

How Female-Owned SMEs in Uganda Maximise on Social Capital to Strengthen Their Businesses

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The aim of this paper was to explore the extent to which female entrepreneurs in Uganda maximise on social capital by aligning with multiple stakeholders such as customers, government representatives, communities, higher education institutions (HEIs), and the wider public among others, to strengthen their businesses for long-term economic performance. A case study approach was adopted, during which semi-structured interviews were conducted to investigate a sample of three socially oriented female-owned Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) operating in Uganda's Central, Northern and Western regions. Findings suggest that social capital must be tackled holistically by engaging productively with both primary and secondary stakeholders within the wider entrepreneurial context to realise a broad range of benefits. The author contributes a comprehensive partnership framework populated with practical insights from the three female-owned SMEs and presents intricacies of how social capital externalities can be monitored and measured by existing and upcoming SMEs while demonstrating how innovative business-level collaborations contribute to sustained growth.

Keywords: social capital, female-owned SMEs, stakeholders, collaboration

INTRODUCTION

This paper unpacks the concept of social capital as a fundamental aspect of entrepreneurship with a specific focus on female entrepreneurs in Uganda and explores how this contributes to the growth of their businesses with the notion that female leaders value relationships (Madsen & Ngunjiri, 2015; Moodley et al., 2016; Meléndez & Lorenzo 2014), which are an instrumental feature of social capital (Dastourian et al., 2016; Lowrance et al., 2019; Setini et al., 2020). Emphasis is on examining how female-owned SMEs capitalize on relational dynamics to manifest social capital in various forms including the extent to which they collaborate with stakeholders like government representatives, HEIs and the wider community while strengthening their respective businesses for sustained growth.

Entrepreneurship and Small Business Growth

Entrepreneurship is an economic engine that is fundamental to economic and social development (Booyesen, 2015; Lowrance et al., 2019; Meyer, 2018; Sebikari, 2014). The entrepreneurship rate in Sub-Saharan Africa was the highest globally as of 2019, however, most entrepreneurs fail to progress beyond small-scale subsistence (The World Bank, 2019). Existing research shows that SMEs contribute significantly to the development of emerging economies (Loucks et al., 2010; Mwangi et al., 2013; Nuwagaba & Nzewi, 2013) by facilitating poverty eradication through employment creation.

Entrepreneurship is strongly linked with small business growth (Buowari, 2015), which occurs when entrepreneurial capital, knowledge and capacity are in place to stimulate a competitive business environment (Sebikari, 2014).

Rationale for Female Entrepreneurship

Female entrepreneurship is critical for global socio-economic development (Ascher, 2012; Meyer, 2018; Yukongdi & Cañete, 2020) and female-owned SMEs are said to be among the fastest growing businesses globally. However, their numbers are still low compared to male owned SMEs (Lowrince et al., 2019). Moreover, for the longest time, international academic literature on female entrepreneurship mainly focused on the northern hemisphere (Henry & Foss, 2015), leaving most of Africa out. Studies on mainstream female entrepreneurship are said to have only increased after the 1990s with the first official journal publication in 1976 (Meyer, 2018).

However, there is still a need for concrete and in-depth academic research on female entrepreneurship (Muniady et al., 2015). As well, female entrepreneurship is fostered by social dimensions such as relationships and community (Madsen et al., 2015; Meléndez et al., 2014; Moodley et al., 2016), collaborative features that are embedded in social capital which contribute to business growth (Dastourian et al., 2016; Lowrince et al., 2019; Setini et al., 2020). Understanding societal and cultural predispositions and using this contextual knowledge to improve on growth is a critical female leadership feature (Isabirye, 2017). This has been examined further in this study based on the Ugandan female entrepreneurship context.

Female Entrepreneurship in Uganda

Uganda is considered as one of the most entrepreneurial countries globally (Monteitha & Canfield, 2019). Female-owned SMEs in Uganda have grown considerably by 236% with an ownership of approximately 44% of business enterprises compared to the 153% growth rate by male-owned business enterprises over ten years. Women continue to contribute instrumentally to the entrepreneurial sector in Uganda and constitute around 52.5% of the country's labour force (Mugabi, 2014).

Uganda has also been hailed for their high numbers of female entrepreneurs globally (Mastercard, 2017). Like other African countries, their female entrepreneurial work is embedded within social networks, contributing to contemporary survival strategies (Monteitha et al., 2019). The emergence and sustained existence of more female owned SMEs is critical in stimulating the Ugandan and other economies (Liang & Dunn, 2010; Osoimehin et al., 2012) therefore this is an area that requires continued focus.

Research Objectives

Against this background, the underlying research objective for this paper is to explore the extent to which female-owned SMEs in Uganda maximise on social capital to strengthen their business enterprises and promote growth.

The following sub-objectives were set to realize the main research objective of this paper:

RO1: *To understand what constitutes social capital in entrepreneurship*

RO2: *To explore how female entrepreneurs manifest social capital when managing their SMEs*

RO3: *To determine ways in which female-owned SMEs in Uganda collaborate with various stakeholders including HEIs, government representatives etc. to contribute to business success*

RO4: *To investigate what key components are entailed in the partnership framework adopted by female-owned SMEs in Uganda*

The author applied these sub-objectives as guidance when examining existing literature and during data gathering, specifically how the three female-owned SMEs maximize on social capital in their routine business interactions within their respective business environment.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND ANALYSIS OF RELATED WORK

This section examines existing literature on social capital and its fundamental nature within the entrepreneurship sector. The relational aspect of social capital and how this contributes to female business start-up and growth is also unpacked.

The Concept of Social Capital

Voluntary or self-regulation is a striking feature of global business that emerged in the 1990s and reflects the new role played by multiple primary and secondary stakeholders (Berghoff, 2017) and the collaborative nature of governance (Holley et al., 2012). Primary stakeholders who comprise of shareholders, employees, customers, suppliers, governments, HEIs and communities directly influence the business, absence of which may threaten its survival. Secondary stakeholders influence or are influenced and affected by the business without engaging directly in business transactions and are not essential for survival. These include competitors, the media and existing support groups such as the public, and are capable of damaging the business directly or indirectly (Benn et al., 2016; Clarkson, 1995). This spells out how formal and informal collaboration enforces accountability and promotes excellence in global business (Braithwaite, 2008), which has seen increased levels of social capital translating into low costs of doing business (Jha, & Rangarajan, 2020; Loucks et al., 2010; Styaningrum et al., 2020).

The concept of social capital has its origin at the beginning of the 20th century and has gradually evolved within the wider sociological discourse (Guðmundsson & Mikiewicz, 2012). HEIs for example, have even been urged by government agents and policy makers to create an enabling environment where social networks can flourish. It is believed that linkages between HEIs and SMEs are critical in knowledge stimulation and exchange and as potential grounds for cultivating social capital (Gordon & Jack, 2010). This can also be achieved through business incubators, a useful tool HEIs facilitates to support business start-ups (Bikse et al., 2016). The relationship between HEIs and businesses is said to have become more prominent especially in modern day entrepreneurship (Gordon et al., 2010).

Although the urgency for leadership to focus on social capital and relationships as a means of improving on productivity has continued to prevail (PWC, 2014), there are still gaps in existing research especially with regards to the impact of social capital on entrepreneurship in general (Gailey, 2010; Muniady et al., 2015).

Social Capital in Entrepreneurship

Social capital is defined as the progressive way in which a community's spirit and activities are built, based on a combination of social connections, reciprocity, cooperation, good will, trust, partnership, compassion and social interaction (Guðmundsson et al., 2012; Lindvert et al., 2017). Dastourian et al. (2016) have linked social capital with individuals' ability to work collectively within groups and organisations to achieve common objectives through social relations, norms, values and interactions within society using a set of resources to promote entrepreneurship objectives and overcome resource limitations.

Social capital is the value obtained through social interactions, including benefits from relationship networks formed with suppliers, customers, public servants, the government sector, service organisations, media and intermediaries within the external business environment. This includes the breadth, depth, degree of trust and reciprocity within and between these relationships (Xei et al., 2021) plus the norms and trust that govern them (Gailey, 2010). It is a means of identifying opportunities, organising resources, improving social entrepreneurship, building legitimacy for the business and facilitating access to financial and other useful information, culminating in improved business performance (Lowrince et al., 2019).

Loucks et al. (2010) denote that communities with high levels of social capital have lower transaction costs and higher degrees of democratic self-regulation. Ring et al. (2010) suggest that social capital is crucial in facilitating or constraining business networks, but they articulate how communally enhanced social capital promotes successful business networks.

Guðmundsson et al. (2012) view social capital as the resources in social relationships, manifested in social networks and considered essential for business success (Muniady et al., 2015). This allows

enterprises develop competitive advantage using various collaborative mechanisms (Dastourian et al., 2016; Lindvert et al., 2017; Lowrince et al., 2019) to generate productive results and facilitate economic returns through new business opportunities and sales growth (Fornoni et al., 2012; Lindvert et al., 2017).

Dastourian et al. (2016) further describe social capital as an intangible asset that encourages cooperation and innovative interactions, facilitating learning through intra and inter-group dimensions. It represents cognitive, structural and relational dimensions that influence business performance (Lowrince et al., 2019; Setini et al., 2020) with a relational aspect that features type, quality and characteristics of relationships and how they are developed to include trust and commitment. The structural dimension features properties of the social system and how network relations yield benefits and assesses how network ties and connections are structured. The cognitive dimension refers to shared goals, vision, interpretations and systems of meaning among different groups while facilitating mutual understanding of goals and methods of social interactions (Lowrince et al., 2019).

Jha et al. (2020) emphasize the need for responsiveness towards multiple stakeholders in addition to contextual features as complex non-financial dimensions. Businesses rely on personal relationships with their customers (Cai et al., 2021), business partners and most importantly on employee knowledge, values, skills and experience for long-term performance. Prioritizing community needs is equally good for business and may lead to numerous positive outcomes (Loucks et al., 2010).

Findings that emerged from a study conducted by Gordon et al. (2010) depict some business development benefits of social capital, which can be fostered when businesses engage with HEIs and urge government agencies to broker such linkages for the good of the relevant parties. Cai et al. (2021) reverberate this notion and demonstrate findings that advance social capital in various forms between HEIs and the business sector.

Foley and O'Connor (2013) suggest that networking, which is characterized by fundamental social dimensions unique to the context, contributes significantly to business ambitions. Hence, internal and external network ties linked to traditional and historical characteristics are key drivers of social capital.

Female Entrepreneurship and Social Capital

Female entrepreneurs are creators and creations of social capital (Aaltio et al., 2008) and African female entrepreneurs in particular, are said to have extensive social networks (Lindvert et al., 2017), which they use in building their businesses (Isabirye, 2017; 2021). Female-owned SMEs are said to possess unique entrepreneurial orientation dimensions such as being proactive, innovative and risk-conscious, which are instrumental in augmenting business performance using their networking tendencies manifested in social capital (Lowrince et al., 2019). Female entrepreneurs are skilled at building relationships with their context, which contributes to their effective negotiation abilities with various stakeholders, a major factor in business success (Dastourian et al., 2016; Isabirye, 2017; 2021). Women embrace collaboration and inclusiveness and embody ethics and fairness to contribute to various levels of decision-making (Kuchynchova, 2015; Moodley et al., 2016).

Networking is a social process that occurs over time (Gordon et al., 2010) and plays a crucial role in the success of business enterprises. Women tend to create more collaborative networks that include family, employees, society and their business connections (Dastourian et al., 2016; Yukongdi et al., 2020). These networks are key components of social capital (Foley et al., 2013; Lowrince et al., 2019; Ring et al., 2010) and provide female entrepreneurs with an avenue for knowledge sharing (Setini et al., 2020) and information exchange which are useful during business start-up and expansion, absence of which may hinder successful female entrepreneurship (Isabirye, 2017; 2021).

Family orientation and family structures contribute significantly to the economy and have been classified by Cai et al. (2021), Dastourian et al. (2016) and Lindvert et al. (2017) as forms of social capital that feature in the start-up and management of SMEs, said to be useful instruments in female entrepreneurship (Odebrecht, 2013). Isabirye (2021) agrees with Kovjanic et al. (2012), Madsen et al. (2015) and Moodley et al. (2016) that the relational tendencies demonstrated by women, make them suitable for leadership approaches that embrace personal interactions and influencing of groups, which have

increasingly been accepted as significant features in social capital useful in promoting organisational growth and success (Dastourian et al., 2016; Lowrance et al., 2019; Setini et al., 2020).

Therefore, the author considered it imperative to examine how female-owned SMEs in Uganda maximise these relational tendencies during their collaborative interactions with various stakeholders to determine their significance in business growth.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research design, method and approach applied have been described in this section. Case study profiles, criteria for case selection, modalities of data gathering, data analysis and data triangulation, and how trustworthiness has been guaranteed are unpacked.

Case studies were used as a qualitative research design to develop a detailed analysis of three female-owned SMEs operating in Uganda (Creswell, 2014). These SMEs were investigated comprehensively to collect large amounts of descriptive information (Bhattacharjee, 2012; Howitt, 2019; Ponelis, 2015) from which significant aspects of their social capital mechanisms were gathered.

Sample Selection of Case Studies

A sample of three case studies was purposively selected (Panneerselvam, 2018) from Uganda's bee keeping, agriculture and textile industries and allocated participants' identifiers (O GANDA, M-FARM and K-WBKA) for anonymity. The small sample size is typical of case study designs (Ridder, 2017) and was determined by the need for comprehensive but qualitative information from a few experienced female-owned SMEs (Bhattacharjee, 2012) who have been engaging in entrepreneurship for over five years in different parts of Uganda. The author deemed it necessary to adopt this sample with the aim of engaging comprehensively with experienced and socially-oriented female entrepreneurs to gather useful but in-depth information on their collaboration and relational practices, which have been critical in moulding their success. The author examined how the various case studies interact with their respective stakeholders and the social and economic benefits as a result.

3.2 Case Study Profiles
The table below presents profiles of all three case studies.

TABLE 1
ORGANISATIONAL PROFILES OF THE THREE FEMALE-OWNED SMES

Sample: Three (3) female-owned SMEs
O-GANDA: Textile and communications brand that produces unique products (shirts, dresses, gift items etc.) with messages that are printed in the indigenous language to share Uganda's unique identity with the world: Textile Industry, over 5 years in Operation, In Kampala District, Central Uganda.
M-FARM: Commercial coffee farm seated on hundreds of acres with over 300 beehives. The farm is intercropped with matooke (a staple Ugandan banana food item). Produce honey and other bee products for sale: Agriculture Industry, 7 years in operation, In Fort Portal District, Western Uganda
K-WBKA: Bee keeping business by over 300 women with a vision of reducing poverty among rural women: Bee-Keeping Industry, over 15 years in operation, In Kitgum District, Northern Uganda.

(Author's Own work)

Data Collection

Yin (2014) recommends interviews as important data collection sources for case studies. Therefore, semi-structured interviews were used to gather insights from the SMEs (Ridder, 2017) on how they maximise social capital, including relations with the community, government and HEIs, and employee, supplier and family dynamics as critical components in manifesting growth. Two of these interviews were conducted in August 2021 and one in September 2021, with follow up discussions in January 2022.

Yin (2008)'s logic on replication was applied to replicate the explicitly described social capital mechanisms in each selected case, while focusing on their unique and innovative practices and

characteristics. All interviews were conducted and transcribed manually by the author to ensure accuracy (Taylor et al., 2016).

Reviewing literature was a significant aspect of this paper (Bryman, 2016; Creswell, 2014), to map available literature and unpack current ideas on social capital and female entrepreneurship, while identifying various meanings and scope relevant to the study (Bhattacharjee, 2012; Patten & Newhart, 2017).

Data Triangulation

Primary data from the three case studies were triangulated with reviewed literature to authenticate practical information generated from the participants (Ponelis, 2015). The author understands that case studies dwell heavily on contextual information, which was derived from literature on the Ugandan female entrepreneurship context and from the three participants, after which the data from each source were triangulated as per standard case study practice (Bhattacharjee, 2012; Creswell, 2014; Ridder, 2017). This process culminated in a comprehensive partnership framework populated with insights from the three participants.

Data Analysis

The insights from each case study were critically analyzed (Taylor et al., 2016) to unpack collaborative practices implemented by the SMEs and their underlying social and economic impact. Data analysis was dynamic and creative (Taylor et al., 2016), which linked the relevant data to the research objectives (Glaser & Laudel, 2013).

Raw text from semi-structured interviews and evidence from reviewed literature were condensed into summarised formats (Haslam & McGarty, 2014; Howitt, 2019). The female owned SMEs were the unit of analysis based on their social capital dynamics, which were the source of interest for this study (Ponelis, 2015). Content analysis was applied to examine the raw data (Haslam et al., 2014), which were micro-analysed using colour coding mechanisms to study interactive text and determine evolving codes (Strauss & Corbin, 2008).

The process was holistic, rigorous and contextual, enabling the researcher to identify essential themes, patterns and linkages in the collected data (Bhattacharjee, 2012; Creswell, 2014; Strauss et al., 1998; Taylor et al., 2016). Thematic analysis entailed conceptualizing and categorizing key issues and discussion points using different colour coding tactics from which concepts, categories and sub-categories were grouped into major themes (Creswell, 2014; Glaser et al., 2013; Howitt, 2019; O'Connor et al., 2020) constituted in the partnership framework developed.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was a fundamental aspect of this study (Johnsson et al., 2014) and entailed generating convincing and replicable findings using Lincoln and Guba (1985)'s evaluation criteria. Data analysis was conducted with the appropriate level of rigour and transparency during the coding process (O'Connor et al., 2020). Credibility was applied by utilising the correct operational measures when conducting this study by applying methods that have been used and tested in previous studies (Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Lincoln et al., 1985; Loh, 2013; Shenton, 2004; White et al., 2012) and familiarising with all participants related to this study before engaging with them during the interview phase.

The author examined past studies as adequately as possible to reflect how previous research corresponds to social capital in general intending to foster credibility (Loh, 2013; Lincoln et al., 1985; Shenton, 2004). The case study approach gathered different voices of participants with similar and different characteristics, which provided an element of diversity in the perspectives they shared and generated varied knowledge that represents the wider African setting (Fusch & Ness, 2015; Korstjens et al., 2018; Lincoln et al., 1985; Loh, 2013; Shenton, 2004; White et al., 2012).

FINDINGS

An account of how social capital is manifested by the three female-owned SMEs and entrenched within their business operations through various collaborative efforts is presented in this section. This includes the corresponding social and economic impacts of these relationships.

Social Capital and Business Success

The author focused comprehensively on case study mapping of some of the collaboration mechanisms between the three SMEs and the various stakeholders they cooperate with, which have been perceived as largely beneficial to their enterprises.

Social capital in the form of existing partnerships has been investigated including how these relationships influence business performance. This has been implemented by selecting cases that bear varying and unique degrees of social impact from which a comprehensive partnership framework was developed.

Findings have been categorized using major themes constructed within the partnership framework of the respective SMEs and applied to describe some of the discussion points gathered during the interviews from which unanticipated insights were derived (Haslam et al., 2014; Howitt, 2019).

TABLE 2
A PARTNERSHIP FRAMEWORK FOR FEMALE-OWNED SMES IN UGANDA, WHICH ILLUSTRATES THEIR COLLABORATIVE EFFORTS WITH VARIOUS STAKEHOLDERS

K-WBKA	M-FARM	O-GANDA
<p>Community Level Collaboration Have been collaborating with more than 350 women (young mothers, school drop outs, child and women headed families with no source of income), over the years and provide them with various forms of bee keeping incentives (training, counselling, marketing and material support) to produce very good honey = income generation for rural women; quality assurance for the business; high social impact: <i>“Every season that we have harvested our honey, we sell and then we get 5%, we take to our pool and look for someone who is very vulnerable. We buy these modern hives and give her so she pays later. At least her sale from that hive will support her home, her</i></p>	<p>Community Level Collaboration Symbiotic relationships with over 30 permanent workers + over 100 community workers from surrounding areas who grow their food and are accommodated on their land, the community in turn tills the land, which means productive relations with the community = efficiency, good reputation + economic returns: <i>“So we give them land, they help us till, then we put in our coffee and matooke, as it’s growing they also put in their own vegetables, onions,</i></p>	<p>Industry Level Collaboration Created a textile brand to collaborate with Ugandan tour companies in 2015 to clean up Uganda’s image on social media which was congested at the time due to negative publicity (“walk to work” protests, the Ebola virus, depreciation of the Ugandan Shilling, struggling economy and tourism industry) hence they needed to showcase Ugandan heritage and counter bad publicity. Brand has been translated into more indigenous languages = increased visibility/monetary benefits.</p> <p>Family Level Collaboration Business owner collaborated with her daughter to produce a brand for children by applying branding principles that portray an artistic expression of a young child = increased visibility/monetary gains</p>

<p><i>children and other things because it will generate for her some money.”</i></p> <p><i>“Someone taught me when I was still young, that for you to succeed you must have Ubuntu and the passion for the people you work with. Of course, if you have Ubuntu, the passion and then you are looking at a business that is sustainable for your people then you will know how to handle them. Because these are really vulnerable people, they need support so sometimes I have the knowledge on training them. We discourage them from cutting down trees and encourage them to plant flowery plants like sunflowers... because that is where we shall get our honey from”</i></p> <p>Collaborate with board members who provide technical advice and oversight = Quality Assurance</p> <p>Knowledge on bee keeping, good reputation + relationship with communities within the district means influx of visitors to their processing unit (a learning site) = improved visibility + increased sales/monetary gains</p>	<p><i>things that they can get money from, we actually even provide them with seedlings”</i></p> <p>Majority of their workers are women, which means support to gender equity which trickles down to families = increased yields and wider social impact</p> <p>Collaborate with recruitment agents to hire workers which helps with accessing the right manpower = quality assurance/efficiency</p> <p>Membership to the Nyabuswaba Abakwataniza Coffee Farmers Association (NACOFA) a local cooperative = information sharing, networking and access to affordable coffee processing facilities</p> <p>Good relationship with the public = farm visits from local and international consumers, increased visibility + income from product sales</p>	<p>Partnership with Traditional Kingdom Partnership with the Buganda Kingdom to elevate the Kabaka’s (King) sovereignty, created a brand for the kingdom and are earning royalties in collaboration with the Buganda government = improved visibility/monetary gains/social impact <i>“Every week I send them 50 shirts, they sell and we reconcile on Fridays. They put the money on my account, I make more shirts and then I give them. They take off their royalties and then they give me my money”</i></p> <p>Collaborate with female bakers from Buganda region and with the Buganda Kingdom in a campaign to celebrate the Kabaka’s birthday by baking cakes to build his image, proceeds from sales allocated to developing women in Buganda = improved visibility/social impact</p> <p>Corporate Partnerships Partner with corporate organisations in supplying gift hampers to their respective organisations for their staff = monetary gains/visibility</p> <p>Mutual Collaboration with Suppliers/Service Providers Mutually collaborate with multiple suppliers/service providers in their day to day operations = social impact/quality assurance:</p>
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<p>Family Level Collaboration Influence from mother and grandparents nurtured business owner's interest in bee-keeping from a young age = continues to impact on the business positively</p> <p>Market Linkages Support communities with market linkages = market for honey and increased visibility: <i>"We link them to markets because you cannot imagine that someone from very deep like the border of South Sudan and has made honey of maybe 50 liters and has to bring it to Gulu (approx 300km), it is not easy. He doesn't know anybody in Gulu so we link them up to markets"</i></p> <p>Collaborate with a committed community of buyers in and out of their district who buy their products consistently = increased sales/monetary gains.</p> <p>Government and NGO Linkages Partner with the Uganda Bureau of Statistics (UBOS) who have tested their hives for quality purposes and they meet international standards = Quality Assurance</p> <p>Collaboration with government and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) means linkages to national and continental bee-keeping events = material support, increased visibility and learning</p>	<p>Focus heavily on networking means many referrals for coffee purchases = visibility & monetary benefits.</p> <p>International Linkages Member of "Women in Coffee," an international Women in Coffee Alliance = information exchange, empowerment + leadership development, strategic partnerships and market visibility on the global scale</p> <p>Government Partnerships Maintain a good reputation/relations with and are supported by the Uganda Coffee Development Authority (UCDA) who ensure that they pick the right cherries and provide them with technical advice, free coffee seedlings, coffee processing equipment and market linkages with local and international buyers and test their coffee samples = quality assurance/visibility/increased sales</p> <p>Partnership with Uganda Bureau of National Statistics (UBNS) means following the necessary regulations (full registration, Fair Trade Certification; discourage child labour and discrimination) = quality assurance</p> <p>Partnerships with Incubators Linkages with coffee roasters in Uganda for technical advice on quality coffee roasting and on how to dry green coffee = value addition: <i>"I researched among coffee processors on how they go</i></p>	<p><i>They rely on this business so every shirt for example the Kabaka shirts, they have five stages of production. Before that shirt is sold, five people have to touch it. And all those are Ugandans. There is a woman who tailors the shirts, then the guy who does the printing. Now the Kabaka shirt has the screen print and an embroidery, you have to put a screen print and then you have to put the Buganda logo. Those are three people. After that has been done there is a person who has to pack, someone has to iron that shirt and pack it. Then there is the lady who does the bags where we put the shirt and then there is the boda boda guy who delivers it to bulange. That one shirt supports six people before it even supports the Buganda government"</i></p> <p>Collaboration with indigenous suppliers have prompted them not to import ready-made items <i>"from China because those women would lose money, they wouldn't have anything to tailor. The shirt is stitched in Uganda and the plan is, even when we go to the other countries, the stitching will be done in Uganda because I want these people to grow. All the decision we are making are to make sure that we engage these people we have partnered with. Instead of using Safe Boda, we have this one guy who knows all our people. He knows where Bulange is, he knows where the printer is. It being Ugandan, it's already an indigenous brand, so they will not see us doing foreign things"</i></p> <p>Social Partnership with the Public Good relations with the public who always support and look out for them = goodwill, good reputation, increased sales + monetary gains <i>"The other point of goodwill is every time we've had issues with</i></p>
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<p>opportunities:</p> <p><i>“It produces flowers which attract bees and their honey, we came to know about this when we went for a competition in Zambia where Enterprise Uganda took us”</i></p> <p><i>“There is a time when we went for an LWF competition in Jinja. LWF was number one, so they gave us a processing equipment for honey”</i></p> <p><i>“The knowledge that I got sometime on Business from Enterprise Uganda is the one that I still use in management including some small NGOs that train us like for a week and then they give certificates. I also participated with Village Enterprise and got a certificate.”</i></p> <p>District level funding and other bee-keeping support by government representatives:</p> <p><i>“We have Entomologists who take bee keeping as one of their major enterprise activities so we link our women with them so that they can get some hives”</i></p>	<p><i>about it and they told me so I did a sample roasting of our beans and the feedback has been very good”</i></p> <p><i>“When I have big numbers I use Curad. Curad has one of the biggest roasters. It’s an incubation facility basically put there to support mostly farmers like us who want to do value addition”</i></p> <p>Collaborates with HIEs for online training and practical visits by students from agricultural institutions</p> <p><i>“I have partly attended some online trainings supporting women entrepreneurs and I felt we have to first put a lot of structures and develop the farm before we take those steps”</i></p> <p><i>“We have had some students and groups from agricultural institutions that want to learn more about the different entities that we have at the farm e.g. coffee growing to value addition, bee-keeping and how to extract honey, matooke growing & management and general farm tours.”</i></p>	<p><i>our trademark, we just have to post on social media that person x is faking our product, they will put you down till you stop producing it.”</i></p> <p><i>“There is another powerful story, a friend of mine traveled on the day Chemutai won gold at the Olympics, she was wearing her shirt, she was going to Germany, she got to the airport with her shirt, the air hostess looks at her, she is like “Oh my God, congratulations Uganda,” they gave her an upgrade to Business Class. Then actually most Ugandans, who have traveled with the shirt have said they get so much goodwill, immigration doesn’t bother them, they get so many people giving them favours, such that they never travel again without their shirt”</i></p> <p><i>“I had no money at all by the time we recovered from Covid. We were down to zero, we had cleaned the accounts, I made one phone call, I picked shirts, I called the printer and, I said you print them. They printed them and then I started pushing them on social media. End of July, we had raised a portion of our capital back, and why were we able to do that because the brand is strong. So the investment in the brand has been so good, it has equity. People trust it...”</i></p> <p>Partnerships with Start-Ups to Conduct Training on Branding</p> <p><i>“Covid has proved to us that you don’t have to go to a HEI or to get a certification to acquire knowledge. I have not technically or</i></p> <p><i>practically partnered with a HEI but during the lockdown I did about four classes on branding fundamentals for entrepreneurs (small businesses). This training was usually on Facebook live for</i></p>
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		<p><i>about an hour. As many people were starting their businesses, I was just giving them the nuggets of what they needed to do to make sure that they start well on building their brands. Those Facebook live sessions garnered quite a number of views (over 3000)...So no partnership with an education institution yet but have we shared knowledge, yes we have shared knowledge with the public. Most people get back to me and tell me that those branding sessions during the lockdown helped them.”</i></p> <p>Has enrolled with a HEI to advance her knowledge</p> <p><i>“My going back to school to study is really to enrich my Communications career on top of my branding knowledge”</i></p>
<p>Challenges:</p> <p>Capitalise on 1) financial, equipment, logistical and Covid-19 related challenges by aggressively strengthening their efforts to access external financing; 2) the lack of environmental compliance by reinforcing community-level environmental sensitization efforts and 3) vulnerability of rural women gives them impetus to reinforce women empowerment activities.</p>	<p>Challenges:</p> <p>Navigate challenges (exploitation from big international coffee players; problems with farm workers; Covid-19 related issues; lack of child-care facilities for female workers;</p> <p>liquidity issues = lack of a business plan which hampers collaboration with HEIs for e.g.; staff-turnover and unfavorable work ethic; robberies) in the best way possible to improve efficiencies in their business and use them as a learning opportunity.</p>	<p>Challenges:</p> <p>Embrace challenges such as no open bidding for jobs; delay in receiving payments; a lot of cut-throat competition, which limits sale of ideas especially for female entrepreneurs; financial issues due to the Covid-19 pandemic; societal expectations of women; exhaustion related to striking the balance between business and domestic responsibilities; un-leveled playing field in the business sector especially for women and use these as learning opportunities for growth.</p>

(Author’s Own Work)

In this framework, the author aligns with Jha et al. (2020)’s notion about the importance of engaging multiple stakeholders and demonstrates how female-owned SMEs manifest social capital in their business relationships with primary and secondary stakeholders to ensure that all components of their businesses function productively. The outcomes of social capital have been measured using indicators like improved

visibility, quality assurance, value addition, increased sales, monetary gains, improved learning and goodwill which are all instrumental to business success.

The relational, structural and cognitive dimensions of social capital are distinctly manifested through the nature and quality of relationships formed between the SMEs and their various stakeholders, the social structure and network of people within these relationships and the common understanding, values, goals and purpose between the SMEs and their various stakeholders. These include intangible aspects, the interplay between them and the impact that the three dimensions have on business connections and on the wider social grouping all of which are a critical manifestations of social capital as demonstrated in reviewed literature (Dastourian et al., 2016; Lowrance et al., 2019; Setini et al., 2020).

The author concurs with Foley et al. (2013) and Loucks et al. (2010), demonstrating that female-owned SMEs cannot achieve business success as a stand alone practice. There is power in collective grouping, and social capital enables the effective functioning of a social group. Mechanisms that focus on collectiveness have a marked impact on business stability; hence it is imperative to invest in social capital. The benefits that flow from these intangible investments multiply material and social returns many times over as depicted from the insights gathered from the three SMEs. The partnerships and collaboration efforts between these SMEs and formal and informal groups have been seen to establish connections that strengthen and grow their businesses. They blend Ubuntu mechanisms by altruistically integrating the social aspect within company culture with the aim of promoting common good that is beneficial to their business and wider society.

Findings have also demonstrated to some extent that social capital is a two-way street that incorporates social transactions marked by the elements of reciprocity, trust and cooperation in running a business while promoting common good, as Dastourian et al. (2016) postulate. These are implications of social capital, which have been depicted in the relationships between the SMEs and some of their collaborators such as the wider community, their suppliers and government representatives. It means being part of a community while displaying mutual support for mutual development as advanced by Lowrance et al. (2019). Social capital promotes quality of life depicted in how these female-owned SMEs build some of the different groups of people they engage with, while also using their alliances with government and non-governmental representatives to promote efficiency in the production of goods.

Social capital can be manifested by understanding how society operates, bearing in mind that all societies have rituals and patterns, which can be maximised for business success. One SME capitalises on the importance of collaborating with the traditional kingdom during which both parties benefit strategically from each other. Another SME is aware of the social requirements within their community and provides incentives to farm workers, which promotes food security while creating opportunities for affordable labour that boosts efficiency in production. The SME from Kitgum maximises on their understanding of the issues that rural women face and supports them accordingly while establishing trust and good will among the local community. Hence, all SMEs engage with influential members of their local and business communities to a large extent and maximise on this for the success of their enterprises.

Studies have attempted to examine the beneficial aspects of various forms of entrepreneurial linkages such as family networks (Dastourian et al., 2016; Lindvert et al., 2017), government linkages (Cai et al., 2021; Xie et al., 2021), community engagement, customer relations (Cai et al., 2021; Loucks et al., 2010), linkages between HEIs and the business sector (Cai et al., 2021; Gordon et al., 2010) regarding social capital modalities. This study has empirically determined some of these networks and their benefits. However, the author finds lacking a more holistic form of social capital mechanism that captures all dimensions of social interactions with an equal level of impetus. Hence, it is clear that the SMEs' relationships with government representatives, the community, their suppliers, and the wider public seem to have more momentum than their linkages with HEIs for example and yet these relationships are equally beneficial for business growth as Cai et al. (2021) and Gordon et al. (2010) determine. When the author prodded about their collaborative efforts with HEIs for example, one participant pointed out the divide between theory and practice which she believes has been detrimental to the success of such forms of collaboration. She stated, "we have realised that for many technically knowledgeable people, we are the ones who teach them about what we are experiencing. Even those people who are technically knowledgeable from HEIs like professors should

know that to do things practically is very crucial.” Another participant made an interesting observation, “people have changed the way they seek knowledge, you don’t have to sit in a classroom, you can have a master class, you can have a talk, all these talks going on in rotary clubs where people gain knowledge, talks in microfinance groups, they keep on inviting expatriates so people who are professionals give their time voluntary to share knowledge with people who would usually not make it to a HEI to get that kind of knowledge or certification.” The participant from Kitgum District who conducts regular trainings for community members on bee-keeping intimated that she has not had any formal links with HEIs whatsoever, but she relies on other partners such as local and international NGOs for this form of support. For example, this divide between these SMEs and HEIs could also be because the SMEs have not aggressively sought any form of engagement with HEIs or the HEIs are not aware of their existence in the first place. Therefore, this is an area that can be capitalised upon by both parties.

While social capital may provide opportunities for growth, it also presents avenues for abuse and other shortcomings, which may constrain business networks, like Ring et al. (2010) deduced. Nevertheless, the participants leverage on the challenges that they face and have established mechanisms that work, to create a niche for themselves within the complex business environment in which they operate. The most notable finding, therefore, relates to the unique level of interactions against all odds, and the related social and monetary impacts observed which are beneficial to their businesses in multiple forms.

CONCLUSION

Conclusion

Business growth is a holistic phenomenon that embraces a range of interdependent variables, some of which are grounded in endless forms of social capital during which collaboration is achieved in line with primary and secondary stakeholders for the greater good. The keywords here are relationships, networks, trust, reciprocity, community, and mutual benefit developed between SMEs and their various stakeholders as resources that improve their businesses over time. The author concurs with Loucks et al. (2010)’s perception that the quality of personal relationships with customers and business partners is very critical for the growth of SMEs and that the implication for businesses operating in communities with higher social capital means low cost of doing business and higher level of trust, which translates into business success.

Each relationship is unique, and agents of change are both internal and external through commitment by top management and employees as well as support, buy-in, pressure and oversight from other stakeholders that constitute the wider public, community members, investors, suppliers, regulatory agencies, HEIs and customers who have a considerable influence on internal business practices. Relationships produce a public good, which depicts the instrumental role that social capital plays in improving managerial performance, the functioning of diverse groups, enhanced supply chain relations, value derived from strategic alliances such as improved capacity building, training and innovations, the evolution of communities and the ultimate goal of improved growth of business enterprises, which makes it a significant component in modern day entrepreneurship.

Contribution

This paper makes several contributions around female business growth by providing a comprehensive mechanism for integrating partnerships and collaboration into business practices from a Ugandan perspective. The study uses the relational, structural and cognitive dimensions of social capital to explore how these are innovatively and consistently integrated into business practices using the partnership framework developed. This approach provides female entrepreneurs with a formalised approach to embracing social capital in their business operations while integrating key components such as relationships, trust and community in line with culture and other normative features as resources for business success.

In terms of practical contributions, the partnership framework illustrates how SMEs can devote efforts to measuring social capital externalities by documenting positive and negative business outcomes arising from existing relationships using indicators that portray how their social structure yields maximum benefits

and how to counter the impediments they face. This provides novel insights into how SMEs can monitor and measure social capital outcomes in a manner that reflects the interactional aspect of business growth while improving their ability to engage with multiple stakeholders (government representatives, suppliers, customers, HEIs, the wider community). The author contributes practical knowledge on the outcomes of social interactions by determining that relationships are a core dimension of social capital and features how resources are formed through interactions between multiple actors.

By adapting the social capital perspective, the author outlined comprehensive and practical insights of how businesses use traditional and non-traditional partners to develop innovative business solutions. By studying their various partnership patterns and activities, the author adds a dynamic understanding of how businesses can manage and build better alliances by providing a rich illustration of novel partnership practices identified in female-owned SMEs in Uganda. This includes local value-based culture, which lies in the domain of their corporate values and have been transformed into internal strategy and translated into financial benefits made possible through the leadership, which is in touch with local communities that comprise their staff and other critical partners such as government agencies, suppliers and community members.

Limitations

The study has outlined the importance of social capital through business level collaborations in various forms for the growth of female owned SMEs. However, empirical discussions with the female entrepreneurs did not exhaustively yield collaborative practices with certain actors as comprehensively as necessary. This includes linkages with HEIs for example, which are equally fundamental for business success.

The reciprocity aspect regarding certain forms of collaboration has also not been fully exhausted in this study. This includes how these SMEs and some of their linkages with HEIs, NGO partners, business incubators and international bodies mutually benefit each other.

Future Research

First, the author recommends further research on ways in which HEIs and other relevant stakeholders not sufficiently described in this study can proactively engage with these SMEs and vice versa to establish forms of collaboration that will benefit the relevant parties, as advanced by scholars like Cai et al. (2021) and Gordon (2010).

In the principle of reciprocity, which is a major component of social capital (Guðmundsson et al., 2012; Lindvert et al., 2017; Xei et al., 2021), the author recommends additional research to analyze how the various stakeholders benefit from each other specifically how the different collaborators of female-owned SMEs gain from these social interactions. These forms of engagement may be through capacity-strengthening functions if we consider the broad roles of HEIs, for example, by collaborating with female-owned SMEs to provide tailor-made courses while also providing spaces for these business owners and the corresponding institutions to gain practical experiences in the form of business incubators facilitated by HEIs or internship programs established by the SMEs where necessary.

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