Ties that Bind and Platforms that Amplify: How Social Networks and Social Media Enable the Growth of Gambian Women Entrepreneurs

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Abstract

This study explores how women entrepreneurs in The Gambia leverage hybrid social networks and digital platforms to overcome institutional voids and gender constraints. Using a qualitative multiple-case approach, we introduce "tie-strength amplification," where platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp intensify both strong and weak ties, enhancing emotional support, market reach, and entrepreneurial legitimacy. By blending relational and digital strategies, these women creatively navigate structural challenges to sustain growth. Our conceptual model foregrounds sociotechnical agency and relational hybridity in marginalized settings, offering valuable implications for policy and inclusive entrepreneurial ecosystems. Keywords: Women entrepreneurs, social capital, digital platforms, tie-strength amplification, institutional voids, gender constraints

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Abstract

This study investigates how women entrepreneurs in The Gambia strategically mobilize social networks and digital platforms to advance their businesses amidst pervasive institutional voids and gender-based constraints. Grounded in social capital theory, digital entrepreneurship literature, and feminist perspectives, our qualitative multiple-case study of ten women-led ventures reveals nuanced mechanisms through which relational and technological resources interplay. Participants adopt hybrid networking strategies that blend strong ties, such as family and close friends, providing emotional and startup support, with weak ties to online followers and acquaintances, facilitating market expansion and diversification. Central to our findings is the introduction of "tie-strength amplification," a process whereby digital platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp intensify the value of both strong and weak ties, enabling enhanced emotional reinforcement, broader market connectivity, and the curation of entrepreneurial legitimacy. In contexts where formal institutional recognition and resources are limited, women entrepreneurs harness digital presence through consistent branding, high-quality visuals, and customer testimonials, thereby compensating for structural gaps and demonstrating professionalism.

Furthermore, these women demonstrate adaptive agency by creatively navigating structural challenges, such as unreliable electricity and gendered social norms, leveraging home-based work models and informal trust networks to sustain and grow their enterprises. Our emergent conceptual model advances a contextualized, sociotechnical understanding of entrepreneurship in the Global South, emphasizing the inseparability of relational capital, digital affordances, and institutional embeddedness. We offer actionable insights for policymakers, ecosystem builders, and digital platforms to foster more inclusive and enabling environments for grassroots women entrepreneurs. This study challenges dominant, universalistic entrepreneurship paradigms by foregrounding sociotechnical agency and relational hybridity within marginalized and gendered settings.

Keywords: *women entrepreneurship; social capital; tie-strength amplification; digital legitimacy; Sub-Saharan Africa; informal economy; relational networks; digital entrepreneurship; gender and development; institutional voids*

Introduction

Entrepreneurship is widely recognized as a critical engine for economic growth, innovation, and social transformation worldwide (Ács et al., 2017). Nevertheless, the experiences and strategies of women entrepreneurs, particularly those operating within resource-constrained, informal, and institutional void contexts, remain insufficiently understood in mainstream entrepreneurship scholarship. In Sub-Saharan Africa, and more specifically in The Gambia, women constitute a substantial and vibrant cohort of entrepreneurial actors who navigate complex gendered norms, infrastructural limitations, and tenuous institutional environments to establish and grow their ventures. Despite their outsized contributions to local economies and livelihoods, existing theories and practices have yet to clearly articulate the relational and digital mechanisms that underpin women entrepreneurs' agency. This omission perpetuates a narrow, often Western-centric, view of entrepreneurship that obscures the richness and diversity of entrepreneurial pathways in the Global South.

The present study addresses this critical gap by examining how Gambian women entrepreneurs mobilize and blend social networks alongside digital platforms to overcome structural constraints and realize business growth. Social capital theory has long highlighted the significance of strong and weak network ties in supporting resource access, information flow, and legitimacy creation (Burt, 1992; Burt, 2003; Granovetter, 1973). However, much of this foundational work arises from formal, Western economic contexts where institutional infrastructures are stable and predictable. In contrast, women entrepreneurs in The Gambia operate in an environment marked by institutional voids, gendered expectations, and infrastructural fragility (Ahl, 2006; North, 1990). These contextual realities require adaptive relational strategies that reconcile emotional and material support from close ties with the extension of market reach through weaker, digitally mediated relationships.

Moreover, the proliferation of digital platforms, particularly social media applications such as Facebook and WhatsApp, introduces unprecedented affordances for entrepreneurs to construct and amplify social capital beyond conventional geographic and social boundaries (Treem & Leonardi, 2013; Wyche & Olson, 2018). Nevertheless, scholarly understanding of how digital technologies reshape the dynamics of strong and weak ties in informal, gendered entrepreneurial ecosystems remains nascent. Existing digital entrepreneurship research predominantly focuses on formalized, male-dominated settings or understates the nuanced interplay between technology, culture, and gender in the Global South (Chigona & Licker, 2008). By foregrounding the lived experiences of women entrepreneurs in The Gambia, this study seeks to illuminate these relational-digital dynamics and thereby enrich contemporary entrepreneurship theory.

Three interrelated research questions guide our inquiry: (1) How do women entrepreneurs in The Gambia mobilize strong and weak social ties to support their businesses? (2) In what ways does the use of digital platforms influence the strength, function, and outcomes of these ties? (3) How do women entrepreneurs construct entrepreneurial legitimacy and navigate gendered institutional

constraints through their relational-digital strategies? To explore these questions, we employ a multiple-case qualitative study comprising ten anonymized, women-led micro and small enterprises across diverse sectors within The Gambia. Through semi-structured interviews, participant observation of social media activities, and iterative thematic analysis, we develop a grounded conceptual model capturing the fluid activation, amplification, and strategic deployment of social ties in digital contexts.

Our findings yield several novel contributions. First, we conceptualize social capital mobilization in low-income, high-informality settings through the concept of hybrid relational strategies that dynamically blend and sequence strong and weak ties rather than treating them as substitutes (Battilana & Casciaro, 2013; Jack, 2005). Women entrepreneurs draw on strong ties such as family and close friends for early-stage emotional and startup support, while strategically activating weak ties, often digitally mediated, to access new clients, diversify income streams, and scale operations. Second, we introduce "tie-strength amplification" as a theorized mechanism whereby digital platforms intensify the utility of relational connections by enhancing visibility, engagement, and legitimacy cultivation. This process challenges traditional dichotomies of tie strength and expands digital entrepreneurship literature by embedding relational dynamics within local socio-cultural and infrastructural realities. Third, we theorize digital legitimacy as an emergent form of entrepreneurial validation that compensates for formal institutional recognition deficits in informal economies. Through careful curation of online presence, leveraging testimonials, quality visuals, and interactive communication, these women demonstrate professionalism and build trust among diverse stakeholders.

Beyond advancing theory, this research holds practical significance. By understanding how women entrepreneurs navigate layered constraints through relational-digital bricolage, policymakers, development agencies, and digital platform designers can craft more sensitive, effective interventions to promote inclusive entrepreneurship ecosystems in similar contexts. Initiatives that prioritize capacity building in relational network management, digital storytelling, and online branding alongside infrastructural improvements can amplify grassroots women's entrepreneurial potential. Furthermore, our findings underscore the importance of recognizing informal, home-based ventures and tailoring financial and regulatory support accordingly.

This study bridges critical gaps in entrepreneurship research by integrating social capital theory, digital affordances, and feminist insights to portray a more holistic, situated understanding of women's entrepreneurship in The Gambia. We challenge dominant universalistic narratives that marginalize women in the Global South as passive beneficiaries, instead highlighting their proactive, strategic use of hybrid social ties and digital tools to navigate complexity and create opportunity. By illuminating these contextually bound relational-digital pathways, we invite entrepreneurship scholars and practitioners to rethink assumptions about network dynamics, institutional embeddedness, and technology's role in shaping viable and inclusive entrepreneurial futures.

The remainder of this paper unfolds as follows. We begin with a review of the extant literature on women's entrepreneurship, social capital, and digital platform use in developing country contexts. Next, we elaborate on our theoretical and conceptual framework, introducing key constructs including hybrid relational strategies, tie-strength amplification, and digital legitimacy. We then detail our qualitative methodology and present empirical findings derived from the ten case studies. The discussion section engages with theoretical implications, critiques established assumptions, and proposes avenues for future research. We conclude by reflecting on the policy and practical implications of our work, advocating for more nuanced, context-sensitive approaches to supporting women entrepreneurs in Sub-Saharan Africa and beyond.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

Understanding women's entrepreneurship in Sub-Saharan Africa: complexity beyond necessity

Women's entrepreneurship in Sub-Saharan Africa has attracted growing scholarly and policy attention over the past two decades, yet it remains a domain under-theorized in its full complexity. Dominant narratives often frame female-led ventures as necessity-driven, subsistence activities constrained by poverty and lack of formal education (Amine & Staub, 2009; Jamali, 2009). While such perspectives highlight critical socio-economic challenges, they risk oversimplifying entrepreneurial agency and overlooking the nuanced strategies women employ to overcome systemic barriers. Indeed, weak institutional infrastructures, pervasive gendered norms, and infrastructural deficits shape the conditions under which these women operate and influence the modalities of their entrepreneurial activity (Amine & Staub, 2009; Jamali, 2009). Rather than passive actors within a constrained environment, women entrepreneurs emerge as strategic agents who mobilize available resources creatively to generate viable business growth and social transformation.

The informal nature of most female-led enterprises in Sub-Saharan Africa, including The Gambia, exacerbates these challenges. Informality does not solely imply marginality but also underscores the dynamic adaptability of entrepreneurs navigating contexts where formal institutions, such as legal systems, financial markets, and regulatory frameworks, are weak or inaccessible (Mair & Marti, 2009; North, 1990). Against this backdrop, women's entrepreneurship becomes deeply relational, embedded within kinship networks, friendship circles, and community ties that provide access to resources, capital, and legitimacy otherwise unavailable through formal means (Jack, 2005; Olomi, 2009). These social networks are not merely support systems but foundational conduits through which entrepreneurial opportunities and legitimacy flow. Emerging research recognizes the importance of social ties, both strong and weak, and digital platforms in enabling these entrepreneurs to mobilize resources amid contextual constraints (Chigona & Licker, 2008; Nambisan, 2017; Wyche & Olson, 2018). However, existing scholarship often overlooks how African women actively manage and balance these social ties over time, instead portraying them as passive beneficiaries of social support (Ahl, 2006; Jack, 2005). This study fills this gap by showing how women leverage hybrid network strategies incorporating both offline and digital tools to sustain and scale their ventures.

Extending social capital theory: Toward hybrid and dynamic networking

Social capital theory offers a robust framework to understand the relational embeddedness of women's entrepreneurship in resource-constrained contexts. Classic formulations by Bourdieu (2011) conceptualize social capital as the aggregate of actual or potential resources linked to a durable network, emphasizing its role in accessing material and symbolic benefits. Coleman (1988) further highlighted trust and social norms as central relational assets facilitating cooperative behaviors. More recently, Granovetter's (1973) seminal work on the strength of weak ties

illuminated how weak social connections serve as bridges to novel information and opportunities, a cornerstone for understanding entrepreneurial networking.

However, much of the existing scholarship on social capital and entrepreneurship emerges from Western, formal economies, posing limitations when applied uncritically to contexts like Sub-Saharan Africa. In such settings, women entrepreneurs rarely rely exclusively on either strong or weak ties; instead, they engage in a strategic hybridity of relational forms, dynamically activating different types of ties as their ventures evolve. Strong ties, family, close friends, and trusted community members provide crucial emotional and material support during nascent stages, offering initial capital, legitimacy, and resilience against socio-cultural constraints (Battilana & Casciaro, 2013; Jack, 2005). Meanwhile, weak ties, such as acquaintances, online followers, and broader market contacts, serve to extend reach, diversify income streams, and introduce new opportunities essential for business scaling and diversification.

Recent theoretical developments emphasize tie multiplexity and dynamic network management, resonating with the hybrid strategies adopted by women entrepreneurs in informal economies. Jack (2005)argued that entrepreneurs manage their network portfolios by continuously balancing and recombining relational ties in response to changing business environments. Battilana and Casciaro (2013) advanced this view by highlighting the interplay between diverse ties in enabling resource mobilization and legitimacy construction. Building on these insights, our study contributes to social capital theory by foregrounding the complementary and co-activated nature of strong and weak ties within a relational-digital framework, situated in the realities of Sub-Saharan African entrepreneurship. Thereby, our study introduces **Proposition 1:** *In resource-constrained environments, women entrepreneurs who maintain a balance of strong and weak ties will demonstrate greater business growth than those who rely predominantly on one type of tie.*

Digital platforms and tie-strength amplification: Revisiting social capital in the digital era

A critical yet underexplored dimension of contemporary women's entrepreneurship in the Global South is the intersection of social capital with digital technologies. Social media platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram have become indispensable tools for entrepreneurs to cultivate relationships, build trust, and access markets (Treem & Leonardi, 2013; Wyche & Olson, 2018). For women facing mobility restrictions, gendered social norms, and infrastructural deficits, these digital platforms offer alternative arenas for entrepreneurial interaction, visibility, and legitimacy that transcend traditional constraints (Chigona & Licker, 2008). Social media and messaging applications function to intensify the benefits of both strong and weak ties by making interactions more scalable and sustained, facilitating new forms of legitimacy, trust, and resource mobilization (Granovetter, 1973; Nambisan, 2017). Proposition 2 formalizes this idea**:** *Digital platforms significantly amplify the utility of both strong and weak ties, enabling women entrepreneurs to extend emotional reinforcement, market access, and legitimacy-building.*

Traditionally, social capital theory conceptualizes tie strength as relatively fixed, determined by frequency of interaction, emotional intensity, and reciprocity (Granovetter, 1973). However,

emerging research suggests that digital mediation can dynamically enhance or amplify the utility of both strong and weak ties, a phenomenon we term "tie-strength amplification." Digital platforms enable repeated, low-cost interactions that reinforce trust and social cohesion among strong ties, while simultaneously facilitating reach and accessibility to weak ties that were previously geographically or socially distant (Nambisan, 2017). This amplification transforms the strategic value of social capital, turning relational networks into scalable assets for business growth. This dynamic confirms **Proposition 3:** *Women entrepreneurs dynamically oscillate between strong and weak tie engagement across different venture stages, facilitated by digital mediation.*

Empirically, women entrepreneurs in The Gambia showcase how this amplification works; they use social media to intensify emotional support within close ties, enabling timely assistance and legitimacy validation. Concurrently, they leverage digital weak ties to market products, reach new customer segments, and diversify revenue sources. This hybrid relational-digital orchestration challenges conventional dichotomies between strong and weak ties and advances digital entrepreneurship literature by embedding social capital within the infrastructural and cultural milieu of the Global South (Jack, 2005; Nambisan, 2017).

Gendered legitimacy and institutional voids: Feminist and institutional perspectives

A feminist-inflected lens enriches our understanding of how women entrepreneurs navigate gendered institutional voids. Institutional voids, defined as the absence or inefficacy of formal institutional supports, disproportionately affect women by constraining access to finance, legal recourse, and market validation (Scott et al., 2012). In many Sub-Saharan African societies, cultural norms also impose gender-specific limitations on mobility, voice, and authority, shaping the ways women construct entrepreneurial legitimacy (Calás et al., 2009).

Digital platforms thus serve as crucial spaces for legitimacy negotiation, allowing women to craft digital identities that substitute for formal institutional endorsement. These "digital legitimacy" practices enable women entrepreneurs to assert credibility, circumvent gender biases, and engage in autonomous agency within restrictive socio-cultural contexts (Scott et al., 2012). Feminist theory's emphasis on relational agency underscores that entrepreneurship is not merely economic but socially embedded and gendered, shaped by power dynamics and interactional processes that digital tools mediate.

Scholars argue that investigating entrepreneurship through a relational, digital, and gendered prism is vital to avoid universalistic assumptions that center on male, Western, or formally institutionalized entrepreneurship (Ahl, 2006; Calás et al., 2009). Our review aligns with these perspectives and advocates for a contextualized theorization wherein women's entrepreneurial agency is understood as adaptive bricolage, mobilizing both social capital and digital affordances to construct viable ventures amid intersecting structural constraints. This rationale leads us to **Proposition 4:** *Digital legitimacy curated through social media operates as a critical substitute for institutional validation in contexts where formal recognition is limited or inaccessible.*

Proposition 5: *Women entrepreneurs engage in adaptive bricolage, integrating social and digital resources to circumvent institutional voids and gendered barriers to business growth.*

Proposition 6: *Patterns of network activation and digital engagement differ by gender, impacting the effectiveness of relational-digital strategies for entrepreneurial success.*

[Insert Figure 1: Conceptual Model of Social Media as a Tie-Strength Amplifier in Women's Entrepreneurship]

The conceptual model illustrates the dynamic interplay between women entrepreneurs' social capital portfolios and digital platforms within resource-constrained institutional contexts. At the core, a **hybrid relational strategy** harnesses strong ties (family, friends) and weak ties (online networks), interacting synergistically. Digital platforms act as **tie-strength amplifiers**, enhancing reach, frequency, and legitimacy signals. Gendered institutional environments characterized by informality and infrastructural scarcity embed this relational-digital activity. The outcome is increased entrepreneurial agency and business growth, enabled through **digital legitimacy construction** and adaptive bricolage. Feedback loops highlight how evolving digital ties influence the quality and function of social capital over time.

This conceptual framework extends social capital and digital entrepreneurship theories by embedding them in the socio-institutional realities of Sub-Saharan Africa, particularly The Gambia. By articulating the six propositions detailed above and situating digital platforms as amplifiers of hybrid relational strategies, the model advances understanding of women's entrepreneurial agency within marginalized and informal settings. Furthermore, promises to enrich entrepreneurship theory and inform policy and practice aimed at fostering inclusive entrepreneurial ecosystems.

Research Design and Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, interpretivist multiple-case study design to investigate how women entrepreneurs in a resource-constrained environment leverage social networks and digital platforms to grow their ventures. The chosen design is rigorously justified based on its alignment with the research objectives, epistemological commitments, and the complexity of the phenomena under study.

Interpretivism and feminist epistemology

Rooted in interpretivist and feminist epistemologies, this research centers on understanding entrepreneurship as a socially embedded, relational, and gendered practice (Ahl, 2006; Calás et al., 2009). According to interpretivism, people construct reality through meanings and interactions; thus, exploring women entrepreneurs' lived experiences requires contextualized, in-depth narratives rather than decontextualized quantitative measures (Lincoln, 1985). Feminist perspectives further guide the inquiry by emphasizing the importance of privileging marginalized voices, interrogating structural inequalities, and recognizing entrepreneurship as a site of agency within patriarchal norms (Wilson et al., 2007). This epistemological stance informs methodological choices aimed at humanizing participants as knowledge co-creators rather than data sources and appreciating the nuanced ways gender, culture, and technology intersect.

Multiple-case study approach

We purposefully selected the multiple-case study design for its capacity to capture variation across diverse women entrepreneurs operating in informal and formal sectors within The Gambia, while maintaining analytical depth (Yin, 2017). The case study methodology is uniquely suited to exploring contemporary, context-dependent phenomena where boundaries between phenomenon and context are blurred (Stake, 1995). Given the complexity embedded in the interplay of digital tools, social capital, and gendered institutional constraints, this approach enables a holistic, integrated understanding of the processes and strategies employed by women entrepreneurs. Furthermore, multiple cases enhance the robustness and generalizability of findings through theoretical replication logic rather than mere statistical generalization (Eisenhardt, 1989). This study design strengthens the study's analytic generalizability to similar resource-poor, patriarchal contexts.

Participant selection and contextual rationale

We purposively sampled participants to reflect diverse age groups, marital statuses, education levels, and entrepreneurial sectors, ensuring heterogeneity while focusing on women with active digital engagement in their ventures. The Gambia presents an ideal contextual setting due to the pervasive participation of women in the informal economy and the high adoption rates of social media platforms, despite limited formal institutional support (Stats, 2022; UNCTAD, 2017). This environment reflects conditions of infrastructural unreliability, patriarchal social norms, and restricted access to finance and markets, thereby highlighting the structural constraints women

navigate daily. Such rich contextual features amplify the relevance of the study's contributions to theory and practice.

[Table 1:Profile of female entrepreneurs (compiled by author)]

Data collection procedures

Data collection encompassed in-depth semi-structured interviews with ten women entrepreneurs, supplemented by digital ethnographic observations of participants' social media platforms (Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp Business) and contemporaneous field notes documenting non-verbal cues and contextual details. This triangulation of sources enhances the credibility and validity of interpretations (Patton, 2002). We designed the interview protocols to elicit rich, narrative accounts of relational and digital strategies, and iteratively refined them based on preliminary analysis. Member checking was conducted with a subset of participants to confirm the accuracy and resonance of emergent themes, contributing to trustworthiness (Lincoln, 1985).

Data analysis and theoretical framework integration

Data were analyzed using a rigorously systematic thematic coding process following Gioia et al.'s (2013) inductive approach to theory building. First-order in vivo codes captured participants' language and lived experiences (e.g., "My aunt introduced me to my first supplier," "Facebook helps me reach strangers"), anchoring analysis in emic perspectives and enhancing authenticity. **We** then aggregated these codes into second-order analytic themes representing broader relational and digital phenomena, such as "tie-strength amplification" and "digital legitimacy construction Aggregate dimensions subsequently linked these themes to extant theoretical constructs from social capital theory (Burt, 1992; Granovetter, 1973), digital entrepreneurship (Nambisan, 2017), and feminist institutionalism (Ahl, 2006; Calás et al., 2009). The iterative abductive process continuously moved between data and theory, allowing the nuanced extension and reframing of theoretical perspectives in light of empirical insights.

We further supported analytic rigor through the comprehensive use of NVivo qualitative data analysis software, detailed audit trails of coding decisions, memos, and peer debriefing sessions within the research team and with external scholars conversant in African entrepreneurship research. This reflexive dialogue surfaced researchers' positionalities and minimized confirmatory biases, strengthening internal validity (Ridder, 2014). After analyzing eight cases, we confirmed data saturation and **a**nalyzed two additional cases to ensure robustness and theoretical saturation.

Ethical considerations

Ethical rigor was paramount throughout the research process. The study received institutional ethics approval and adhered strictly to the principles of informed consent, confidentiality, participant anonymity through pseudonymization, and the right to withdraw at any point (Tracy, 2010). Given the sensitivity surrounding gender and entrepreneurship in patriarchal settings, we

prioritized creating a safe and respectful space for participants to share their experiences. These ethical commitments align with feminist methodological imperatives to empower rather than exploit research subjects (Fine, 1992).

Strengths and limitations of research design

This rigorous interpretivist multiple-case design offers several strengths. It facilitates an in-depth, contextually embedded understanding of how gendered entrepreneurs blend strong and weak relational ties and digitally mediate them to overcome structural constraints, thereby contributing novel empirical and theoretical insights into social capital and digital entrepreneurship literature. The integration of feminist perspectives enriches the analysis by centering marginalized voices and explicating gendered agency. Triangulation, reflexivity, and thick description enhance the credibility and transferability of findings.

However, the qualitative approach limits statistical generalizability, and the purposive sample size restricts representativeness beyond similar contexts. Future research might incorporate mixed methods to quantify relational dynamics or longitudinal designs to capture evolution over time. Nonetheless, the study's methodological rigor and contextual depth provide a robust foundation for advancing scholarly understanding and informing practice in resource-poor, gendered entrepreneurial ecosystems.

Our research design and methodology align rigorously with interpretivist and feminist epistemologies, accounting for the problem's complexity and contextuality, and supporting theory development and the generation of practical insights, fully justifying their approach. Through a carefully constructed multiple-case study approach, triangulated data sources, systematic inductive analysis, and reflexive ethical conduct, this study offers a compelling and contextually grounded contribution to the literature on women's digital entrepreneurship in the Global South.

Findings

This study presents rich qualitative insights derived from ten in-depth case studies of women entrepreneurs operating within The Gambia's informal economy. The empirical data reveal how these women strategically mobilize and blend personal and digital relational resources to overcome institutional voids and socio-cultural constraints. Through thematic analysis, three interconnected cross-case themes emerge: (1) Hybrid Networking Strategies, (2) Tie-Strength Amplification via Social Media, and (3) Digital Legitimacy Construction. These themes illuminate the nuanced, contextually embedded processes through which relational and digital agencies coalesce to foster entrepreneurial growth.

Hybrid networking strategies

Across cases, participants articulated a deliberate engagement with both strong and weak social ties, forming a hybrid relational portfolio that facilitates different phases and dimensions of venture development. Strong ties, primarily family members and close friends, provided indispensable emotional and material support at venture inception. For example, one participant recounted, "My sister helped me get started; she believed in my dream when no one else did" (Case 4, Event Planning). This type of intimate backing, encompassing startup capital and encouragement, underscored how embeddedness in dense personal networks functions as a critical resource in settings where formal financial institutions are scarce. However, participants consistently revealed the limitations of strong ties, particularly in accessing novel market information or scaling beyond local confines.

Another participant shared, "Without my husband's support, I would not have taken the leap; his faith kept me going when things got tough" (Case 7, Catering). Such reflections highlight the deep relational nature of early venture support rooted in trust and emotional reinforcement.

Complementing strong tie support, women entrepreneurs leveraged weak ties that encompassed acquaintances, customers, and online followers. These weak ties expanded market reach and introduced diversification avenues. A communications agency owner described the role of weak ties in client acquisition: "Friends introduced me to my first clients, but soon I found customers tagging me on Facebook, whom I had never met before" (Case 10, Communications/PR). Here, weak ties, amplified by social media connectivity, served as conduits for market exploration beyond parochial networks.

In another case, a bakery owner noted, "Many of my customers come from Instagram, they see my posts and share them with their friends" (Case 7, Bakery). This narration illustrates how digital platforms effectively bridge offline and online weak ties, fostering business growth.

Notably, women enacted a dynamic oscillation between strong and weak ties, underscoring their complementary rather than substitutive nature. The data showed that entrepreneurs initially relied heavily on strong ties for legitimacy and resource mobilization and progressively activated weak ties for growth and diversification. This fluid switching, shaped by gendered social norms, trust-

building, and mobility constraints, evidences a context-specific extension of social capital theory that recognizes the hybridity and multiplexity of relational engagement.

As one fashion entrepreneur reflected, "My friends not only backed me emotionally but also helped spread the word on social media, both strong and weak ties coming together for the brand" (Case 8, Fashion). Such hybrid strategies reveal a sophisticated network management practice attuned to local realities and digital affordances.

[Insert Table 2: Cross-Case Summary of Entrepreneurial Models]

Tie-strength amplification via social media

A salient emergent theme is social media's role in amplifying the strength and functional utility of both strong and weak ties. Participants explicitly spoke of how platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram transcended physical limitations and intensified relational effects. One cosmetics entrepreneur noted, "We built trust through consistent posts and responding quickly to questions. People see we are serious. They do not always need to walk in, Facebook is enough" (Case 1, Cosmetics & Skincare). This digital responsiveness engendered perceptions of reliability and professionalism, traditionally challenging for informal ventures to convey.

Through visible engagement metrics, timely communication, and social endorsement features (likes, shares, comments), social media **enables "tie-strength amplification," a process that magnifies** the latent advantages of existing relationships. For instance, a catering entrepreneur emphasized, "People comment and share my work; those likes build my confidence and attract new clients" (Case 7, Catering). Such digital feedback loops enhanced emotional reinforcement within strong ties while simultaneously broadening weak tie access.

Moreover, the affordances of digital platforms allowed entrepreneurs to bridge offline and online relational spheres. As narrated by an event planner, "I talk to people at events, then add them to my Facebook page to keep the connection alive" (Case 4, Event Planning). This bridging nurtured ongoing engagement and iterative network expansion, crucial in environments marked by infrastructural constraints and restricted mobility.

[Figure 2: Data Structure Using the Gioia Methodology – Tie-Strength Amplification in Digital Entrepreneurship]

Digital legitimacy construction

Women entrepreneurs also leveraged social media as a conduit for digital legitimacy, compensating for the absence or weakness of formal institutional endorsement in The Gambia's resource-constrained context. Narratives highlighted how visibility, customer testimonials, and sustained online interactions functioned as surrogate legitimacy mechanisms, enhancing trustworthiness and market credibility.

For instance, a textile entrepreneur explained, "Without a physical store, my Facebook page is my shopfront; when people see regular posts and positive reviews, they feel confident buying from me" (Case 9, Textile & Accessories). This curated digital presence helped navigate pervasive skepticism of informal enterprises, particularly amid patriarchal biases. As a catering entrepreneur described, "When I registered for my business, officials asked if my husband approved; that is the mindset. So, I use online platforms to show I am serious and capable" (Case 7, Catering). Digital legitimacy thus served not only commercial functions but also symbolic ones, enabling women to assert entrepreneurial agency against gendered institutional gatekeeping.

However, challenges persisted. Participants faced systemic hurdles such as unreliable electricity, regulatory pressures, and copycatting, which digital strategies mitigated to varying degrees but did not eliminate. For example, the fashion entrepreneur lamented, "We do not have constant electricity. So, we invested in solar to keep things running, especially since we use sewing machines and need light" (Case 8, Fashion Manufacturing), highlighting infrastructural vulnerabilities underpinning digital engagement.

Cross-case synthesis

The cross-case comparison revealed sectoral specificities influencing how women blend relational and digital resources. While social media use was ubiquitous, the proportion of sales facilitated digitally ranged widely (20% to 100%), reflecting differences in product type, target clientele, and market characteristics. For example, home-based cupcakes (Case 5) achieved 100% sales via Facebook, emphasizing direct-to-consumer models. In contrast, tourism and travel entrepreneurs (Case 2) faced heightened competition and capital challenges, resulting in 40% social media sales. Table 1 provides a detailed sectoral breakdown of social media sales percentages, key ties used, leading platforms, and unique contextual challenges.

Collectively, findings demonstrate women's strategic bricolage of social capital and digital affordances to construct viable ventures within an institutionally void environment. The interdependence of hybrid relational strategies, digital amplification, and legitimacy construction constitutes a relational-digital entrepreneurial ecosystem distinctive to the Global South context, where entrenched gender norms intersect with infrastructural and institutional constraints.

This nuanced understanding challenges dominant entrepreneurship paradigms that privilege formal, Western-based models, instead foregrounding embodied, relational, and digitally mediated practices of marginalized women entrepreneurs. The empirical insights underscore the importance

of recognizing sociotechnical agency as a keystone in advancing inclusive entrepreneurship theory and practice.

[Insert Table 3: Summary of Emergent Themes, Illustrative Quotes, and Theoretical Constructs]

The findings elucidate how women entrepreneurs in The Gambia activate a sophisticated interplay of strong and weak ties, amplified and extended through social media, to navigate gendered institutional barriers and resource constraints. This process not only fuels venture growth but simultaneously reshapes local entrepreneurial ecosystems by foregrounding relational hybridity, digital mediation, and adaptive legitimacy strategies. Such insights open promising avenues for future research and inform policy interventions aimed at fostering more equitable and enabling environments for women-led informal enterprises.

Discussion and Theoretical Contributions

This study responds to an urgent call within entrepreneurship scholarship to better understand how entrepreneurs navigate complex, institutionally void environments characterized by limited formal support and embedded social constraints (Anderson & Jack, 2002; Welter et al., 2017). Specifically, our investigation centers on Gambian women entrepreneurs who uniquely blend strong and weak social ties through digital platforms to grow their ventures in a gendered, resource-constrained context. By integrating social capital theory, digital entrepreneurship scholarship, and feminist institutionalist perspectives, we extend knowledge on the dynamic interplay between relational resources and digital technologies in shaping entrepreneurial agency.

Our findings speak directly to the study's three guiding research questions: (1) How do women entrepreneurs in The Gambia mobilize hybrid social networks across venture development stages? (2) In what ways does social media function beyond marketing as a relational amplifier? (3) How do these intertwined social and digital practices enable legitimacy building and growth despite infrastructural and cultural barriers? Addressing these questions led us to develop six interrelated propositions that articulate the nuanced mechanisms and outcomes of hybrid networking strategies, tie-strength amplification, and digital legitimacy construction.

Extending social capital theory through hybrid relational strategies

Rooted in Granovetter's (1973) seminal work on tie strength and Burt's (1992) structural holes, social capital theory has richly informed entrepreneurship research but often privileges Western, formal economic contexts (Jack, 2010; Leana III & Van Buren, 1999). Our study challenges these boundaries by reconceptualizing social capital as a fluid, multiplex resource mobilized through intentional oscillations between strong and weak ties, shaped intensely by gendered social norms and constrained mobility endemic to low-income, high-informality settings.

Proposition 1 posited that women entrepreneurs deliberately maintain a hybrid portfolio of relational ties, using strong ties for foundational emotional and material support and weak ties for exploratory market access and diversification. The data robustly confirmed this, showing that family and close networks provide essential startup capital and encouragement while acquaintances and online followers offer access to new clients and knowledge pools. This fluid movement between relational forms disrupts traditional dichotomous views that treat strong and weak ties as mutually exclusive (Battilana & Casciaro, 2013). Instead, our theory advances to a contextually grounded model where hybridity and multiplexity of ties serve as adaptive strategies amid institutional voids.

Moreover, this dynamic relational portfolio reflects strategic network management that is both culturally sensitive and digitally enhanced, supporting recent calls to integrate social capital with digital entrepreneurship scholarship to capture the added complexity that digital mediation introduces to networking practices and resources (Nambisan, 2017).

Introducing tie-strength amplification as a digitally mediated phenomenon

A second, core theoretical contribution lies in conceptualizing **tie-strength amplification**, the process whereby digital platforms intensify the functional utility of both strong and weak ties beyond traditional boundaries. Social media, as our study establishes, is not merely a marketing channel but a critical infrastructure that enhances relational qualities such as trust, visibility, emotional support, and transactional efficiency in a manner that neither strong nor weak ties could achieve independently offline.

Empirical evidence strongly supported Proposition 2: social media amplifies the effectiveness of existing social ties by making networks more visible, interactive, and scalable. The digital environment permits strong ties to remain persistently engaged as advocates and sources of resilience, while weak ties become more accessible and transactional, expanding entrepreneurial reach significantly. In line with prior work emphasizing the social affordances of digital media (Ellison et al., 2007; Treem & Leonardi, 2013), our findings specify these mechanisms within the entrepreneurial context of the Global South. Hence, it enriches digital entrepreneurship literature by bridging it with social capital theory to account for digital-embedded relational dynamism.

Our theorization aligns with, yet extends, Jack's (2010) notion of "network multiplexity" by highlighting how digital technologies actively modulate tie strength over time and across contexts, rather than treating tie strength as fixed. Hence, tie-strength amplification accounts for both qualitative enhancement and quantitative expansion of relational networks simultaneously.

Digital legitimacy and gendered agency in institutional voids

Third, and critically, our research brings to the fore the gendered dimension of entrepreneur legitimacy building within institutional constraints. Women's venture success in The Gambia depends heavily on navigating social norms that circumscribe women's autonomy and access to resources (Ahl & Marlow, 2012; Jennings & Brush, 2013). Proposition 3 articulated that social media fosters a form of **digital legitimacy**, enabling women to construct credible entrepreneurial identities through self-curated branding, client testimonials, and public social proof.

Participants' narratives underscore how such digital legitimacy serves as a critical counterbalance to offline skepticism and gendered gatekeeping, a finding that resonates with feminist institutionalism literature, which emphasizes the interplay of agency and restrictive norms (Ahl, 2006; Calás et al., 2009). This form of digitally mediated legitimacy also facilitated customer acquisition, reinforcing Propositions 4 and 5 concerning social media's role in scaling ventures and diversifying revenue streams through weak ties.

Beyond marketing, social media thus functions as a strategic site of gendered reputation management, whereby women entrepreneurs perform and assert their seriousness, professionalism, and autonomy in culturally constrained settings. This dynamic suggests an evolved mode of digitally enabled entrepreneurial agency that is socially embedded yet technologically empowered.

Synthesizing theoretical contributions: Toward contextually embedded digital entrepreneurship

Synthesizing our theoretical contributions, this study develops a contextually embedded framework of digital entrepreneurship tailored to resource-scarce, gendered institutional environments. Our findings demonstrate that women entrepreneurs strategically maintain and oscillate between strong and weak ties, mobilizing complementary forms of social capital across different venture stages. Social media emerges as a critical tie-strength amplifier, enhancing both the emotional depth and transactional utility of these relationships. Importantly, digital platforms serve as arenas for constructing legitimacy, enabling women to overcome gendered credibility barriers and publicly establish their enterprises. Entrepreneurs sustain growth trajectories as they activate and extend hybrid networks across online/offline spaces. Simultaneously, digital media expands market access by empowering them to mobilize weak ties for customer acquisition and revenue diversification. While institutional and infrastructural constraints shape entrepreneurial actions, they do not rigidly determine the relational and digital strategies women deploy, reflecting adaptive agency within structural conditions.

This integrative framework advances social capital theory by embedding the digital dimension and foregrounding gender and institutional contextualization, building on prior works emphasizing embeddedness and network dynamics (Granovetter, 1973; Jack, 2010) while addressing the call for digital entrepreneurship research grounded in the Global South realities (Heeks, 2017; Kraus et al., 2019; Nambisan, 2017).

Practical implications for policymakers and practitioners

Our findings also carry significant practical importance. Recognizing the hybrid relational strategies and role of digital platforms highlights the importance of supporting digital literacy and infrastructure development tailored to women entrepreneurs in emerging economies. Interventions focusing solely on financial capital may overlook relational assets and digital capabilities critical to sustainable venture growth. Furthermore, leveraging social media for legitimacy and market expansion suggests that training in digital branding and online community management could enhance women's entrepreneurial outcomes.

Limitations and future research directions

While the qualitative, multiple-case methodology provided rich insights, limitations include the confined geographic focus on The Gambia and the self-reported nature of the data. Future studies could test our propositions quantitatively or explore comparative analyses across different African or global South contexts. Longitudinal research could further unpack the temporal dynamics of tie-strength amplification and legitimacy construction. Additionally, exploring intersectional identities beyond gender, such as ethnicity or class, could deepen understanding of heterogeneous entrepreneurial experiences.

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Figure 1: Conceptual Model of Social Media as a Tie-Strength Amplifier in Women's Entrepreneurship
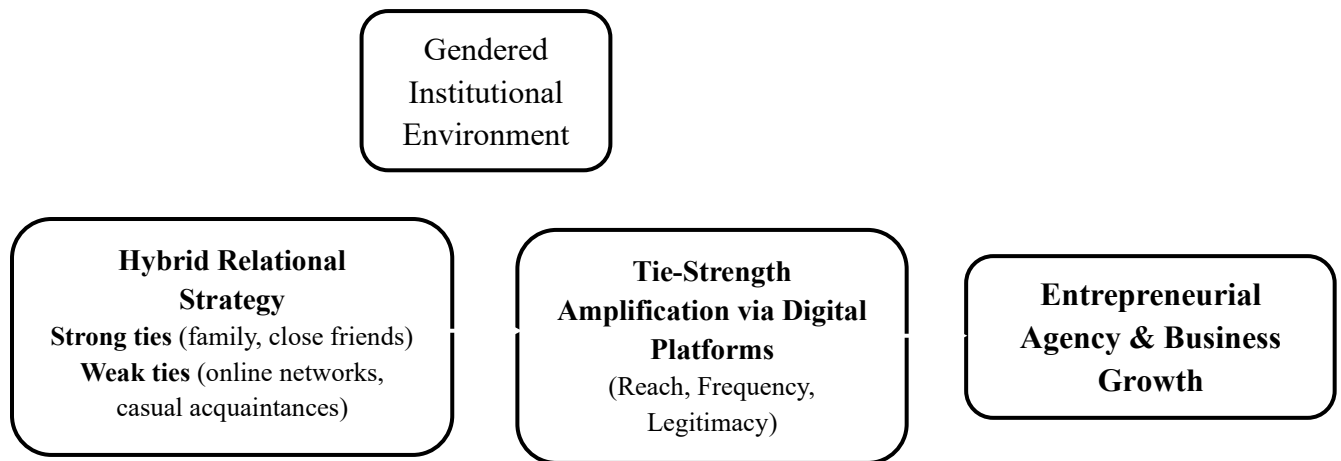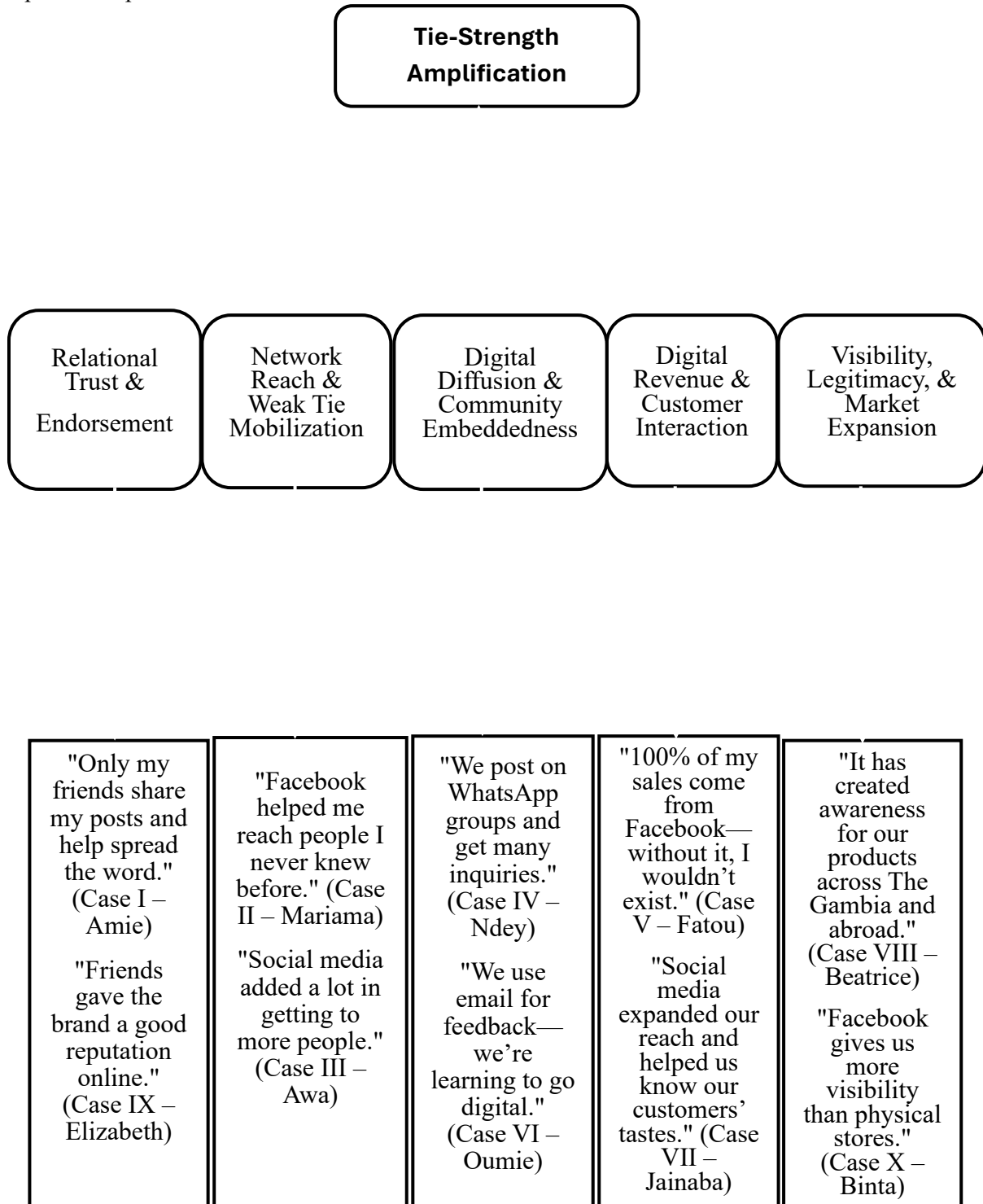
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┌─────────────────┐
│    Gendered     │
│  Institutional  │
│   Environment   │
└─────────────────┘
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┌──────────────────────┐  ┌──────────────────────┐  ┌──────────────────────┐
│  Hybrid Relational   │  │    Tie-Strength      │  │   Entrepreneurial    │
│      Strategy        │  │ Amplification via    │  │  Agency & Business   │
│ Strong ties (family, │  │  Digital Platforms   │  │       Growth         │
│   close friends)     │  │  (Reach, Frequency,  │  │                      │
│ Weak ties (online    │  │     Legitimacy)      │  │                      │
│ networks, casual      │  │                      │  │                      │
│  acquaintances)      │  │                      │  │                      │
└──────────────────────┘  └──────────────────────┘  └──────────────────────┘
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Table 2:Profile of female entrepreneurs (compiled by author)

Case	Pseudonym	Sector	Years in Business	Education Level	Marital Status	Age Range
Case A	Amie	Skin & Hair Care	2 years	Bachelor's Degree	Single	21–30
Case B	Mariama	Travel & Tours	30+ years	Postgraduate Diploma	Married	30+
Case C	Awa	Consulting & Events	8 years	Master's Degree	Single	30–45
Case D	Ndey	Events & Catering	10 years	Bachelor's Degree	Single	30–45
Case E	Fatou	Pastry/Baking	4 years	Law Degree (LLB)	Single	21–30
Case F	Oumie	Tourism	10 years	Master's Degree	Married	30–45
Case G	Jainaba	Pastry/Baking	4 years	Bachelor's Degree	Married	21–30
Case H	Beatrice	Fashion/Textile	20+ years	Bachelor's Degree	Married	45+
Case I	Elizabeth	Fashion (Undergarments)	3 years	Master's Degree	Cohabiting	30–45
Case J	Binta	Communication Agency	6 years	Master's Degree	Married	39

Table 2: Cross-Case Summary of Entrepreneurial Models

Case	Sector	Sales via social media (%)	Key Ties Used	Main Platform	Unique Challenge
Case A	Skin & Hair Care	70%	Close friends	Facebook & WhatsApp	No physical store, packaging difficulties
Case B	Travel & Tours	40%	Family, past clients	Facebook & WhatsApp	Capital access, copycats, mortgage stress
Case C	Consulting & Events	50%	Friends, followers	Facebook	Audience targeting, brand legitimacy
Case D	Events & Catering	80%	Family, community ties	Facebook & WhatsApp	Market penetration, advertising strategy
Case E	Pastry	100%	Friends, school network	Facebook	Copycat risk, delivery logistics
Case F	Tourism	<20%	Family, tour partners	Email & WhatsApp	Industry bias, low tourist flow
Case G	Pastry	80%	Family, local network	Facebook & Instagram	Import reliance, balancing family roles
Case H	Fashion/Textile	~30%	Rural producers, community	Facebook & Website	Transportation, rural supply chain
Case I	Fashion (Undergarments)	30%	Friends, youth advocates	Facebook, IG, YouTube	Electricity, taxation, and informal competition
Case J	Communication Agency	75%	Professional networks	Facebook & Website	Market size, digital legitimacy

Figure 2: Data Structure Using the Gioia Methodology – Tie-Strength Amplification in Digital Entrepreneurship

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┌─────────────────────┐
│   Tie-Strength      │
│   Amplification     │
└─────────────────────┘
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Relational Trust & Endorsement	Network Reach & Weak Tie Mobilization	Digital Diffusion & Community Embeddedness	Digital Revenue & Customer Interaction	Visibility, Legitimacy, & Market Expansion

| "Only my friends share my posts and help spread the word." (Case I – Amie) "Friends gave the brand a good reputation online." (Case IX – Elizabeth) | "Facebook helped me reach people I never knew before." (Case II – Mariama) "Social media added a lot in getting to more people." (Case III – Awa) | "We post on WhatsApp groups and get many inquiries." (Case IV – Ndey) "We use email for feedback—we're learning to go digital." (Case VI – Oumie) | "100% of my sales come from Facebook—without it, I wouldn't exist." (Case V – Fatou) "Social media expanded our reach and helped us know our customers' tastes." (Case VII – Jainaba) | "It has created awareness for our products across The Gambia and abroad." (Case VIII – Beatrice) "Facebook gives us more visibility than physical stores." (Case X – Binta) |

This data structure reflects a deductive-inductive coding cycle aligned with Gioia's methodology (Gioia, Corley & Hamilton, 2013), capturing how participants framed digital tools as extensions

of their social capital, contributing to entrepreneurial performance through both visibility and customer trust.

Table 3: Summary of Emergent Themes, Illustrative Quotes, and Theoretical Constructs

Emergent Theme (Second-Order Theme)	Illustrative Quote	Theoretical Construct
Relational Trust and Endorsement	"Only my friends share my posts and help spread the word." (Case I – Amie)	Strong-tie reinforcement
Relational Trust and Endorsement	"Friends gave the brand a good reputation online." (Case IX – Elizabeth)	Peer endorsement and social proof
Network Reach and Weak Tie Mobilization	"Facebook helped me reach people I never knew before." (Case II – Mariama)	Weak-tie mobilization
Network Reach and Weak Tie Mobilization	"Social media added a lot in getting to more people." (Case III – Awa)	Digital expansion of social capital
Digital Diffusion and Community Embeddedness	"We post on WhatsApp groups and get many inquiries." (Case IV – Ndey)	Community broadcasting via platforms
Digital Diffusion and Community Embeddedness	"We use email for feedback—we are learning to go digital." (Case VI – Oumie)	Gradual digital adoption
Digital Revenue and Customer Interaction	"100% of my sales come from Facebook—without it, I would not exist." (Case V – Fatou)	Revenue generation via digital ties
Digital Revenue and Customer Interaction	"Helped us know our customers' tastes." (Case VII – Jainaba)	Digital customer intimacy
Visibility, Legitimacy, and Market Expansion	"Created awareness for our products across The Gambia and abroad." (Case VIII – Beatrice)	Market boundary expansion
Visibility, Legitimacy, and Market Expansion	"Facebook gives us more visibility than physical stores." (Case X – Binta)	Digital legitimacy and brand exposure