s where I have the connections’ - Action	Who we are, what we do, and where we want to be	Organization growth	Leader
‘Our goal... since I started, is to grow to a large company and aim for stock market listing...this necessarily means global markets, as you know, we have a small domestic market’ - Forest	Our short-term and long-term goals	Top level decision-making	Decision maker Change maker
‘We don’t have all the right people, so we collaborate in the medical design space with key complementary services. We collaborate with an alliance of specialists from local to overseas, especially now in Canada, China and Middle East... this puts us in better positions to create new products’ - Dale	Resource constraints Can not do it alone	Relationships Connections Collaborations	Connector Networks Relationship

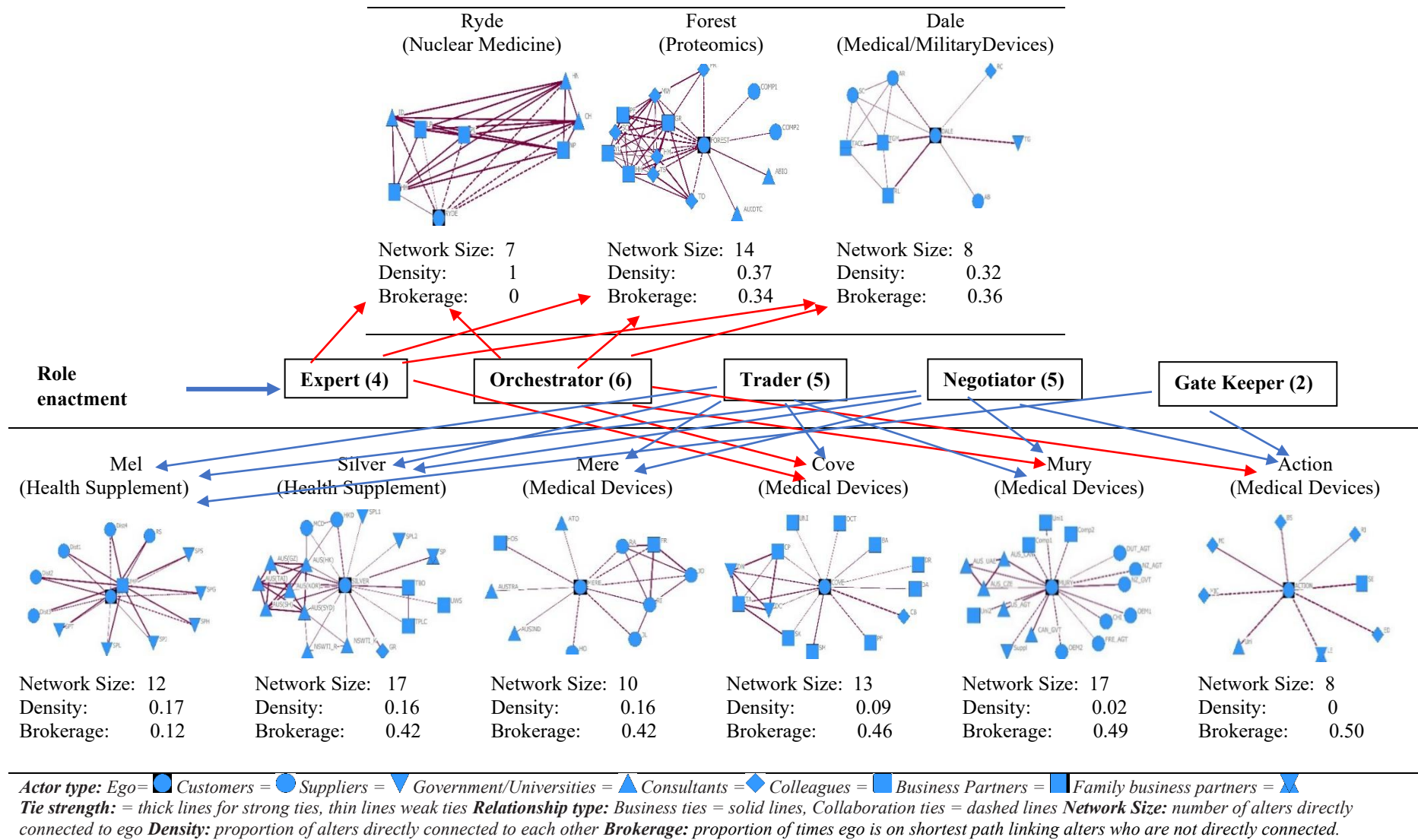
‘Any time we want to develop new products we go to the people who use our products... our customers, direct and indirect. We give samples and get feedback on the trials. Or, in the case of pathology or hospitals, we actually talk to the clinical nurse specialist, or an infection control nurse, etc. And we start to develop – get an idea, go back to our customers, and they say, ‘No, change this’. Yeah, they tell us what to change. So we keep improving until we get the right product.’ – Mury	Information gathering	Co-creating	Collaborator
	Knowledge exchange	Trusting	Market and product development
	Listening	Reciprocating	Networks ties
	Being open		
‘We have an office in the US but I still travel a lot. I have sales managers in US and here, so I am the boss but I am also the export manager, I represent my company in dealing with government, major distributors and suppliers. Finding good people is a big challenge... I have to do what I have to do’ – Cove	Doing what it takes	Proactive behavior	Creator
	Getting the job done	Action bias	Creating new networks
			New relational roles
‘We attend 2 or 3 major conferences a year, display our equipment, talk to our customers, to scientists and people in our medical area. We have to be there, all experts in our area are there...’ – Ryde			

We focused on participants’ verbal descriptions of multiple role enactments within their networks. When actions and interactions are central, interpreting these actions is crucial (Weick et al., 2005: 409). We employed an iterative process, studying each line and word without a priori role descriptions, and using participants’ own words for role enactment coding. For example, ‘My sister and I started this business, but I am the Managing Director, so you can say I am the boss. It has not been easy...we did a few wrong things too along the way but, but we recover, you know, we learn from the mistakes, and we fix up the problems and that’s how we, and I guess we make more right decisions than wrong decisions...so, yeah.’ – Silver. This was coded as ‘Boss’ role, involving problem-solving and decision-making behaviors. We compared our coding with prior literature (Biddle, 1986) and used NVivo to create sub-notes for each role.

To examine network structural characteristics, relational data from interviews were transformed into network matrices for each entrepreneur, detailing network members and relational values. NetDraw created graphs of each participant (ego) network, highlighting structural properties like relational types and tie (Borgatti, 2002). UCINET 6 calculated key structural measurements of network size, number of ties, density, and brokerage connections (Borgatti et al., 2002). Network size is the total number of actors (alters) directly connected to ego. Density measures the proportion of connections among ego’s alters while brokerage

measures how often ego links alters who are not directly connected (Marsden, 1990). Figure 1 presents the findings on the network's structural characteristics.

Figure 1: Integrating network structure with role enactment



Findings and propositions

Role enactment

We address role enactment by entrepreneurs within their networks and investigate the interplay between entrepreneurs' role enactment and the structural network characteristics for resource acquisition. We start by examining the participants' perceptions of role enactment in pursuing network resources. Table 3 provides exemplary quotes from the participants and the coding protocol used to develop the role titles detailed in the final column.

Table 3: Identifying role enactment

Core roles	Exemplary excerpts	Latent coding protocol
‘Ambassador’	We have a product that is quite peculiar, quite unique in the world. We have been very successful as a result of the initiatives I developed in our technical marketing, a lot of other governments in the world copied our program and this has helped us to market not just the program but all the products that go with the program - Mury	Essence of the narrative: One who is highly ranked and well respected within an organization and likely to have intimate knowledge and expertise of the organization. It requires the presence of the boss as ‘ambassador’ to demonstrate not just technical expertise but passion and conviction for the products they are marketing
‘Co-Creator’	It’s really about me, as the boss, leading the process in co-developing our products to meet different usages and price-point needs. Many hospitals are not able to take our high-end equipment ... so we need to adapt our products or lose the sales – Mere	Essence of the narrative: Role focuses on collaborating with external parties to tap on expertise that our participants lack. It is a boss role as ‘co-creator’ that actively seeks opportunities for business growth especially through developing new products for specialized customer needs
‘Mediator’	When we first started, I used to think I am a fixer – I have to fix all the problems, it’s my company. But now, I am thinking other staff can do it too. If you are in this business, you will know there are so many design creatives that one needs a trouble-shooter - Dale	Essence of the narrative: The role of boss as ‘mediator’ is one of problem-solving but tends to evolve mediating in terms of decision-making between different departments in the business and/or trouble shooting for new business
Specialist roles	Exemplary excerpts	Latent coding protocol
‘Expert’	Ours is a biomarker research company that specializes in the development and commercialization of diagnostic products. In our early days I initiated a lot of contract work for local and overseas customers, but we are now at a stage where we are focusing on the launch of our new diagnostic product – Forest	Essence of the narrative: Role requires technical expertise, someone with the knowledge and training to develop innovative and scientific products. The role resembles that of a scientist, someone with years of training and experience and is played by entrepreneurs who emphasize continuous product development to enhance product image and reputation
‘Orchestrator’	We are designers, that’s our business ...I need to get our Chinese manufacturer to talk to our visualizers, our packing supplier to talk to our designers and so on ...the project can fall apart if I let our work to develop into small silos – Dales	Essence of the narrative: The role when situations require strong leadership in galvanizing the right alter to achieve pre-determined outcomes. The role in these situations is similar to that of a middleman, assembling and connecting alters to ensure smooth operations

‘Trader’	Chasing the international sales is not easy... in most cases the margins are precarious almost, so chasing the volume is critical. We have finally found a distributor in [country] but we’re constantly looking... that’s the only way to go. So, you give me this \$10,000 to show that you are serious and if you meet the target, we will refund this to you. Some would say it’s unfair... but at the end of the day, if they are confident and you know, to a lot of big companies \$10,000 is nothing, nothing - Silver	Essence of the narrative: The role is almost akin to a salesman role. It focuses on firm’s growth by expanding geographical markets, especially export markets. It is not unusual for the role to take a more ‘wheeler-dealer’ approach in difficult markets
‘Negotiator’	I’ve been there physically more than 3 times in the last 6 months. A bit more might be required but I am confident. It’s a small market, but it is a long-term market. A lot of potential. For this reason, I’ve undertaken presentations, courses and training with their team - Mury	Essence of the narrative: Some situations require a softer approach while being focused on expanding geographical markets. In these situations, entrepreneurs enact this role and are required when long-term contracts and/or partnership agreement are at stake
‘Gatekeeper’	I’m using a layman’s term for what I do ... I’m the hub here, you can see I am the connector. I provide the connections. I’ve worked in so many places, done so many things. I have the connections...’ I can’t say we are a distributor; we also don’t manufacture. You can say we are a middleman; we do what we do best, and this is developing new products, but we need suppliers, contract manufacturer and distributors. We always have to protect our sources of supply as ... to be honest our products are not that special – Action	Essence of the narrative: There is a deliberate motivation to control activities and flow of information and resources within their network

Our findings show that all participants perform the **core** role of a boss through their identity as owners and entrepreneurial managers of the business (Mintzberg, 1971). Our study suggests that the core role of bosses extends to ambassadors, co-creators, and mediators. The performance of these three core roles indicates the importance of decision-making for a leader of an entrepreneurial firm. The enactment of boss as ambassador role is akin to being a power promoter or an advocate (Gemünden et al., 2007), requiring the demonstration of technical expertise, passion, and conviction of the products they are marketing as expressed by Ryde as boss in an ambassador role:

‘We are one of the pioneers in chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD)... I make sure I am in every meeting... doing what it takes to get our product and service approved. It is very serious...’

The co-creator role emphasizes collaborating with external parties to leverage expertise that the firm lacks (Priem et al., 2012). This role actively seeks opportunities for business growth especially through new product development or markets, as expressed by Mel as boss in a co-creator role:

‘...look at these three products, our best sellers, we developed them with a health nutritionist... this is what we do best, we have the ideas and then we look for people to work with....’

Enacting the role of a mediator involves problem-solving, trouble shooting for new businesses, and mediating in terms of decision-making between different departments and different actors in the business (Jansen et al., 2011; Williams et al., 2021); for example, Silver, as boss in a mediating role:

‘Every market need promotion funds and all kinds of expenses... my staff expects me to decide... I am the one to decide which market to enter and how much to spend...’
Silver.

These core essential roles in managing the growth of entrepreneurial ventures lead us to propose our first hypothesis:

Proposition 1: Entrepreneurs as the boss of their business ventures enact the core role of boss as an ambassador, a co-creator, and mediator.

Next, we identified five specialist roles (experts, orchestrators, traders, negotiators, and gatekeepers) enacted by some participants. Interview transcripts suggest that these are deliberate role enactments to access resources to achieve the desired business growth outcomes.

The six participants who performed expert and orchestrator roles operated in the medical and medical device segments. The expert role requires technical expertise, knowledge, and training to develop innovative products. Gemünden et al. (2007) describe this role as an expert promoter, which differs from that of a power promoter or an ambassador. In this study, the expert role resembled that of a scientist with considerable training and experience. The expert role is generally performed by entrepreneurs who place importance on continual product development to enhance product image and reputation. Of these six, Ryde, Forest, and Dale operate in highly scientific and specialized areas of nuclear medicine, proteomics, and military/medical devices, respectively, as expressed by Ryde:

‘We may be in a small community, but it is a community of experts that has tentacles that grow everywhere because it has to do with medicine and health... through medical conferences and our publications is how we connect and maybe... collaborate, that’s how our products get validated.’

The expert role overlaps with the orchestrator role frequently when situations require strong leadership to impel the right alter to achieve predetermined outcomes. The orchestrator’s role in these situations is like a middleman, assembling resources and connecting alters to ensure smooth operation (Gemünden et al., 2007):

‘We are designers, that’s our business but we also freelance out many jobs...I need to get our Chinese manufacturer to talk to our visualizers, our packing supplier to talk to our designers and so on ...the project can fall apart if I let our work to develop into small silos...’ – Dale.

Gemünden et al., (2007: p.412) describe this role, as technology-related relationship promoter, requiring the ‘...search for external cooperation partners, information exchange... collaboration with cooperation partners.’

All three participants focalize their role enactments as experts and orchestrators to develop innovative products to venture growth, thus adopting a product-focus growth strategy:

‘Discovering medical diagnostic products is one thing but we need funding to develop the products and commercialize them. One of our biggest sources of investors are the big pharma companies... we are in the same industry; we talk the same language... but they have the big bucks to make things happen...’

Forest. Action, Mury, and Cove, who were also in the medical device market, performed the roles of experts and orchestrators. Formally, we propose the following:

Proposition 2: Entrepreneurs emphasizing product-focus growth for their venture enact expert and orchestrator roles that capitalize on their new product development capabilities and expertise.

Moreover, six participants—Action, Mury, Cove, Mere, Mel, and Silver—performed the specialist roles of traders, negotiators, and gatekeepers. The trader’s role is almost similar to a salesman’s role, focalizing a firm’s growth by expanding geographical markets. Some markets may be more difficult to penetrate than others, requiring much more negotiation, and participants may perform the negotiator role to achieve the planned outcome for market growth. The enactment of these two roles is driven by the intention to pursue a market growth strategy by creating new domestic and international markets (Zhou et al., 2020). For Mury, even though government hospitals are their biggest customers, there is still the need to expand their domestic customer base:

‘In the local market, we sell to government hospitals, they are our biggest customers, but we have had to build a distribution network with distributors and sales brokers to help us cover private hospitals and clinics. Our local market sales can’t grow without using distributors... they are just too many outlets for us to cover. We also rely on these distributors for market information to help us expand our product lines...’

All participants have a presence in international markets, and they continue to actively engage in expanding their international markets:

‘We have been exhibiting our products overseas, at least once or twice a year for the last few years. They [oversea exhibitions] are very expensive but that’s where all our buyers meet. With my key people, I attend all of them. Once we meet the potential buyers, we start talking, talking, negotiating... we don’t easily let go of the opportunities... to sign the contracts!’ – Silver.

Our interview data indicate a gatekeeper role in which there is a degree of defensive and protectionist role enactment, suggesting a deliberate motivation to control activities and the flow of information within networks (Jacobides and Tae, 2015; Mason and Botelho, 2016) . In this study, gatekeeper roles are performed to protect sources of information relating to external distributors and suppliers:

‘I can’t say we are a distributor; we also don’t manufacture. You can say we are a middleman; we do what we do best, and this is developing new products, but we need suppliers, contract manufacturers and distributors. We always have to protect our sources of supply and distribution as ... to be honest our products are not that unique.’

This leads us to the third proposition:

Proposition 3: Entrepreneurs emphasizing market-focus growth for their venture enact the specialist roles of trader, negotiator, or gatekeeper.

Table 4 summarizes the participants’ enactment of specialist roles.

Table 4: A summary of different role enactment by participants

	Specialist roles				
	Product focus growth		Market focus growth		
	Expert	Orchestrator	Trader	Negotiator	Gate keeper
Ryde	✓	✓			
Forest	✓	✓			
Dale	✓	✓			
Action		✓		✓	✓
Mury		✓	✓	✓	
Cove	✓	✓	✓		
Mere			✓	✓	
Mel			✓	✓	✓
Silver			✓	✓	

Network structural characteristics

We analyzed the network structure visually using graphs indicating tie strength and relationship type and included quantitative network measures in terms of size, density, and brokerage for accurate validation of network characteristics. Figure 1 integrates the network graphs of the nine entrepreneurs and their perceptions of the roles they play in acquiring

resource opportunities. The red arrows show the expert and orchestrator roles, and the blue arrows show the trader, negotiator, and gatekeeper roles. We first inspected the composition and structure of the participants' networks. The participants' networks showed a diverse set of alternatives ranging from customers, suppliers, business partners, consultants, and government institutions such as universities and hospitals. While all the network graphs show a combination of strong and weak ties with several strong collaborative links, there are noticeable structural differences in density and brokerage opportunities. The first three graphs in the first row have the densest networks and lowest brokerage opportunities ranging 0.32–1 and 0–0.36, respectively. The remaining six graphs in the second row have the sparsest networks and highest brokerage opportunities, ranging 0–0.17 and 0.12–0.50, respectively.

The first row in Figure 1 shows the three networks with the highest densities. Ryde and Dale's networks are dense and comparatively small in terms of network size, whereas Forest's network is larger but still dense because of the cluster of cohesive ties visible on the left-hand side of the graph. Ryde's network is the only network that is maximally dense with no brokerage opportunities, indicating that the entrepreneur is no more prominent than any other network alter:

'Our field is very niche, but we collaborate with worldwide leaders... medical practitioners, academics, researchers and even competitors. Sometimes it feels like everyone knows everyone, we meet at the same conferences, we share problems and ideas, do joint research...' Ryde.

This evidence leads us to propose the following hypotheses:

Proposition 4: Dense entrepreneurial networks where ego and alters are directly or indirectly connected with each other provide a conducive and collaborative environment to share and exchange tacit knowledge and expertise.

The remaining six networks, shown in Figure 1, were relatively sparse, with densities ranging 0.17–0. The network structures of Mel, Silver, and Mere were sparse at 0.17, 0.16, and 0.16, respectively. Mel's star structure network shows no ties between alters, but there is equal sharing of access to connections with Mel's business partners. In the network structures of Cove, Mury, and Action, all three graphs showed star structures with deviations. Action's maximally sparse network indicates that there are no connections between alters, placing Action in a high brokerage position. Apart from a small cluster of government institutions,

there are no other ties between alters in Mury's network, which increases the brokerage opportunities.

Silver and Mury had the largest networks, whereas Action had the greatest brokerage advantage. Of the six networks with the sparsest structures (see the second and third rows), five had relatively high brokerage advantages ranging from 0.41–0.50. The exception is Mel with a low brokerage at 0.12 despite its star-like structure, because of the equal sharing of access to all alters with Mel's business partner, an expression from Mel:

'We know the market, but we outsource just about everything, from manufacturing to distribution. You can say we are running a middle-man business; customers on one hand and the many suppliers and distributors on the other. Protecting our business sources is important to our survival.'

Thus, we propose the following:

Proposition 5: In sparse networks where ego is connected by non-redundant ties to all alters, higher brokerage opportunities exist and entrepreneurs with high brokerage opportunities tend to enhance their social capital to control flow of resources and information.

Integrating network structure with role enactment and resource outcomes

The key findings of the network analysis indicated that participants enacting the expert role had small and dense networks, whereas those enacting the orchestrator role had dense and sparse network structures. Trader and negotiator roles operated in large sparse networks. Only two participants played the gatekeeper role, and both had a sparse network structure.

An iterative analysis of our interview data shows that only two participants, Action and Mel, performed the gatekeeper's role. The gatekeeper establishes the power and control based on ego. It secures the perception of authority and command over network alters and allows entrepreneurs to decide on the flow of information and resources (Anderson et al., 1998; Jacobides and Tae, 2015). Both Action and Mel, demonstrated the need to control the flow of information to protect their business contacts. Action's professional background of working with government agencies and hospitals provides many contacts required to secure business contracts. Action highlights the need to protect the source. Mel's entrepreneurial firm operates in a competitive health-supplement market segment, where few products have proprietary intellectual property, and product differentiation focuses on marketing (Pina and Dias, 2021). The absence of internal product development and R&D teams implies their

dependability on external partners for developing new products to remain competitive and protecting their source of product developers means maintaining their source of competitive advantage (Chen et al., 2022).

Table 5 shows that entrepreneurs play multiple roles to capture resource opportunities in both dense and sparse networks.

Table 5: Enactment of roles to acquire resources

Network structure	Enactment of roles	Types of resources sought	Outcomes from resources acquired
<u>Dense structure</u> Conducive to tacit knowledge-sharing	Ryde: Expert, Orchestrator Dale: Expert, Orchestrator Forest: Expert, Orchestrator	Expert knowledge Technical know-how	1. New innovative products 2. Product line extension 3. Customized products for specific market needs
<u>Sparse structure</u> Provides more diverse and novel opportunities	Mury: Orchestrator, Trader, Negotiator Mere: Trader, Negotiator Cove: Expert, Orchestrator, Trader Mel: Trader, Negotiator, Gatekeeper Silver: Trader, Negotiator Action: Orchestrator, Negotiator, Gatekeeper	Market information Consumer information Business contacts	1. New market segments, e.g., from government to private sectors 2. Entry to new international markets 3. Access to major global players facilitating technical collaborations resulting in new products.

We focused only on specialist roles as they are performed with deliberate intentions to achieve the desired outcomes. In dense networks, participants assume expert and orchestrator roles as they seek knowledge resources such as specialized expertise and technical know-how to develop new innovative products as a product-focused approach to business growth. In sparse networks, participants seek information and connections to new markets and consumers as a market-focused approach to business growth, thus assuming more trader, negotiator, and gatekeeper roles.

The last column in Table 5 identifies the outcomes of performing the roles necessary to acquire different types of resources.

Discussion

Our study addresses the gap between the considerable resources provided to entrepreneurs through social networks to circumvent resource limitations (Boso et al., 2013; Pinho and Prange, 2016) and the different roles played by entrepreneurs to capture resources from their social networks. As network resources do not materialize until entrepreneurs take purposeful action (Adler and Kwon, 2002; Weick et al., 2005), we show the integration of entrepreneurs' role enactment within the structure of their social networks and outcomes of their roles.

The network graphs in Figure 1 show a central position for all entrepreneurs except Ryde. The central position of the ego, the entrepreneur's focal actor, is a key feature of ego networks (Burt, 1980: 89-91). Ryde's maximally dense network measuring density indicates a closely knit network of scientific and academic collaborators, where everyone has equal standing. Dense networks encourage trust and open communication conducive to knowledge exchange and collaborative opportunities for developing new products (Tortoriello et al., 2012b). Entrepreneurs in dense networks, such as Ryde, Dale, and Forest, perform expert and orchestrator roles; all three are scientific experts in their fields, and their role enactment is instrumental in their drive for innovative new product development. The exception is Cove, a technical expert in his field, whose sparse network suggests a stronger focus on market expansion than product development. A sparse network structure is consistent with loose, non-affective ties, containing more structural holes and brokerage opportunities, providing access to diverse information, and connecting actors who are non-connected (Burt, 2004; Granovetter, 1973). These characteristics bode well with most entrepreneurs performing trader and negotiator roles, which focus on expanding market segments, geographic expansion, and developing opportunities to connect with global players (Boafo et al., 2022; Martin-Rios and Erhardt, 2017). Furthermore, brokerage opportunities in sparse networks are consistent with the gatekeeper's role in Action and Mel's networks.

Core roles appear to be default roles and are enacted intuitively and almost instinctively. Previous studies allude to these core roles as the founder and leader's role identity (Hoang and Gimeno, 2010) suggesting that entrepreneurs perform multiple roles and identify themselves in all roles required to manage their ventures to achieve innovative, economic, or social outcomes (Mintzberg, 1971). In our network graphs, the default and core roles are visualized through the central position of the entrepreneurs' ego in their networks (Figure 1). The roles enacted in this central position—boss, ambassador, co-creator, and mediator—are associated with being the leader, decision-maker, and boss (Hoang and Gimeno, 2010).

Network measurements of size and density have less relevance in the performance of core roles.

Specialist roles, unlike core roles, are played with purposeful intentions. In our study, this intention was typically motivated by the acquisition of resources to achieve business growth outcomes. Thus, business growth results from the new product development and/or markets. In this study, Ryde, Forest, and Dale are the three entrepreneurs with dense networks. In these situations, we find that entrepreneurs play an expert role based on their scientific training and reputation. Expert roles are often researched in innovation studies in which expertise is required to drive innovative new products (Gemünden et al., 2007). Expert roles may overlap with orchestrator roles because developing new products requires entrepreneurs to play an orchestrator role as they source and mobilize many resources, such as financial resources and external expertise, required to develop new innovative products.

In this study, six participants had relatively sparse networks, with densities ranging 0.17–0. Such sparse structures offer more opportunities and brokerage advantages while pursuing novel connections, resources, and geographical markets. The six entrepreneurs with sparse networks—Action, Mel, Mury, Cove, Mere, and Silver—play strong trader and negotiator roles, which are particularly crucial, as they seek a market expansion strategy as part of their business growth. A gatekeeper role, observed in Action and Mel, fits a protectionist approach to role enactment, as high brokerage and centrality positions are unique, allowing for the perception of power and control of resources (Jacobides and Tae, 2015; Tushman and Katz, 1980).

This study makes an important contribution to existing literature. First, performing different roles requires a network of actors possessing the resources to offer or exchange with each other. Using social network analysis (SNA), we examined the network structure of our participants, highlighting the key network characteristics of size, tie strength, density, and brokerage opportunities to identify their influence on participants' role enactment with others to access resources (Borgatti and Halgin, 2011). Network size, tie strength, and brokerage opportunities enhance entrepreneurs' social capital by facilitating action and interaction with others to seek resources. For example, on the one hand, our study suggests that strong ties in a dense network are conducive for exchanging tacit knowledge of scientific expertise between experts, enabling the development of new innovative products; on the other hand, weak ties in a sparse network create connections to more novel information such as new market segments and geographical markets. Furthermore, numerous brokerage opportunities in sparse networks allow entrepreneurs to control resource flow and reinforce their perception

of power. Second, while entrepreneurs perform core roles such as ambassador, co-creator, and mediator that identify with their position of the boss, leader, and decision maker, we uncover a nuanced ‘do what it takes’ attitude to grow their business venture, suggesting that participants are motivated to take action by performing distinct and sometimes multiple roles with purposeful, deliberate intentions to achieve desired outcomes (Callero, 1994; Gemünden et al., 2007). Specialized roles identified include experts, orchestrators, traders, negotiators, and gatekeepers. Our study indicates that entrepreneurs in the medical device segment focus on developing innovative products as their growth strategy, requiring continuous innovation to stay competitive (AMGC, 2022b). They perform expert and orchestrator roles, leveraging scientific expertise and connections in the segment. In contrast, entrepreneurs in the health supplement segment focalizes on expanding their customer base. Using market knowledge and networks of distributors and customers, entrepreneurs concentrate on developing new market segments and geographical markets, thus enacting more commercially focused roles for traders, negotiators, and even gatekeepers (Voss and Voss, 2013). These five specialized roles are dynamic, and the emphasis can shift, to adjust to entrepreneurs’ resource situations.

Finally, our study provides insights into the complexity of entrepreneurs’ role-related behaviors as they seek business growth. Based on the social identity of entrepreneurs (Powell and Baker, 2017), we emphasize the nuanced perception of enacting different roles to acquire resources (Biddle, 1986). Roles are played in a network of actors, and we identify how role play is integrated into the network’s structural characteristics.

Additionally, this study has managerial implications for resource-seeking entrepreneurs pursuing growth for their business ventures. Resource-seeking entrepreneurs who understand the need to play multiple roles while interacting with alters are likely to achieve their goals. Moreover, entrepreneurs need to function, adapt, act, and interact as roles are dynamic and evolving (Anderson et al., 1998). This behavior may seem opportunistic; however, entrepreneurs can mitigate this by articulating intentions of mutually beneficial economic outcomes for both parties (Emerson, 1976). The familiar, cohesive ties in a dense network can be encouraging and supportive, but weak ties in a sparse network are needed to connect to novel information and markets. The challenge for entrepreneurs is to balance precious networking time to connect with different network actors and entrepreneurial time to grow their businesses.

Our study has some limitations. We introduce the concept of ‘role’ to understand entrepreneurs’ role enactment in resource acquisition. Our interpretations rely on entrepreneurs’ self-descriptions of their actions; however, their descriptions may not

elucidate the context of their intentions and actions completely. Our current study has eight participants, and while it provided valuable insights, our study can be much enriched with more robust results if more participants can be included. In SNA, NetDraw provides useful visuals (Cross et al., 2002) and UCINET 6 (Borgatti et al., 2002) provides the quantification of structural attributes to complement the discussion on role enactment within networks. However, the SNA is data-intensive, which is time-consuming. Moreover, in this study, the SNA data are self-reported and hence prone to recall bias (Marsden, 1990). Following the established literature on egocentric networks, such as this study, the views of other actors are not captured. Thus, SNA theorists advise caution when interpreting network structures.

Therefore, an extension to a broader range of industries and geography is required. This would assist in generalizing and building on the current findings. Nevertheless, we assert that there remains substantial value in studying single countries and industries that aid in understanding the nuances and complexities of entrepreneurs' resource-seeking behaviors in these markets. Future research can also examine other roles besides those identified in this study. Further aspects of role enactment can prove valuable, such as the ease or difficulty of actors' role overlap and transition as well as in appreciating structural network characteristics in ways that are meaningful to the actors.

Final remarks

While the extant literature suggests that social networks provide important resources to entrepreneurs, this study investigates the actions undertaken by entrepreneurs to capture network resources. Our findings suggest that entrepreneurs purposefully enact multiple specialized roles to achieve the desired outcomes for their business growth. Using network graphs to visualize the integration of role enactment with structural network characteristics, we found an interplay between several structural characteristics that influence role enactment. The importance of the network density is noteworthy. For entrepreneurs operating in the medical sector, a dense structure with actors connected directly or indirectly and strong ties provides a conducive environment where knowledge sharing is instrumental in developing innovative products (Coleman, 1988; Tortoriello et al., 2012b). A sparse network structure, in which actors are typically connected to each other through weak ties, offers novel information and connections to new markets (Burt, 2004; Burt, 2019), thus providing opportunities for entrepreneurs to seek growth through market development (Lockett et al., 2012; Martin-Rios and Erhardt, 2017). In addition, the structural holes with rich brokerage

opportunities present in sparse networks enable gatekeeping roles to control the flow of information and resources (Jacobides and Tae, 2015; Tushman and Katz, 1980).

Entrepreneurs seeking a growth strategy may consider product focus, market focus, or both depending on their growth plans (Voss and Voss, 2013; Zhou et al., 2020). We propose that growth-seeking entrepreneurs must be purposeful in their interactions with others in their networks, strategically enact differently, and play multiple roles in their pursuit of resource acquisition (Anderson et al., 1998; Clough et al., 2019b).

Note: We thank the reviewers for their time in reading our paper and for their very helpful comments. As advised, we have addressed these comments in our Limitations. We will continue to improve our paper in preparation to submit to a reputable journal for publication.

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