The role of strong ties in empowering women entrepreneurs in collectivist contexts.

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2023

The Role of Strong Ties in Empowering Women Entrepreneurs in Collectivist Contexts

Abstract

Purpose- This study examines what social ties within collectivist settings mean for women's venturing and how these ties support women in gaining empowerment through their ventures.

Design/methodology/approach- Thirteen in-depth semi-structured interviews with women entrepreneurs located in the United Arab Emirates were conducted to examine the influence of social ties in their ventures.

Findings - The findings reveal that women in this context, contrary to most reported findings in the extant literature, both rely more on, and find strong ties more conducive than weak ties, in most of their entrepreneurial behaviours and activities. Results also show how the UAE's collectivist cultural norms shape social networks and inform individual decision making, resource acquisition, well-being and self-efficacy as well as enhance women's empowerment through entrepreneurship. The women entrepreneurs were found to leverage their social ties for both power and action throughout their entrepreneurial journey consistent with their culture.

Originality - A conceptual model, derived from the results of a qualitative study, illustrating the relationships between women entrepreneurs' use of social ties, and the empowering capacities of venturing within a collectivist cultural context is developed. Based on these findings, we discuss the implications for policy makers and recommend avenues for future research, and research designs, on women entrepreneurs in collectivist contexts.

Keywords social ties, women entrepreneurship, empowerment, collectivist society

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The role of social networks is considered a pivotal element for entrepreneurial behaviour and action (Neergaard et al, 2005; Powell and Grodall, 2005; Drakopoulou-Dodd *et al.*, 2006). The characteristics of social networks underlie numerous influences, and cultural context has been identified as a crucial one of these (Drakopoulou-Dodd and Partra, 2002; Klyver and Foley, 2012). However, research supporting contemporary analysis regarding the impact of social networks on venturing tends to display a US- and European-centric view, or a decontextualized perspective, which assumes a Western form of entrepreneurship that bases on individualist cultural norms as universally standard (Al-Dajani and Marlow, 2013; Welter *et al.,* 2019; Zali *et al.,* 2013). This approach gives little consideration to the relationship between social networks and entrepreneurship based on other cultures, notably collectivist ones. Consistent

with this understanding, inherently entrepreneurial activities such as creativity, innovation, opportunity recognition and opportunity exploitation have been positively associated with distant relationships and weak social ties (Granovetter, 1973; Ruef, 2002; Maurer *et al.,* 2011), which are more prevalent in individualist settings. This is supported by views that see individualism as an essential precursor for growth and wealth creation (Allik and Realo, 2004) and that apply a seemingly culturally objective entrepreneurship research ontology (Shane and Venkataraman, 2000). With increasing intellectual contributions from researchers located in the Global South and in non-Western countries in recent years, considerable ontological and epistemological critique has arisen regarding conventional research logic (Brush *et al.,* 2009; Yousafzai *et al.,* 2018; Welter *et al.,* 2019). There are calls for studies that embrace the heterogeneity and multiplicity of lived entrepreneurial experiences in different cultures, which pay attention to individual involvement in, and enactment of, cultural context (Welter and Gartner, 2016; Al- Dajani and Marlow, 2013) to generate greater contextual understanding regarding the role of social ties and networks for women entrepreneurs (Lindvert *et al.*, 2017; Roos, 2019).

The present paper contributes to this research stream by analysing the impact of social relations/ties on entrepreneurial behaviour and activity of women in a cultural context, that is dominated by the interplay between collectivism and Islamic religion (Tlaiss, 2014), notably female nationals in the Arab-Islamic, collectivist society of the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The paper asks about the relationship between women's use of social relations and their entrepreneurial behaviour within a collectivist cultural context. In this context, the paper will also identify specific and contextualized enunciations of women's networking behaviour. While previous research has shown that collectivism may be particularly important for understanding entrepreneurship in general (Hofstede, 1980; Tiessen, 1997), studies that combine the two research streams (women's businesses and collectivism) are still scarce. The study of female entrepreneurship in developmental contexts often falls victim to similar Western-logical pitfalls, where the concepts of collectivism and gendered patriarchal environment are often blurred or not distinguished (Radcliffe, 2015), allowing underlying assumptions that collectivist contexts are detrimental to female entrepreneurial activities to remain unexamined or critiqued (Arregle *et al.,* 2013). Therefore, the present article analyses what social ties within collectivist settings mean for women's venturing. Collectivist environments prioritize the needs of the group or, at a minimum, consider them at least equally important as individual needs and rights (Triandis *et al.,* 1988). The prevalent understanding of entrepreneurship also implies an individualist notion of the self in relation to social ties (Wood *et al.,* 2021). Entrepreneurship,

particularly with regards to women, is considered a liberating force to gain autonomy and independence from the constraining ties of their collectives (e.g., family, tribe, clan), as a precursor to successfully pursue entrepreneurial venturing (Ojediran and Anderson, 2020). This perspective, however, ignores the embeddedness of women's entrepreneurship in its collectivist cultural contexts, which dominate most regions of the world (Ng *et al.,* 2022). Moreover, the implicit Western individualist perspective underestimates the positive potential of social networks and social ties in collectivist contexts, reflecting the contextual bias when analysing social networking and its impact on entrepreneurial activity. Based on our qualitative study and its empirical findings, we develop a conceptual model that illustrates the relations between women entrepreneurs' use of social ties and the empowering capacities of venturing within collectivist cultural contexts. We show how collectivist cultural norms shape social networks, instruct individual decision making, resource acquisition, well-being and self-efficacy and enhance women's empowerment through entrepreneurship.

Our paper is organized as follows: We begin with a literature review that critically analyses the main concepts and the relations between them; we then contextualize the debate and describe the context of women entrepreneurship in the UAE. This is followed by an explanation of our methodology which details methods utilized to generate our empirical observations. The findings inform our conceptual model, which we discuss in detail. We conclude with our research contribution, whilst recognizing limitations and offering avenues for further research.

Literature review

Entrepreneurship and social networks

Venturing activities are embedded in a network of social relations, notably interpersonal links that can facilitate or constrain entrepreneurial actions (Leyden *et al.,* 2014). Such social networks are central for successful entrepreneurship since they provide access to knowledge, assets, and skills which the individual entrepreneur may otherwise lack (Huang et al. 2019; Ma et al, 2020; Elfring et al. 2021). Within entrepreneurship literature, a distinction between strong and weak ties is common to identify different contributions of social relations to entrepreneurial success (Granovetter 1973). Granovetter identified time spent in a relationship, quality of emotional bonds between actors, degree of relational reciprocity and intimacy, as key factors that influence the strength of a relationship. Weak ties refer to social connections in that they are characterized by substantial distance between actors who do not necessarily share similar backgrounds, life, or professional experiences (Schoonjans *et al.,* 2013; Kozan and Akdeniz,

2014). On the other hand, strong ties base on deep trust and knowledge and on greater emotional investment with people who share the same background or similar life experiences (Jack et al. 2004; Akçomak and Müller-Zick 2018) for example, family and friends (Birley, 1985). Strong ties provide entrepreneurs with detailed and tacit knowledge and resources (Chen and He, 2011), and they are important for entrepreneurial motivation, intention and social support (Hite and Hesterly, 2001).

Weak ties, on the other hand, are distant and diverse in nature, and they provide entrepreneurs with new information, knowledge and perspectives, as well as with greater opportunities to connect with outsiders that can benefit entrepreneurial learning (Kingsley and Malecki, 2004). Weak ties tend to give rise to new business opportunities (Hite and Hesterly, 2001; Leyden *et al.*, 2014).

Research shows that entrepreneurs use a mix of strong and weak network relations during different venture stages (Lechner and Dowling 2003, Sullivan and Ford 2014, Bastian and Tucci 2017; Omar et al. 2020). Both forms of social relations are highly relevant for firms, and fulfil different entrepreneurial needs (Lechner and Dowling 2003; Durda and Ključnikov 2019, Omar et al. 2020). Early stage entrepreneurs have been shown to rely predominantly on strong ties to access scarce resources (Bierly 1985), and to test new ideas (Greve and Salaff 2003). During later venture stages, entrepreneurs use diverse social ties, to gain access to resources, which could not be sourced through the market (Strobl and Kronenberg 2016; Bastian and Tucci 2017), or to benefit from coopetition networks (Elfrink and Hulsing 2003). Diverse social ties also impact entrepreneurial opportunity recognition and exploitation differently (Elfrink and Hulsing 2003).

For example, Partanen et al. (2014) find that the commercialization of radically new products requires the use of strong and weak ties: Strong ties allow for continued interaction with customers, researchers and industry partners to gain better understandings of products, customer needs, and R&D processes. Weak ties relate more to industry partners that can function as brokers to connect entrepreneurs with markets (Partanen et al. 2014). Products that are more incrementally innovative require weaker tie relations that connect entrepreneurs to distributors and distribution networks (Partanen et al 2014; Manuela et al. 2021).

Gender and the use of social networks

Entrepreneurship rates have differed substantially between men and women across many countries. There has been an ongoing debate around the way women and men use social networks and if this impacts entrepreneurial outcomes. Earlier research on the subject found

that women tend to be disadvantaged because of their lack of industry, entrepreneurial and managerial experiences compared with male counterparts, which reflects in the composition of social networks (Fischer et al. 1993; Cromie and Birley 1992). For example, women were shown to rely predominantly on female personal contacts and some singular male primary contact (Cromie and Birley, 1992). Women seemed to have less robust and less diversified networks, which failed to be supportive of innovation development and entrepreneurial growth (Menzies 2004, DeTienne and Chandler, 2007) and less diversified networks of weak and strong ties (Greve and Salaff 2003). Across different countries, women's networks were shown to emphasize strong ties, notably kin relations (Greve and Salaff 2003; Renzulli et al. 2000; Neumeyer et al., 2019) and single networks, mostly family related (Klyver 2011; Bastian and Tucci, 2017). In comparison, men were involved in broader networks (Gonzalez-Alvarez and Solis-Rodriguez 2011) including entrepreneurial ones (e.g. entrepreneurs, investors, business angels). Many of the research findings have been criticized by scholars like Ahl 2005, Ahl and Marlow 2012, 2017; Foss 2010) as overemphasizing differences between male and female entrepreneurial behavior and used to hold women responsible for entrepreneurial failure or ineffectiveness, because they somehow do not meet prevailing male entrepreneurial standards, (Ahl 2005; Ahl and Marlow 2012). In that sense, women's networking is often considered as suboptimal, despite being not so different from male behavior, simply because the gender compositions of networks are predominantly female (Ahl 2005), and there is an assumption that women dominated networks cannot be as effective as male dominated ones (Foss 2010). Such research tends to ignore systemic factors and related structural constraints of gender unequal societies with regards to work, education, career and family circumstances. (Ahl and Marlow 2012; Brush et al. 2019) Besides, gendered professional contexts tend to expose women to less diverse networks and often women are prohibited sufficient access to resources controlled by male dominated networks (Klyver and Grant, 2010; Renzulli *et al.*, 2000; Ufuk and Özgen, 2001).

Culture, empowerment and the use of social networks

In addition to female entrepreneurial behaviour not fitting the predominantly masculine networking norms, social networking, is contingent on culture (Zali *et al.,* 2013; Bastian and Zali, 2016) with concomitantly substantial impact on entrepreneurial outcomes (Ojediran and Anderson 2020). In this context, individualistic cultures emphasize the needs and rights of individuals, assuming that the pursuit of individual wellbeing and prosperity will also benefit the group or society (Matsumoto *et al.,* 1996; Triandis *et al.,* 1988). On the other hand, collectivist cultures primarily prioritize the needs and rights of the group. In individualist

contexts, weak ties were shown to be positively correlated with entrepreneurial opportunity recognition (Ma et al. 2011), innovativeness of firms, and new product and service development, whereas in collectivist contexts, it was shown to be other way around - and strong ties turned out to be more conducive to knowledge sharing and for mobilizing important entrepreneurial resources (Ma et al. 2011; Rooks et al. 2016; Wood et al 2021). In collectivist contexts, social aspects rather than functional benefits are central to understand networking behaviour (Rooks et al 2016) as there is a strong preference toward loyalty to the in-group, such as extended family and tribes (Xiao and Tsui 2009; Wood et al. 2021), and sharing resources bases on social norms that prescribe whom to trust and with whom to share (Ma et al. 2011).

Women's entrepreneurship is also considered as an important catalyst to female agency and empowerment (WEF 2019, UN 2018), where women gain in personal autonomy and overcoming gender discrimination and social constraints (Shamieh and Althalathani 2022). In collectivist contexts, networking behaviour emphasising strong ties was shown to be a particularly successful strategy for women from a venturing and emancipatory perspective. A comparison of Afghan and US American (Bullogh *et al.* 2017) and on female entrepreneurs in the MENA region (Kalafatoglu and Mendoza (2017) reveal how in-group collectives (notably, families) defended women's interests against prevailing gendered societal norms and helped in balancing societal expectations with women's personal goals. Japanese and Chinese case studies show how in-group collectives are central to the entrepreneurial success of female members, since they provide essential support in the form of childcare, psychological help, financial support and others (Sequeira *et al.* 2016). In the following, we examine how the use of social relations support empowerment in an Islamic collectivist context.

Methods

Context: UAE

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) has a Sunni Muslim, Arab culture with family and tribal networks having both an active and central role, and so offers an Islamic model of welfare for local citizens. The UAE has one of the largest oil reserves, thus individual Emirati nationals are very well supported with the state providing all university and medical costs free of charge, and generous support and allowances upon marriage, providing housing and land, pensions and business start-up funding. Recent Gallup data has shown this model to have been reflected in the finding that unemployment – a situation which commonly has a negative impact on well-being – does not have a large role in life satisfaction here (Lambert *et al.,* 2020). There are thought to

be two reasons for this: there is an extensive social safety net, and, as a collective culture, the extended family supports those without work or income of their own.

There are large numbers of female students in universities across the country – according to the UAE Gender Balance Council, over 70% of university graduates in the country are women - who also directly benefit from the mandating of entrepreneurial education in the country for all students. Traditional barriers to women's entrepreneurship such as access to capital, lack of family/spousal support, imposter syndrome and the like are not prevalent here. Emirati women have access to and autonomy over their own money, which is frequently substantial, given that 'maintenance' costs for female family members is the purview of males (fathers, brothers, husbands) (Briegel and Zivkovic, 2008). In fact, the latest Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM) report reflects that although overall numbers are still small, women almost equal men in terms of entrepreneurial activity in the UAE, and a similar situation exists across the Gulf, with Saudi Arabia having more women entrepreneurs than men. In summary, Emirati women are autonomous and privileged with their access to, and interest in, entrepreneurial activities supported by the state, the local religion and commonly in families and wider society. In addition, the confidence Emirati women feel in their ability and their position as entrepreneurs is reflected in the GEM finding that entrepreneurs in the country regard themselves as innovative and having made an innovative contribution to marketing or business through their work.

Data collection and analysis

This study focuses on exploring the social ties leveraged by women entrepreneurs beyond their types and nature, focusing on the socialization process that creates different strengths in ties, which then produces empowerment. As such, the investigation into social ties includes contextual conditions by looking at their importance in business ventures. With the research question looking to investigate 'why' and 'how' social ties supported the entrepreneurial behaviour and activities of women entrepreneurs in a collectivistic context, a qualitative methodology based on multiple cases was adopted (Yin, 2013). This approach was chosen to offer an in-depth explanation, with comprehensive and rich insights, on how different social ties embedded in the real-life environment impacted women entrepreneurial behaviour and empowerment (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007). Multiple cases are necessary to capture the heterogeneity and uniqueness of each woman and her ventures.

Face-to-face interviews were chosen as the main data collection method. With support from the Abu Dhabi Chamber of Commerce and Industry (ADCCI), the women entrepreneurs

were selected based on purposeful sampling. Three criteria were used in selecting the cases. First, following the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM) classification of an owner/manager of an 'established business', we selected only local woman entrepreneurs with an established business of more than 42-months. This allows richer experience and more evidence in their sharing on social interactions with different ties. The second criterion is she must employ at least two full-time workers, to show her ability in job creation. Third, the business must be fully owned and managed by the women entrepreneur herself. Using the database provided by ADCCI's Al Ain office, we approached 75 women fulfilling these criteria as potential informants. Few qualified for invitation, as the majority only take part in business on a part-time or co-owned basis. To ensure confidentiality and with respect to the national culture, the business specialist at ADCCI contacted the potential informants on our behalf to obtain their agreement to participate. After several rounds of arranging suitable times to meet, we managed to conduct interviews with thirteen women in their business premises or the ADCCI office. Though the sample was identified in the Al Ain branch, the participants conducted business throughout the UAE. Al Ain has the highest proportion of Emirati nationals in comparison with expat-dominated cities like Dubai and Abu Dhabi , as it is where the founding father of UAE started his political career and the birthplace of the rulers of the UAE, Al Ain remains a royal city. Thus, it preserves a rich Emirati culture. The majority of the Emiratis in Al Ain live close to their family, or within the same family compound that supports collective customs and norms. The oldest university in the country is also in Al Ain and most of its graduates are female. The university is also one of the first to offer a business degree with a major in entrepreneurship.

A brief interview guide, including such questions as age, educational, venture information, types of social ties, their social interactions, positive outcomes from the ventures etc., was devised from the literature review and administered to the women entrepreneurs during the meetings to facilitate the overall direction of the interviews. They were asked to comment in detail on how they use and engage different social ties in business ventures. Data collection continued until additional interviews did not seem to generate any new conceptual categories, which has been referred to as data saturation in the literature (Suri, 2011). The women entrepreneurs appreciated research focusing on them and shared their thoughts openly. They were pleased that researchers from different backgrounds were interested to learn their stories. Under such settings, we reduced social desirability bias, as the subjects of study were not drawn to give better answers to conform to the societal expectations (Glesne, 2006; Maxwell, 2005). The length of the interviews varied from a minimum of 60 minutes to a

maximum of 120 minutes. All participants allowed the interviews to be audio recorded. A female native speaker of Arabic with research experience was present during each interview to interpret. Professional transcribers converted each recording into a written document. The native Arabic speaker conducted follow-up telephone interviews where necessary, to clarify information and obtain missing data. Secondary information such as company catalogues, websites, newsletters, and interviewer notes were triangulated with the interview data to enhance construct validity and reliability. Profiles of the women interviewed is shown in Table 1. Pseudonyms were given to the interviewees to ensure anonymity. They were 35.71 years old on average, with the youngest being 22 and the oldest being 59 years old. Regardless of their age, education background and business characteristics, all the women interviewed relied on family as their main social ties in business, while relatives and friends formed the second group of dominant ties.

Table 1 Profile of women interviewed

Pseudonym	Age	Education	Age of business	# of staff	Social ties used
Aisha	38	High school	3	16	Family, friends, and social media
Amal	30	Master's degree	6	4	Family and business contacts
Fatima	45	High school	7	4	Family
Fazeya	59	High school	16	2	Family, relatives, and friends
Ghada	40	Bachelor's degree	7	2	Family and social media
Mariam	35	Bachelor's	8	7	Family, relatives, and friends
Meera	24	Bachelor's	6	8	Family
Muna	22	Bachelor's	9	13	Family
Noura	34	High school	8	4	Family and friends
Pure	38	Bachelor's	9	25	Family and social media
Salama	45	Bachelor's	28	17	Family
Shaikha	28	Bachelor's	9	40	Family, relatives, friends and friends of friends
Shamsa	27	Master's	9	6	Family

To ensure reliability and consistency in the analysis process, each member of the research team read through the interview transcripts several times to get a comprehensive understanding of each case, then organising them into categories using table and highlighting text on the transcripts. We developed a cross-case analysis to find the commonalities and differences in the types and use of social ties among the women entrepreneurs (see Table 2). Then, notes and highlighted transcripts were compared to discover possible properties based on the cases (examples of short notes found in Table 2). With the use of Nvivo 12, the transcripts were coded, and properties were grouped into categories. The analysis allowed us to form first-

order codes, which emerged from the rich data. The iterative process of exploring themes and cases ceased when we found we could no longer discover any new categories. Based on these first-order codes, we identified themes to generate second-order codes by showing their connection with entrepreneurial behaviour and empowerment. Following that, aggregate theoretical dimensions were developed, which are illustrated in our data structure table (Table 3). Table 3 provides the detail of how we progressed from raw data to emerging themes (Gioia *et al.,* 2013). We had a vigorous and extensive series of meetings to review the responses from the interviewees. The robustness of these discussions leveraged our various personal, national and academic backgrounds as none of us are Emirati nationals or native Arabic speakers. This allows us to view the subject matter from different angles while also understanding the interactions in context (Flyvbjerg, 2006). The research team have conducted extensive research and work in the Arab region. One of the members was invited to facilitate series of workshop to support new venture creation for the Emiratis and worked on the socioemotional wealth aspect of family business in the UAE. Two members in the team have lived and socialised with the Emiratis for more than three years. They have also developed strong engagement with the Emirati venture funding agency, Chamber of Commerce and the local communities.

Table 2 Cross-case analysis table

	Aisha	Amal	Fatima	Fazeya	Ghada	Meriam	Meera
Business	Interior design	Event planner	Handcraft	Tailor	Trading	Fashion designer	Flower shop
Types of social ties (ST) used	Family, friends, and social media	Family and business contacts	Family	Family, relatives, and friends	Family and social media	Family, relatives, and friends	Family
ST influence on decision-making to create venture	Wanted to become like her friends who are entrepreneur	Buy and sell items for colleagues	Grandmother was her role model	Mother and older sister are tailors	Father was an entrepreneur	Inspired and encouraged by parents	Sister's encouragement
ST for resource acquisitions	Family home as initial office, family and friends keep recommending her business (network)	Business contacts provided advice and network opportunities	Money from husband and children. Brother and children recommending her business	Relatives and daughter's friends used her service. Skills from her mother and sister.	Networks through family and social media to generate business	Friends buying her design and recommending to others	Money and business networks from family
ST influence on state of feeling	Family supportive with action and words	Good partnership with sister	Strong support from family	Contentment to provide for family	Husband's constant encouragement	Using venture experience to teach children	Thankful and grateful partnering with sister
ST support on perceived ability	Ties expansion via social media	Training at Khalifa Fund	Family pushes her to achieve what she wanted	More confident dealing with customers.	Institutional support for stall	Boosted her confidence	Loan and network from Khalifa Fund
Short notes	Was a police officer and shooting instructor but a very creative person	Quite unsure of how to plan, goes with the flow and market, cheerful and optimistic	Ambitious though she never had any work experience before the venture	Humble and soft spoken, tidy workspace, strong emphasis on family	Mistakes did not deter her motivations, bold and business oriented	A risk taker to do what it takes to be successful, no prior work experience	Young entrepreneur with prior start-up experience

Note: Yellow highlight= strong ties; Turquoise highlight= weak ties

Table 2 Cross-case analysis table (cont')

	Muna	Noura	Pure	Salama	Sheikha	Shamsa
Business	Abaya design	Children clothing	Fashion designer	Architecture firm	Restaurant	Software developer
Types of social ties (ST) used	Family	Family and friends	Family and social media	Family	Family, relatives, friends and friends of friends	Family
ST influence on decision-making to create venture	Family and friends like her design	Inherited sewing skills from mother	Family like her design	Encouraged by father	Family loves her cooking	Inspired by father.
ST for resource acquisitions	Financial support from her family	Using home as workspace and self-funded but received help from sisters	Network and earlier business recommended by family and through social media	Family funded initial set up, relied on relatives to recommend business	Family provided financial and network in the beginning, father helped with business plan	Relied on advice and financial support from father initially, then friends and relatives
ST influence on state of feeling	Emotional support from family, cohesion in venture with family	Self-confidence and constant passion in her venture	Contented and thankful with own abilities	Appreciated support received from family.	Thankful for her current success with strong desire to expand	Enjoy working as a family with her team and employees
ST support on perceived ability	Abilities to use social media to get customers, involved in start-up competition	Ability to organise resources to start the business	Strong networks through social media and TV to promote her business	Showed that woman can do anything after facing difficulties in early years	Confident to set up more restaurants with family's support	Received training and education from university on entrepreneurship
Short notes	Housewife turned entrepreneur with no work experience	Father initially rejected her idea but became supportive after seeing her determination; without work experience.	Enthusiastic and determine to expand her business. Lavish fashion house emphasising the needs of the ladies.	First female architect in her town, reflected on prior mistakes but determined to pursue bigger plan	Upskilling e.g. accounting course to manage finances, thoughtful person that cares about her employees	Started business while still in university with friends, adventurous and risk-taker

Note: Yellow highlight= strong ties; Turquoise highlight= weak ties

Table 3 Data Structure and Coding

Examples of raw data from interviews	Provisional categories and first-order	Theoretical categories (2nd order)	Aggregate theoretical dimension
When I started to buy some products and sell them for my colleagues, they liked to buy from me because I was selling them unique products, they could not find these products in UAE. They preferred to buy most of their requirements from me. So, I thought to start my own business. (Amal) *At first, when I was young, I enjoyed designing clothes very much. I designed many clothes for me, my sister and my mother. After that I started to also design for my other family members. (Pure)* *My grandmother also liked handcrafts and she was a role model for me to go into this business. (Fatima)* *My father was my best model and encouraged me. He motivated me and always tells me that if I want to accomplish anything in life, then I can do it. (Salama)* *Yes, because most of my family members have their own business, they gave me a lot of advices, so they are my role models when growing up. (Amal)* *I had many friends who have become entrepreneurs, they shared their knowledge with me, and I wanted to become like them. (Aisha)*	Statements about roles of different social ties in venture creation	Idea validation Role model	Decision-making power
My relatives were the basic network that I had at that time; they were the reason of spreading "marketing" about my business by telling their friends about my office. (Salama) *Also, all my family members are somehow involved in business, ... I benefited from my dad's experience in business. Also, all my family members have different kinds of projects, so I gained knowledge from this. (Pure)*	Statements about access to resources through different social ties	Money Networks Skills	Resource acquisition

I had good relations with my friends and family, and they kept recommending me and thus I became more known. I had only one employee working with me on this in the beginning. I started at my house with my family support. (Aisha) *My father greatly helped us in the networking part. He connected us to potential investors and big people in the software gaming industry which pushed us up a lot. (Shamsa)* *My mother gave me special lessons in sewing. Because she is a sewing teacher. She had a sewing machine and makes me hand-sew clothes for me and my sisters until I love sewing. I grew up with this passion and increased my talent until I became a dressmaker. (Noura)* *I had my sketches and old dresses designs which helped me as a resource, also for the financial resources my family helped me in addition to the money I had. (Muna)*			
My husband faced financial problems which encouraged me to start the business to create enough income to support my family. Thank God now my earnings from the business can provide for my family. (Fazeya) *Thank God. I exceeded and got over all difficulties. I feel I can easily start and run a business. (Meera)* *I gained a lot of experience from my business, even when it wasn't successful. I learned the value of money and I also taught my children the value of one dirham [UAE basic unit of currency]. (Meera)* *I wanted to launch a business, but I didn't know when it was the right time to do it until my brother encouraged me to do it; he gave me his support and all the family did. What motivated me in the first place was my family (Muna)*	Statements about how the state of feeling about business ventures are influenced by the different social ties	Contentment Venture-family cohesion	Well-being
My friends admired my clothes and my elegance, which gave me the confidence to start this project, where I design dresses and Abayas for women. (Mariam)	Statements about how perceived ability are supported by different social ties	Self-confidence	Self-efficacy

The reason that made me start is talent and experience and I have a space in the house equipped with several sewing machines and all the tailor needs; that I have the possibilities and the capital and the manpower - who are my sisters - that they have learned with me the art of sewing, through our mother. (Noura) *I felt ready and I was very excited opening the restaurant. With the support of the family, I was able to come to this success. (Shaikha)* *Mubdea [UAE government funding] for small projects gave me a shop in the Zaafarana area in Alain. I also attended fairs in the United Arab Emirates University, where the girls there loved my products. They know the good products, so they preferred to buy mine. (Ghada)* *I attended training courses at Khaliah funding box in how to make business plans. (Amal)* *I was part of the entrepreneurship club at university. I even tried starting my own crafting shop as I am good at making things. (Shamsa).* *I participated in a start-up competition before. UAEU has a program called Science Park, which organizes an annual competition for projects. (Muna)* *Additionally, I made an Instagram account to sell my products. Selling through Instagram helped me very much. Also, when people try my products and recommend them, this is very good advertising. (Ghada)* *I made many designs and posted them on Instagram. (Aisha)* *I have Snapchat, Instagram and WhatsApp to communicate with my customers and they introduce new customers to me too. (Meera)*		Institutional support Bridging via social media	

Findings

The four aggregate theoretical dimensions are explained with supporting quotes from the thirteen cases. Referring to the literature, the dimensions are linked to the concept of empowerment. In another words, social ties leveraged by the women eventually boosted their empowerment.

Social ties, decision making power and empowerment

The women relied extensively on close social ties during the venture creation stage, especially for idea validation and inspiration. Despite having no relevant experience in business or entrepreneurship, Fazeya took a great leap of faith to venture into business at the age of 59. The fact that friends and relatives admired her fashion designs gave her the idea to start a business in the fashion industry. "*After my family members praised the clothes that I had made for myself. They asked me to make similar ones for them. When I made clothes for my relatives and my daughters' friends, they liked them very much and I decided to start my own project*". She had a competitive edge since she was one of the first women to start one of these businesses in her area. Similarly, Aisha decided to begin her own journey with her company for interior home decoration in 2014, when she turned her hobby into her job. Her first offer was to decorate just one room in a relative's house. Most of the women recognized their talents and skills. They were able to have their business ideas validated through social ties like family, friends and relatives, who interacted with them frequently. These strong ties network members noticed and commended the business ideas, which allowed the women entrepreneurs to gain personal autonomy by venturing into their business (Rindova *et al.,* 2009).

The women were also inspired by their family members and friends in making the start-up decision. As stated by Shamsa: "*My father is an entrepreneur; hence, I have always seen it as something inspiring that everyone should venture into. He has been working on his business for almost 10 years now and it has become a very well-established company in the UAE. I grew up looking up to my father and seeing how hard working he was. This had always motivated me in wanting to become an entrepreneur when I grew up*". Similar influences were also found in Noura: "*My friends and some of my family members have their own business and that makes me brave enough to start a business.*" Strong support from families and friends empowered SS and Noura to choose the entrepreneurship pathway. In a collective society like the UAE, it is not a surprise that the women entrepreneurs were heavily influenced by what friends and family members are doing (Bullogh *et al.* 2017). Again, the effects of these strong ties develop an entrepreneurial culture in the family or social circles, which give rise to the women's decision-

making power (Carmichael and Mazonde, 2016). With the decision-making power drawn from social ties through idea validation and role models, the women established their business. This shows that they were able to exercise their right to pursue their dreams and be held accountable for the outcomes, a clear demonstration of empowerment. It is important to note that there was a lack of weak ties in supporting their venture creation, in contradiction to what is commonly claimed in the entrepreneurship literature (Leyden *et al.,* 2014).

Social ties, resource acquisition and empowerment

Resources are important in any business venture especially in the early years when the business lacks legitimacy and is new to the market (Vershinina *et al.,* 2020). These women also experienced resource limitations. However, many of them were able to acquire resources through social ties. For example, Meera: "*In the beginning, my husband encouraged me and provided me with the capital for investment. We shared ideas and developed the business by investing the profits.*" This young high-school certificate holder who had no prior savings started a flower shop with funding from her husband. Fatima who initially sold her products on the Internet, opened her shop when her husband bought the premises. She explained: "*My husband just told me to prepare large quantities of products for sale. He didn't mention anything about the shop until he took me to Abu Dhabi to show me this shop. So, I wasn't prepared, and it was a shock for me to suddenly have my own place to work instead of just the social media business.*" Spousal support empowered Meera and Fatima to have more access to, and to allocate more resources for their business ventures.

The women also received skills and expertise through their social ties, especially from family members. For example, Shaikha: "*My mother is a very good cook. I developed an interest in cooking too. I grew up with this and learnt cooking from my mother. Eventually in 2013, I decided to open my own restaurant and, to my surprise, it became a huge success.*". Cooking skills inherited from her mother empowered Shaikha to recognise her capability to start her own restaurant. SL who was the first female architect in the area took around a year to start receiving clients. Despite this struggle, she didn't give up as she believed in her work, which she was very passionate about. She claimed that she received the qualities of being patient and persistent from her father. The close relationships with family supported these women with valuable intangible resources as well (Wood and Al-Azri, 2019).

To build up a new small-scale business, the women relied heavily on the support of social ties of different strengths. Many mentioned that family, relatives and friends showed strong support by buying products/services from their business. Amal started selling unique

products to her friends and colleagues. She also developed strong business contacts from a prior fashion business that had strengthened her network, which was also beneficial to the new venture. Similarly, Shaikha who started an Emirati restaurant, explained how her social ties helped: *"....my network was small at the beginning. It was only made up of close relatives, friends and friends of friends. But this is how many ventures start and eventually grow and expand into empires"*. Resources obtained through social ties with frequent interactions suggest a strong bond between the women and their living environment. They managed to use these ties to set up and build up their business, especially through strong ties. The access to resources and skills appears to translate to greater power of women within the society, through their business ventures. These women found their positions and a niche in the market that generates business profitability. This further boosts their control over resources.

Social ties, well-being and empowerment

Well-being is the third aggregate dimensions found when the women were asked how they felt about their ventures. There was a strong sense of contentment amongst most of them. Besides the physical support received from their social ties, there was consistent psychological and emotional encouragement from their family (Sequeira *et al.*, 2016). Amal who has never worked for others, relied solely on her entrepreneurial family to start her own brand of Emirati dresses. She received strong support from her family members who often gave her advice. She felt happy to work along with her family members in this venture and proud to showcase Emirati culture to the world. Similarly, Shamsa, the edutainment innovator who developed software for children, expressed her contentment: "*The main value we emphasize in our start-up is being a family. We value closeness, so that the work environment should feel less like work and more like something we enjoy doing together as one family*." She was proud of having a business that created a feeling of closeness among the co-workers. For women who are married and with children, some successfully developed venture-family cohesion. Their strong social ties, especially from family members, allows them flourishing positive meaning in life. As stated by Fatima: "*This business helps me to improve my skills, to mark my presence in UAE and to show that I can do anything I want. And this motivation made me see criticism, especially from my family, as motivation which helped me to improve my products and sell more products*". Family did not just provide resources or inspiration, it offered strength to women entrepreneurs. The strong ties gained from family support and colleagues show that meaningful relationships are in harmony with their business accomplishments, which championed the well-being of women entrepreneurs. In a collective cultural environment, women venturing would consider the well-

being of their group/family (Wood *et al.,* 2021). Thus, the women were further empowered when their venture success reflected positively on the family.

Social ties, self-efficacy and empowerment

We also found a role for strong and weak ties in explaining the womens self-efficacy. First, there was a high level of self-confidence found among the women. For instance, Meera who rented a premise in a shopping mall even before obtaining a business license, shared how she gained confidence from her parents: "*My dad always encouraged me to believe in myself. When I was young, my mum encouraged us to open a small grocery store. She bought some sweets and asked me to sell them to my relatives and our neighbours. I learned how to sell and conduct commerce with others. I felt confident with this kind of "trading*". Encouragement from parents elevated Meera's self-efficacy, thus empowering her to embark on an entrepreneurial journey. Muna, who is also in the fashion industry, was initially unsure about her desire to start a business upon graduating from university. However, she received encouragement from her family - especially her brother who helped her with the business applications: "*He motivated me and always tells me that if I want to accomplish anything in life, then do it!*" The strong ties and support from family were prevalent in all the cases, where the women gained strong self-confidence regardless of their business experience and readiness. Such confidence prompted their beliefs about personal capabilities that are instrumental to self-efficacy.

Other important ties which were discussed were institutional support. These could be considered as weak ties as the women do not have frequent interaction with institutions such as government, business agencies and network groups. However, there were direct and indirect impacts of such ties in motivating their self-efficacy. Government policies to encourage entrepreneurship in the UAE offered several opportunities to these women. All of them received the benefits of a good education system that helped them realize their abilities to accomplish something in life. Specifically, Amal and Meera obtained funding and training from the government to start their business while Ghada, Aisha and Noura utilized the local women entrepreneur programs run by the Abu Dhabi Chamber of Commerce and Industry that allowed them to start their business from home. Shamsa and Muna also participated in start-up training while they were at university. The support they received from institutions further developed their capability and self-efficacy.

Finally, weak ties through social media were used to connect the women beyond their usual living environment. Though strong ties were crucial in starting and developing new businesses, these women entrepreneurs realized the importance of expanding their

entrepreneurial landscape. Many of them took the initiative to market their products/services using social media. For example, Pure who has built up a household name in the fashion industry shared: "*I created a big social network through Instagram, where I still sell my products now and it even helped me to sell my products internationally. I receive many orders from outside UAE. I first used social media, especially Instagram and Snapchat, to show my designs and I became well-known. Within the first year when I began doing this, my designs were requested by Dubai TV and Abu Dhabi TV.*" The successful use of the digital platforms not only created more business opportunities, but it also helped the women to feel a great sense of achievement. They believed it was possible to garner business success with their abilities and hard work.

Self-efficacy has a crucial role in the entrepreneurship and empowerment process (Ahl and Marlow, 2012; Cattaneo and Chapman, 2010). The findings suggest three elements - self-confidence, institutional support, and use of social media - give rise to self-efficacy. Compared to the other aggregate theoretical dimensions that are mainly influenced by strong ties, the role of weak ties was found critical in building self-efficacy among women entrepreneurs.

Discussion

Based on the findings discussed, a model is proposed to show the relationships between social ties, the four theoretical dimensions and empowerment in Figure 1. The figure suggests that the women entrepreneurs relied on strong and weak ties to support their business ventures and achieve empowerment. Through these supports, they realised their decision-making power, acquired resources, achieved well-being, and developed self-efficacy. The four aggregate theoretical dimensions are linked to the concept of empowerment, where we noticed a sense of agency and power to make personal choices among the women. This indicates that both strong and weak ties are needed for empowerment to happen through entrepreneurship. Referring to the data, it is believed that the empowerment happened concurrently and was ongoing as the women received support. Nevertheless, the results reveal a dominant influence of strong ties through the four aggregate theoretical dimensions on empowerment in this collectivist context.

Research found that emotional and companionship support are provided by strong ties, while tangible and informational support are acquired through weak ties (Walker *et al*., 1993). The theoretical dimensions developed in this study offered similarity to their study, but we found strong ties to have more significant role than weak ties in providing tangible resources like money, networks and skills, and offering knowledge in idea validation and role modelling. Contrary to prior research conducted in individualist settings where distant relationships and

weak ties have been associated with entrepreneurial activities (Granovetter, 1973; Maurer *et al.,* 2011), our findings underscore the importance of social support through strong ties in helping the Emirati women to build their business ventures and develop empowerment.
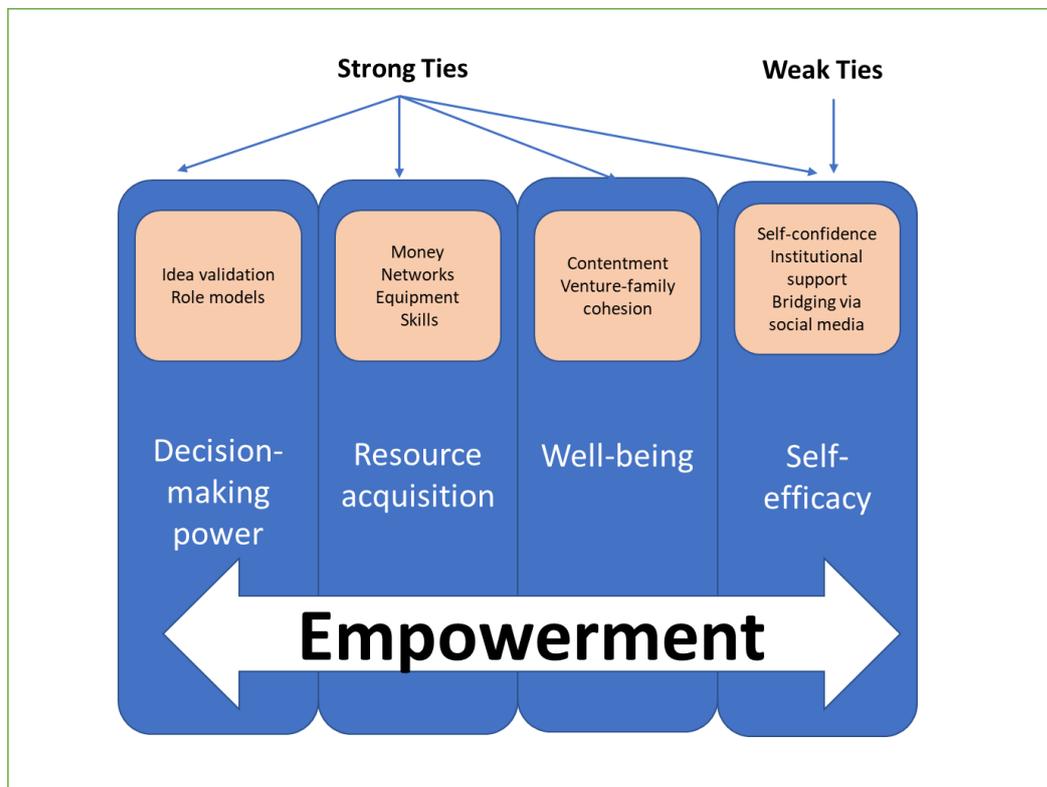

Figure 1 Contextualising women entrepreneur's social ties and empowerment

The present findings suggest that in this example of a collective society, the whole structure of how the balance of social ties works in favour of women's entrepreneurship and empowerment must be reformulated. These findings do not preclude applicability within other contexts (perhaps even less collectives ones), or to collective groups within more individualistic settings – given that collectivity is a continuum (Kağitğibaşi, 2007). Our empirical analysis illustrates how women's empowerment and venturing relates to the use of strong ties in a collectivist context of the UAE. In this, it contradicts research that is critical of family based social capital and that claims that strong ties inhibit female agency and slow down women's venturing (for example Lindvert *et al.,* 2017). The empirically informed framework reflects a different pattern entirely: The social ties- 'base' unit is often quite large, consisting of a family and extended family – maybe even a whole tribal grouping – where the source of power and permission is this base group, and that back-up and support generates a 'bottom up' resource for support in decision-making and provision of autonomy and empowerment (Kağitğibaşi 2007). Our respondents use their large base unit (family, extended family, tribe) and leverage strong ties for both power and permission in their entrepreneurship (Wood*. et al.,*2021;

Kalafatoglu and Mendoza, 2017). This relational self-concept where socialization into the group allows the group to be a rich resource as well as a scene for autonomous agency, means strong ties support decision-making in the context. Important elements for successful venturing, such as idea validation and role modelling are incubated in the group, within the collective of strong ties. Synergistic power and agency come from the support and expertise found in the group, enabling ideas to be well validated and developed before the formal business is started.

Funding for the start-up often comes from personal savings, family savings or from the wider collective in the form of government support. The benevolent social safety net in place for Emirati nationals means that there is extensive social support for entrepreneurship in terms of tangible and intangible resources – workshops, training, funding, mentoring – although our respondents first leverage family and extended family networks where possible for all these resources. In these ways, strong ties again dominate weak ties and are viewed as a necessary 'feedback loop' for the family in terms of personal and societal empowerment. Moreover, our respondents clearly considered well-being to be key to their business success (Tlaiss, 2015). This position is consistent with the well-being research conducted across societies in psychology, where collective societies – particularly Islamic ones - tend to value eudemonic happiness over hedonic happiness – a low hum of constant contentment over a short-lived rush of hedonic joy (Joshanloo, 2013). This difference in the way well-being is conceived also skews research on how people are understood to define 'the good life'. Women's contentment with their entrepreneurial choices and their sense of well-being is pivotal to female business success and appears to be more important than innovation. Their well-being was enmeshed with 'others' (family, tribe) – sharing reputation, funding, supply chains, and role modelling (Ennis, 2019). Having a large, strong, social ties- 'base' group is also consistent with eudemonic happiness, as contentment is situated within a larger sphere of consideration than the single self, which also appears to be more organic in a collective context since it is considerate of group needs as well as group priorities commonly being privileged over individual ones.

Our findings contradict research that finds that women are restricted in their social capital due to cultural and religious norms in Islamic societies. For example, Lindvert *et al.* (2017) claim that "in traditional Islamic contexts, it is generally not socially accepted for women to run their own business or even to work outside the home." (p.766). We caution against such generalizations as they reflect perspectives rooted in Western ethnographic hegemonic conceptions of one homogeneous (orthodox and traditional) Islamic context. This assumes individualist cultural norms for all women entrepreneurs and their empowerment and

is oblivious to the diversity of female entrepreneuring and empowerment (Al-Dajani and Marlow 2013) in various collectivist and/or Islamic contexts.

As mentioned above, the collective, and strong ties within it, allow for both autonomous action and a maintenance of a relational self-concept. In fact, the women's self-construal bases on interdependence with the group and is socially embedded (Al-Dajani *et al.,* 2019) in contrast to an individualist setting that is based on autonomy and separation of others. As a source of power and permission the collective supports self-confidence, with reinforcement from family members and extended family too. This support is also provided by the UAE government in terms of institutional support. Weak ties are also leveraged at this level, in terms of engagement with social media and outreach to more distant connections. Customers are collected and communicated with via social media, particularly visual media where pictures of work/examples of creations can be shown and advertised. Weak ties, typically linked to innovation in the literature were, in our study, still enthusiastically pursued through leveraging social media to compensate for knowledge, reach, distribution gaps. In this way, weak ties could perhaps overcome the eventual constraints strong ties may generate, after a prolonged period of immersion and reliance on them. Moreover, throughout our research we have been struck by how confident our respondents are. This self-belief and self-efficacy are supported in the GEM (2020) data, which reflects the viewpoint of Emirati entrepreneurs (particularly women) who believe themselves to actively contribute to innovation in their ventures.

Conclusion

Within entrepreneurship literature, cultural contextualization especially with regards to collectivists environments has not been obvious in prevailing discourses regarding the relation of social networks and social ties with entrepreneurship. Important inconsistencies persist regarding assumed universalities of entrepreneurial networking behaviour across culture and gender. The present paper contributes to literature that increasingly addresses other cultural contexts than Euro- and US- centric ones (Wood et al., 2021; Boulanouar and Wood, 2018; Tlaiss, 2014) and it produces evidence regarding a positive correlation between reliance on strong ties in this collectivist society and successful women's venturing. With this it extends our understanding of women's use of social ties, which has been predominantly considered as detrimental for innovativeness and firm performance. In fact, it reveals that women in a collectivist context do benefit extensively from the use of close social connections. Our empirically informed paper has addressed women's entrepreneurship in the UAE, an Arab – Islamic and collectivist culture context, where cultural norms strongly support gender separation in most

aspects of life. This has also made the sample compelling for a study of the use of social ties in connection with female venturing and empowerment within a collectivist environment, as both the ethnic and religious contexts the UAE represents, suggest the findings could apply across a wide range of similar contexts.

It is natural in cultures that prioritise group harmony or well-being over individual priorities, that the research on the importance of weak ties undertaken in an individualistic context may be less emphatic. This study does not discount weak ties or challenge their role in innovation and variety-seeking, but it does highlight the primacy of strong ties in our chosen, collectivist, context – the UAE. Given that the majority (of cultures of the) world (Kağitğibaşi, 2007) are collectivist, or more collectivist cultures (Rizvi, 2022) further study of the role(s) of strong ties is indicated. This study responds to literature that calls for research on the place and use of strong and weak ties in a collective cultural context for women entrepreneurs, as well as calls to focus on women's own experience, context, psycho-social priorities and in their own voices (Henry *et al.* 2016; Marlow, 2014).

For wider collectivist contexts and, in our study Arab-Islamic contexts, there are several layers where 'mis-framing' can be said to have occurred (Ali, 2022). These findings are timely, as calls are increasingly being made for rethinking baseline assumptions about entrepreneurial framings, particularly for women, which may prove to be much more heterogeneous than currently imagined (e.g., Susan Marlow Keynote at Diana, 2021). Women, in our sample want their collectivist values to reflect in, and on, their entrepreneurial activities. Our analysis throws light on cultural assumptions premised in the individualist logic that still dominates entrepreneurship teachings and is even very common in gender and entrepreneurship research. Such research tends to overlook the potential of collectivist societies in strengthening female venturing and innovation (Abdelwahed et al, 2022). In this regard, further research is necessary to present an unbiased cultural perspective and that gives voice to collectivist perspectives as they are prevalent in societies in the Global Majority countries. This would advance our understanding regarding the complexities and the diversity of women's entrepreneurship worldwide.

The present research has emphasized strong ties and their impact on female venturing and empowerment. However, many of the weak ties identified in the literature – such as business networks for women entrepreneurs – are, in fact, in place in the UAE. The fact that none of our respondents mentioned them raises the question that they may be ineffective. As a result, we consider that policy makers in the UAE context are active and engaged and there are many options and opportunities for women entrepreneurs to access funding, support, training

and education. Perhaps a role they could expand is that of further support of strong ties, as these systems all rely on strong ties as part of the culture already. We also see no evidence of 'trickle down' in the institutional networks or structures and this may be attributed to two very strong forces in the society, both built around (in-group/out-group) trust – tribal structures and social class.

Currently, there is a strong trend to see women's entrepreneurship as a central catalyst for female empowerment via women's integration in labour markets and economy and as such enhance economic development (WEF 2019; UN 2018). Addressing the relationship between entrepreneurship and empowerment in our research risks promoting a similar vision of women's empowerment solely as mean for development and economic empowerment as main goal (Al Hakim et al, 2022). This has not been our objective, rather we acknowledge how predominantly individualist perspectives inform our understanding of women entrepreneurship with consequences for our ontological understandings. This is particularly problematic when these ontologies inform development policies, especially in countries in the Global Majority, which are for the most part collectivist cultures. It is our intention to contribute to a better understanding regarding entrepreneurship and empowerment in different cultural settings to properly distinguish and evaluate empowerment outcomes and entrepreneurial results.

In this way, our paper offers two main points of summary: 1) reconsidering strong ties, especially in more collective contexts and 2) a new/another formula of empowerment more consistent with collective norms and life patterns. As demonstrated by our findings, strong ties were leveraged in our sample of respondents to support (particularly) venture creation, especially validation and inspiration; resource acquisition – both financial and in skills and expertise terms, with access to resources increasing power, then profitability, leading to access to further resources; well-being where families – often very extended ones – offered strength, with meaningful relationships personifying business accomplishment for women, and business success positively reflecting on the family; and lastly, in self-efficacy terms, where self-confidence (nurtured through family support), institutional support and a use of weak ties in terms of social media use reinforced self-efficacy and self-belief. So, when the relevance and significance of strong ties is considered, an alternative "formula" for empowerment is revealed. Such a formula involves leveraging the power and permission for the group to engage relational selfhood and through this 'bottom up' process, empower the individual <u>through</u> the processes of the group. Empowerment – of the individual and change for both the individual and the group – comes from a push from beneath, rather than a challenge from above [or outside] (Kabeer, 1999). This collective power, evident in Japanese and Māori culture (Jackson, 2007) and other

indigenous cultures will be easily recognisable to those familiar with cultures other than those emphasising individualism, head-to-head challenge/confrontation, and (hyper) masculinised forms of competition as illustrated by neo-liberal capitalistic models.

The failure to properly investigate and weight the impact and importance of the base unit (the family) in any form of collectivist society obscures many of the related ontological "logics" of this perspective – such as relational self-concept, such as dominance of considerations of collective well-being, such as collectivism itself allowing both autonomous action and maintenance of a relational self-concept and, consequently, an embedded interdependent self-construal.

Future Research Directions

Our sample for this study is both small and very privileged. While we acknowledge access issues, due to cultural trust circles, we also feel that given the profile of these respondents, they were a great starting point for research into the use of ties in a collectivist context. Al Ain is a true 'heartland' and, as such, has a strong, well-rooted, privileged, and powerful local population, some of whom are also established women entrepreneurs that we could speak to and hear directly from. As such, the limitations of our research are a small sample size, and a very privileged profile, within a privileged group. Future research could investigate Emirati strong tie leveraging in comparison to other resident collective's use of strong ties – this may involve investigating transnational networks. The use, purpose and roles of Women's Associations in this kind of context – how they operate, who they serve and the networks which power and empower these organisations. Feminism and feminist networking could also be examined, to see how/if it operates in this context and how it might look within this society.

In the Middle East, trust and cooperativeness, which are pivotal to business activities often rely on small, strong, and personalized groups of people exercising a social practice called 'wasta'. Belonging and participation in such networks, bases on individual and family reputation, and the understanding that support and favours will be reciprocated. Future research should address role of wasta for women entrepreneurs in the form of opportunities and constraints, since we must assume that it is gendered too.

Comparative studies between and within other contexts – collective, Arab, Muslim, individualist, or even collectives within individualists – would offer insight into how well our model could be applied more extensively.

We acknowledge our own constrains as authors to the study due to our own multi-national backgrounds (Asian, European, Asian Pacific, Christian and Muslim) which bring

along their own cultural biases. However, as a multi-cultural group we have continuously challenged and scrutinized our visions and perspectives throughout our research.

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