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Tied to the Context

A Comparative Case Study Contextualising Female Entrepreneurs' Networking in Kenya and Sweden

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Despite the rapid global growth of female entrepreneurship, a persistent gender gap in entrepreneurship remains and women continue to face significant barriers. Networking plays a critical role in overcoming such barriers by facilitating access to vital resources. While prior research has relied on structure-based explanations for female entrepreneurs' networking behaviour, assuming that weak, heterogenous ties provide optimal access to resources, this perspective often overlooks context and individual agency, particularly in non-western settings where female entrepreneurs often rely on strong, trust-based ties. Previous research assumes this is due to accessibility; however, this perspective misses out on female entrepreneurs' agency. Building on contextualisation literature, strong and weak ties networking theory, and entrepreneurial cognition research, we explore how female entrepreneurs' meaning-making of their socio-cultural context influences their attitudes towards networking. We conduct a qualitative study based on 22 interviews with female entrepreneurs and 6 interviews with relevant stakeholders in Kenya and Sweden. Our findings show that female entrepreneurs display agency when interpreting their context and in how their attitudes towards networking are shaped. Our findings contribute to networking literature by integrating the agentic perspective, showing how female entrepreneurs' context-specific meaning-making shapes networking attitudes, and demonstrating the importance of context-sensitive approaches in understanding female entrepreneurs' networking along with the limitations of universal structural assumptions.

Keywords: female entrepreneurship, networking, contextualisation, strong and weak ties

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Definitions

Term	*Definition in our study*
Female entrepreneur	Female founder of a company.
Context	"Circumstances, conditions, situations, or environments that are external to the respective phenomenon and enable or constrain it" (Welter, 2011, p. 167).
Social context	The entrepreneur's social network (Welter, 2011).
Informal institutional context	The cultural and societal norms and beliefs (Welter, 2011).
Network	A web of interdependent social relationships (Hallen et al, 2020).
Networking	"A form of goal-directed behaviour [...] focused on creating, cultivating, and utilizing interpersonal relationships" (Gibson et al, 2014, p. 150).
Network content	The resources exchanged between focal entrepreneur and actors in their network (van Burg et al, 2022).
Network structure	Patterns of relationships and quality of those relationship in a network (van Burg et al, 2022).
Strong ties	Close relationship, e.g. family or friends (Granovetter, 1973).
Weak ties	Low-intensity social connection, e.g. acquaintance (Granovetter, 1973).
Meaning-making	Perception and interpretation of context (based on Brännback & Carsrud, 2017).
Attitudes	How somebody views and evaluates something or someone.
Gender norms	Informal rules and shared beliefs that distinguish expected behaviour based on gender at particular points in time and in particular social contexts (UNICEF, 2023).

Accronyms

Abbreviation	*Full Term*
FE	Female entrepreneur
KFE	Kenyan female entrepreneur (participating in this study)
SFE	Swedish female entrepreneur (participating in this study)
SWT	Strong and weak ties theory

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

Female entrepreneurship has increased with more than 75% over the past two decades (GEM, 2023), yet women only represent a third of entrepreneurs (World Economic Forum, 2022). This persistent gender gap is problematic because female entrepreneurs (FEs) are fundamental in promoting equitable societies and driving economic growth (Corrêa et al., 2022; GEM, 2023). In fact, the opportunity cost associated with the entrepreneurial gender gap is estimated to exceed 2.5 trillion USD annually (BCG, 2019).

Research consistently demonstrates that FEs face distinct challenges (Brush & Cooper, 2012; Crane, 2022), e.g., unequal access to financial resources (Brush & Cooper, 2012; Corrêa et al., 2022). As a result, FEs disproportionately rely on their social networks, i.e., their web of interpersonal relationships (Hallen et al., 2020) to access resources (Constantinidis, 2021; Harrison et al., 2024; Thousani & Edy, 2023). Understanding how these networks are formed and used is therefore essential to understanding female entrepreneurship.

Networking research in female entrepreneurship is dominated by the structural perspective, which argues that patterns of relationships, i.e., network structure, determine resource access (Granovetter, 1973; Hoang & Antoncic, 2003). This reflects a broader sociological tradition that views individuals as shaped by their surrounding structures (Mayhew, 1980) which entrepreneurship researchers have adopted.

However, the prominent structural perspective often assumes behaviours that don't reflect non-Western contexts (Mestwerdt, 2025; Rodrigue & Kuyken, 2025). FEs in developing economies tend to form relationship patterns that differ from what the theory claims as most beneficial. Structural theory emphasise weak ties that bridge diverse groups as key to resource access (Granovetter, 1973). However, empirical studies show that FEs, particularly in developing economies, often rely on closer relationships (Kalafatoglu & Mendoza, 2017; Thousani & Edy, 2023). This challenges the idea that one network pattern is universally superior, especially given

the well-documented role of cultural norms in shaping networking practices. For instance, practices like Guanxi in China (Burt & Burzynska, 2017), Wasta in the Middle East (ALHussan & AL-Husan, 2022; Tlaiss & Kauser, 2011), and Blat in Russia (Ledeneva, 2009), highlight the preference for informal networks based on trust and cultural embeddedness, over Western ideals of individualistic, low-frequency patterned relationships. This notion is relevant for FEs, because the highest average rates of entrepreneurial activity for women are found in developing economies (GEM, 2023). Treating Western norms as universal risks misinterpreting culturally appropriate behaviour as structural disadvantage, ignoring why such patterns emerge in the first place.

In doing so, the structural perspective overlooks the individual agency of entrepreneurs (Van Burg et al., 2022), assuming they fall victim to structure, failing to consider how the way they perceive and interpret their reality shapes their behaviour and, in turn, their network (Brännback & Carsrud, 2017; Smith et al., 2020). This aligns with the second broad sociological tradition besides the structural; the individual (House & Mortimer, 1990), which views individuals not only as a result of their structure but actively contributing to shaping it (O'Brien, 2015). In networking research, the equivalent argument can be seen in the recently emerging agentic perspective (Scheidgen & Brattström, 2023). Surprisingly, the agentic perspective is still vastly underrepresented, with a recent literature review concluding that only 17 out of 235 papers on networking published over the last 40 years consider it (Van Burg et al., 2022). This is perplexing because the agentic perspective offers the lens needed to understand the nuance of networking, especially for FEs beyond Western contexts. A small but growing stream of research (e.g., Alakaleek et al., 2024; Greguletz et al., 2019), draws attention to the importance of the agentic perspective, showing how individuals' interpretation of cultural norms specific to their context shapes their networking behaviour and ultimately their network. Thus, the agentic perspective acknowledges the contextual nature of networking and can prove a useful tool to bridge the gap between the context and the individual, allowing us to extend and nuance our understanding of FEs' networking beyond the structural perspective.

1.2 Purpose & Expected Contribution

The purpose of this study is to explore how FEs' context-dependent meaning-making influences their attitudes towards networking. In doing so, we highlight the importance of agency in entrepreneurial networking research, a concept that has been long undervalued in explanations of how network structure is shaped. We do this by studying FEs in two different socio-cultural contexts; Sweden and Kenya, using a cross-cultural comparative approach to study how context-bound meaning-making influences the attitudes towards networking. This study is expected to contribute to networking theory, by introducing the agentic perspective to the dominant structural perspective rooted in strong and weak ties theory (Granovetter, 1973). In doing so, we contribute to emerging shifts in lens through which networking behaviour and structure is analysed, from externally imposed structural factors to internal meaning-making processes. More broadly, we contribute to the literature on female entrepreneurship by challenging the universal application of Western-centric theory, offering a more context-sensitive approach to FEs networking.

1.3 Research Question

To fulfil this study's stated purpose, we formulate the following research question:

RQ: How does female entrepreneurs' meaning-making of their socio-cultural context influence their attitudes towards networking?

1.4 Delimitations

We enforce two delimitations to limit the scope of this study appropriately.

Firstly, we delimit socio-cultural context to FEs' perception of gender norms within their social and informal institutional context (we discuss the exact meanings of these terms in section 2.1.1). We acknowledge that, in doing so, we risk disregarding other contextual antecedents of FEs' networking attitudes, e.g., antecedents situated in the formal institutional context. However, considering the broad meaning of context and the associated risk of impaired generalisability (as outlined in section 2.1.1), we deem this delimitation necessary.

Secondly, we consider FEs' meaning-making, socio-cultural context, and networking attitudes at a single point in time. While we acknowledge the dynamic nature of these phenomena, our approach aligns with the scope of this study and allows for a focused and in-depth exploration.

2. Literature Review and Theory

2.1 Literature Review

2.1.1 Contextualisation in Female Entrepreneurship

Within entrepreneurship research, "context refers to circumstances, conditions, situations, or environments that are external to the respective phenomenon and enable or constrain it" (Welter, 2011, p. 167). In other words, context refers to antecedents that affect how entrepreneurship is enacted but are situated externally to the phenomenon of entrepreneurship itself. Thus, contextualising entrepreneurship refers to integrating such externally situated antecedents in theory to explain entrepreneurial phenomena. De-contextualised theory, i.e., theory indifferent to external antecedents, is at risk of dismissing or misinterpreting relevant implications (Baker & Welter, 2018). Thus, decontextualisation may lead to impaired generalisability (Zahra, 2007). However, contextualisation is no logical imperative. If contextualisation is not bounded, continuous contextualisation can undermine a theory's generalisability by culminating in an endless chain of contingencies. That is, each contextual factor immediately demands its own context, which eventually reduces generalisable explanations to specific descriptions of isolated cases (Baker & Welter, 2018). Thus, both decontextualisation and unbounded over-contextualisation prove equally undesirable in theory development.

The context of (female) entrepreneurship comprises a multitude of different dimensions[1] (Baker & Welter, 2018; Wigren-Kristoferson et al., 2022). However, in line with this study's delimitations (compare section 1.4), we only consider two contextual dimensions: social context and informal institutional context. Social context refers to the entrepreneur's social network (Welter, 2011). Informal institutional context refers to cultural and societal norms and beliefs (Welter, 2011). These include gender norms, i.e., norms and beliefs that apply to a particular gender (UNICEF, 2023). To illustrate how the interaction of these two contexts can influence FEs we consider a study by Wolf & Frese (2018). The authors propose that FEs in sub-Saharan Africa are both

[1] In doing so, studies often use the terms 'context' and 'embeddedness' interchangeably, reflecting a lack of construct clarity (Wigren-Kristoferson et al., 2022). In an effort not to contribute to this confusion, we thus avoid the term 'embeddedness' in this study.

positively and negatively affected by the influence of their husbands (social context). Moreover, the authors suggest that patriarchal societal values (informal institutional context) mediate the degree and nature of the husbands' influence.
Thus, FE's social and informal institutional contexts are interdependent (Welter, 2011).

The context of an FE is closely intertwined with their agency, i.e., their capacity to intentionally initiate a specific action or behaviour (Elfving et al., 2017). Brännback & Carsrud (2017) examine the cognitive foundations of entrepreneurship, i.e., how entrepreneurs think, decide, and act, in an edited collection of articles. Their work emphasises that context cannot be separated from FEs' agency. In the following, we summarise their findings and outline how context influences FEs' behaviour in four steps[2], which are visualised in Figure 1, based on models such as the contextual model of entrepreneurial intentions (Elfving et al., 2017).

The first step concerns FEs' perception and interpretation of their context. That is, FEs internalise their context through cognitive processing. Thus, context cannot be understood as purely external to the individual. Instead, FEs actively perceive and interpret their context through processes such as selective attention and cognitive framing (Chlosta & Welter, 2017; Elfving et al., 2017). In the remainder of this study, we refer to this process of perception and interpretation as *meaning-making*.

In the second step, FEs' meaning-making influences their attitudes and intentions. That is, FEs form attitudes and intentions through a process of cognitive appraisal. Specifically, they assess a situation's desirability, feasibility, risk, and alignment with their personal goals, partly based on their meaning-making of context, ultimately forming attitudes and intentions (Douglas, 2017; Elfving et al., 2017).

[2] The process model we describe oversimplifies the findings on cognitive processes. For example, context is not the only antecedent of entrepreneurial agency. Also, we present a linear model, but the underlying processes are recursive (Brännback & Carsrud, 2017).

In the third step, FEs' attitudes and intentions influence their behaviour. That is, FEs' intentions and attitudes, mediated by cognitive processes such as self-efficacy and perceived control, partly shape the initiation of specific action. Importantly, FEs' agency is context contingent (Brännback & Carsrud, 2017).

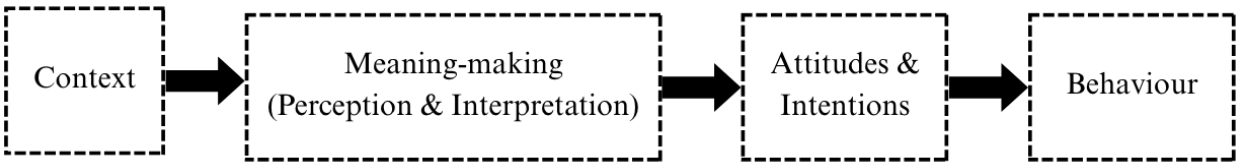

Figure 1: Simplified visualisation of the literature examining the cognitive foundations of entrepreneurship (Brännback & Carsrud, 2017).

In the following, we illustrate how FE's context shapes their agency by applyingthe process in Figure 1 to the findings of Surangi (2018). The author investigates factors influencing FEs' behaviour in Sri Lanka's tourism sector. One participant recounts how they closed their business (a specific action, i.e. behaviour), because they perceived and interpreted (meaning-making) that their community would not approve of unmarried female founders. In other words, meaning-making based on contextual norms influenced their behaviour.

Consequently, FEs' agency is closely intertwined with their context (Brännback & Carsrud, 2017). Naturally, FEs in different locations are surrounded by different contexts. Thus, comparative studies across (national) contexts have been pointed to as fruitful means of contextualisation early on (Rousseau & Fried, 2001). Yet, cross-cultural studies remain an exception within the field of female entrepreneurship (Deng et al., 2025; Rodrigue & Kuyken, 2025).
In the following sub-section, we examine FEs' social context in greater detail.

2.1.2 Networking in Female Entrepreneurship

Within entrepreneurship research, a (social) network is a web of interdependent social relationships (Hallen et al., 2020) that comprises a set of actors, e.g., individuals or organisations, and a set of ties connecting these actors (Brass, 1992). As outlined in the previous section, social networks thus constitute FEs' social context. Networking, then, is "a form of goal-directed behaviour [..] focused on creating, cultivating, and utilizing interpersonal relationships" (Gibson et al., 2014, p. 150). Thus, networking is a mechanism through which the entrepreneur interacts

with their social context. A central feature of an entrepreneur's network is its *content*. That is, the resources exchanged between the focal entrepreneur and the actors they are tied to (Hoang & Antoncic, 2003). Network content includes both tangible resources, e.g., finance, and intangible resources, e.g., information or introductions to people (Van Burg et al., 2022). Network content is fundamental for venture performance. Scholars often explain the dynamics underlying this interrelation through the concept of social capital. Social capital recognises the value that is contained in an individual's social relationships (their network) as an asset, i.e., as a form of capital the individual can utilise (Bourdieu, 1986; Doh & Zolnik, 2011). Thus, social capital acknowledges socio-cultural factors of economic outcomes (Bhandari & Yasunobu, 2009) by emphasising the importance of a person's network for their opportunities and advantages (Bourdieu, 1986). Hence, while network content refers to the specific resources exchanged through the network, the concept of social capital captures the broader utility and advantages the entrepreneur derives from those resources, or, in other words, from network content (Wheadon & Duval-Couetil, 2019). Social capital helps an entrepreneur in accommodating their venture's business needs (Hallen et al., 2020; Khokhawala & Iyer, 2024), e.g., by involving family as investors (Gomez-Mejia et al., 2011).

Relevance of networking & network content in female entrepreneurship

Scholars have consistently shown that FEs face limited access to a variety of resources such as financial, connections to venture capital investors, knowledge, and strategic information (Aldrich et al., 1989; Deng et al., 2025; Foss et al., 2019; Hampton et al., 2011). This lack of resources is particularly profound in developing economies, where it is often reinforced by societal and cultural influences (De Vita et al., 2014). For example, within the UAE and MENA regions, female FEs need to accommodate for family and household responsibilities associated with traditional gender roles (Gupta & Mirchandani, 2018; Kalafatoglu & Mendoza, 2017). Thus, networking is particularly relevant for FEs' success because it helps them mitigate resource constraints by enabling access to social capital (Deng et al., 2025; Khan et al., 2021; Kuschel et al., 2020; Thousani & Edy, 2023; Zhao et al., 2023). The relevance of network content for FEs leads to the question of which factors influence network content, which we turn to in the following.

Besides content, another central feature of an entrepreneur's network is its *structure*. Network structure comprises two dimensions – structural and relational aspects. Structural aspects refer to the pattern of direct and indirect ties among the actors in the network (Hoang & Antoncic, 2003). Structural aspects include characteristics such as size, i.e., the number of actors the focal entrepreneur maintains ties with, or density, i.e., the number of existing ties in the network over the maximum of theoretically possible number of ties in the network (Van Burg et al., 2022). Relational aspects refer to relational qualities of dyadic relationships, i.e., the relational nature of ties linking two actors in the network. Relational aspects include, for example, the strength of a tie (degree of intimacy between the two actors), or diversity, as in ties to actors with different socio-economic status (Van Burg et al., 2022).

Structural perspective

How the constructs of network content and network structure relate to each other is a central question within entrepreneurial networking research (Hallen et al., 2020). The most common answer among scholars adheres to a "content follows structure" logic (Van Burg et al., 2022), referred to as the *structural perspective* (e.g., Scheidgen & Brattström, 2023). That is, the structure of an entrepreneur's network – considering the specific configuration of both structural and relational aspects – determines the network content that the entrepreneur can access. For example, Harima (2014) investigates entrepreneurs' networking in the Japanese diaspora[3]. One participant, who lives in Buenos Aires, maintains strong relations within the local community of Japanese expatriates. Through those interactions, the entrepreneur learns that many expatriates want to consume media in their native language and stay updated about Japanese developments. Consequently, the entrepreneur realised the business opportunity of distributing Japanese newspapers. In other words, structural aspects of the entrepreneur's network (the pattern of relations within the Japanese expatriate community) determined cognitive network content (the information about the expatriates' desire to read about Japan in their native language). The content, in turn, was relevant to the participant's entrepreneurial intentions (a new business opportunity). This example illustrates how the structural perspective interprets entrepreneurs' behaviour and outcomes as a result of their network structure (Van Burg et al., 2022). Moreover, the structural

[3] Diaspora are migrants (and their descendants) who retain a strong relation to their country of origin (Harima, 2014).

perspective suggests that network structure induces a degree of path-dependency. That is, future network development, and in turn entrepreneurial outcomes, are shaped by self-reinforcing dynamics rooted in then entrepreneurs' network structure (Hallen et al., 2020). In summary, the structural perspective - and its "content follows structure" logic - reflects the dominant understanding of scholars regarding the relation of network structure and network content (Hallen et al., 2020; Van Burg et al., 2022).

Agentic perspective

However, some authors argue that the "content follows structure" logic is, to some extent, a consequence of methodological choices. A recent literature review finds that most studies associated with the structural perspective employ quantitative methods (78%), typically focusing on convenient-to-operationalise structural properties of networks over network content (Van Burg et al., 2022). As a result, the relevance of content and entrepreneurial action is overlooked (Van Burg et al., 2022). Only a smaller stream of literature takes the opposing stance – a "structure follows content" logic – typically referred to as the *agentic perspective* (e.g., Scheidgen & Brattström, 2023). The agentic perspective is anchored in research on entrepreneurial cognition (as outlined in section 2.1.1, e.g., Brännback & Carsrud, 2017), and thus derives its name from the notion of entrepreneurs' agency. Below, we outline the "structure follows content" argument that underpins this perspective.

FEs' social context is comprised of their social network (Welter, 2011) and FEs cognitively represent their context (Brännback & Carsrud, 2017). Accordingly, FEs cognitively represent their social network (Smith et al., 2020). Cognitions, through the stages of meaning-making and intentions (compare Figure 1), influence FEs' actions. Consequently, cognitions influence FEs' behaviour with regards to networks, i.e., their networking (Smith et al., 2020). Thus, FEs' networking is intertwined with their agency. That is, a cognition, e.g., the need for a specific type of network content, such as certain information, leads to attitudes and activities that influence tie formation (Roth & Scheidgen, 2024; Scheidgen & Brattström, 2023), e.g., proactive networking behaviour (Kaandorp et al., 2020). As a result, cognitions around the network and its content influence the network structure. In other words, "structure follows content".

We illustrate this argument through findings of Zheng et al. (2020), who investigate networking among entrepreneurs in the US. The authors find that entrepreneurs with prior experience pursue "broadening" networking strategies. That is, they consciously build ties with actors across different

domains such as deliberately seeking a mentor outside their existing network, guided by a clear vision of the qualities they want. Thus, cognitions related to specific network content influenced networking behaviour. Consequently, network content formed network structure, highlighting entrepreneurial agency.

Literature on entrepreneurial cognitions emphasises context-specificity of entrepreneurial agency (Brännback & Carsrud, 2017). This applies to agency regarding networking in particular (Smith et al., 2020). Thus, contextualisation in networking research is important (Roth & Scheidgen, 2024). Despite this, the agentic perspective is in an emergent state (Hallen et al., 2020). This is illustrated by a comprehensive entrepreneurial networking literature review, associating only 17 out of 235 reviewed articles published in the last 40 years with this perspective (Van Burg et al., 2022). Thus, only a few empirical studies have considered contextual influences (Scheidgen & Brattström, 2023).

In summary, considering both the structural and agentic perspectives, the interrelation of network structure and content is not unidirectional but can follow both a ”content follows structure” and a ”structure follows content” logic. In the following sub-section, we examine this tension considering a specific networking theory.

2.1.3 Strong and Weak Ties

In their seminal paper ”The Strength of Weak Ties”, Granovetter (1973) addresses the interrelation of network structure and content. The author introduces their hypothesis of strong and weak ties (SWT), differentiating between two types of tie strength. SWT is highly influential in the field of networking research in entrepreneurship and it has been argued that SWT developed into an established paradigm (Jack, 2005), having been cited over 76,000 times in Google Scholar (as of May 2025). Despite its age, SWT is subject of many contemporary studies (e.g., Klyver & Arenius, 2022). In the following, we outline SWT and its application in female entrepreneurial networking.

SWT concerns the strength of a tie linking two actors in a network. The strength of ties are determined by several interdependent factors: amount of time two actors spend interacting, the emotional intensity and intimacy between them, and the level of reciprocity in their exchange of

content (Granovetter, 1973). Strong ties[4] normally include friends and relatives, whilst weak ties include acquaintances. The central argument of SWT is that weak ties offer distinct benefits because they connect an individual to actors who are dissimilar and belong to different social groups. Thus, weak ties can function as bridges across otherwise disconnected segments of a network. Consequently, content exchanged through weak ties – particularly cognitive content such as information - is more likely to be non-redundant compared to content exchanged through strong ties. Thus, content exchanged through weak ties is more likely to be of higher value (Granovetter, 1973). Studies in entrepreneurship confirm the SWT hypothesis, relating weak ties to creativity, innovation, opportunity recognition and exploitation, new information, knowledge, and learning (Bastian et al., 2023). Thus, weak ties offer distinct advantages to entrepreneurs, and we conclude that SWT follows the ”content follows structure” logic associated with the structural perspective.

Network structure varies with gender. That is, FEs' network structure differs from that of their male peers (Harrison et al., 2024; Thousani & Edy, 2023). In the following, we first outline how this difference is manifested and then turn to its implications.

FEs have fewer social networks (Brush, 1992; Kalafatoglu & Mendoza, 2017) and their networks are of smaller size (Constantinidis, 2021; Greer & Greene, 2003). Moreover, FEs are less likely to have ties with actors in powerful economic network positions (Aldrich et al., 1989). FEs have less diverse networks (Aldrich et al., 1989; Foss, 2010; Jennings & Brush, 2013). Also, men have more ties in higher status professional fields (Greer & Greene, 2003), e.g., banking, while women rely on funding through informal networks to a higher degree (Jennings & Brush, 2013). FEs are more likely to rely on personal ties, such as friends or family (Hampton et al., 2011; Kalafatoglu & Mendoza, 2017). Overall, FE's networks are characterised by a degree of relative homogeneity in terms of gender, race, and social status (Constantinidis, 2021; Deng et al., 2025). In other words, FEs' network structure exhibits homophily, i.e., the tendency to form ties with actors that share similar attributes. Specifically, research consistently demonstrates that FEs lean towards building ties with other women (Constantinidis, 2021; Hampton et al., 2011; Kwiek & Roszka, 2021; Wheadon & Duval-Couetil, 2019). However, gender-homophily is not absolute. FEs often have

[4]i.e., actors an individual is linked to through a strong tie.

mixed-gender networks due to the overrepresentation of men within their industry (Thousani & Edy, 2023). Framing the distinct network structure of FEs through the lens of SWT shows that FEs primarily use strong ties and not weak ties (Constantinidis, 2021). Thus, we can conclude that the structure of female entrepreneurial networks differs from that of their male peers in that it primarily consists of strong ties. Reliance on strong ties is not only associated with gender but also socio-economic environment. Entrepreneurs (both men and women) in developing economies tend to use strong over weak ties (Berrou & Combarnous, 2012), but FEs in particular (Mozumdar et al., 2020).

SWT (Granovetter, 1973), and subsequent work focusing on the benefits of ties that bridge otherwise disconnected network segments (Burt, 1992) are cornerstones of the structural perspective in networking research (Constantinidis, 2021; Scheidgen & Brattström, 2023). The structural perspective, anchored in the central premise of SWT, thus interprets FEs tendency to use strong ties as a challenge (Foss, 2010). Scholars argue that FEs overreliance on strong ties translates into resource accessibility issues (Deng et al., 2025). Hence, the network structure of female founders is considered a constraint of female entrepreneurship (Constantinidis, 2021; Foss et al., 2019). Given the advantages SWT associates with weak ties, the question of why FEs (and entrepreneurs in developing economies) tend to utilise strong ties arises. In the following, we outline the findings of studies related to this question.

The main argument presented is FE's lack of accessibility, which is manifested in a variety of forms, including gender bias (Thousani & Edy, 2023), constraints through societal norms (Westlund & Bolton, 2003), work-family conflict due to family obligations (Aldrich et al., 1989; Thébaud, 2015), demographics (Sprecher, 2022), and discrimination (Sithas & Surangi, 2021).

Sprecher (2022) studies how individuals form weak ties, highlighting the role of demographics, e.g. education and income levels. Those with greater income and education tend to have more weak ties in their network structure, as they encounter more people through higher education. In contrast, individuals without higher education may have less weak ties due to limited exposure to such networks. Sithas & Surangi (2021) review literature on ethnic minority entrepreneurs and find that discrimination (e.g., racial, religious, cultural) makes forming weak ties more challenging. Instead, personal and community (i.e., strong ties) resources are their only available option. Similarly, Jamali (2009) finds that FEs in Lebanon face societal barriers and limited access

to capital, which forces them to depend on family support when starting their venture. To conclude, FEs (and entrepreneurs in developing economies) use of primarily strong tie networks is attributed to external reasons and framed as a lack of accessibility.

Research that does recognise FEs as individual agents commonly argues that strong and weak tie structure differences are rooted in gendered networking behaviour - male founders being more instrumental and rational and women more relational (Deng et al., 2025; Harrison et al., 2024). However, this gendered dichotomy has been criticised (Constantinidis, 2021). Critiques find no significant differences between the networking behaviour of male and female entrepreneurs (e.g., Foss, 2010), and argue FEs' networking is dynamic, complex, and responsive to diverse entrepreneurial needs (Deng et al., 2025). This is illustrated by individual studies that investigate how perception of cultural influences shapes FEs' agency in regard to networking (e.g., Alakaleek et al., 2024).

2.2 Synthesis & Research Gap

Based on our critical review of networking in female entrepreneurship, we identify tension between the structural and agentic perspectives on networking research. This tension is particularly noticeable in studies focusing on the SWT (Granovetter, 1973). Findings consistently demonstrate that FEs network structure leans toward strong tie patterns (Constantinidis, 2021). Given the benefits associated with weak ties, scholars identify this distinct structure as a constraint of FEs (Foss et al., 2019). Moreover, FEs strong tie networks are interpreted as a sign of structural disadvantage (Constantinidis, 2021) and attributed to a lack of accessibility that is manifested in reasons beyond the individual FE (e.g., Sprecher, 2022). This line of argumentation reflects the dominance of the structural perspective's "content follows structure" logic (Van Burg et al., 2022). FEs' agency is, if considered at all, treated as a secondary concern. Studies that acknowledge FEs' agency frequently suggest that their strong tie networks are a result of gendered networking behaviour. That is, FEs, in contrast to their male peers, are argued to engage in relational, emotionally driven networking (Deng et al., 2025). This use of gender as universal explanation for differences in agency reflects the decontextualisation of networking theory, which primarily originates from Western contexts (Mestwerdt, 2025). This is problematic because research on cognitive foundations of entrepreneurship demonstrates the context-specificity of individual

agency (Brännback & Carsrud, 2017), particularly in the domain of networking (Smith et al., 2020). By disregarding context, research thus provides a limited understanding of the contextual complexity of FEs networking and their agency in that regard (Roth & Scheidgen, 2024). That is, we identify a gap in FE networking literature that underemphasises agency because it fails to capture how individual FE's meaning-making of their specific context influences networking attitudes. By addressing this gap, we answer calls for context-contingent investigations of individual networking (e.g., Roth & Scheidgen, 2024) and cross-country comparative studies investigating individual networking (e.g., Rodrigue & Kuyken, 2025).

2.3 Theoretical Framework

To address gaps identified in the literature, our theoretical framework connects the main concepts described in the literature review, namely (1) Contextualisation (2) Cognition, and (3) Networking. Whilst context can be defined in multitudes of ways, unbounded over-contextualization risks a lack of generalisability (Baker & Welter, 2018). Therefore, we bound our model to the social and informal institutional dimensions of context (Welter, 2011), because they are the most relevant to our study of FEs' networking. This context is the lens through which we will study the cognition of the FEs, as illustrated by the bubble around meaning-making and attitudes towards networking. The transition from meaning-making to attitudes are the cognitive foundations of entrepreneurship, and context which in turn has been shown to influence attitudes (Brännback & Carsrud, 2017). Despite the insights drawn from the literature, there remains a gap in the intersection of contextualisation, cognition, and FEs' networking. We aim to address this gap by studying meaning-making and attitudes towards networking through the lens of contextualisation, focusing on the individual FE.

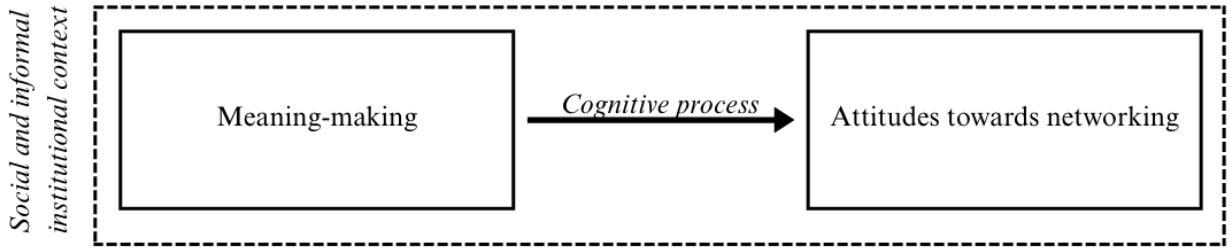

Figure 2: Theoretical Framework

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Approach and Strategy

All methodological choices we adopt are rooted in the assumption that FEs reality is socially constructed (Berger & Luckmann, 2011), i.e. we adopt a constructivist ontology (Bell et al., 2019). Consequently, we assume that the phenomenon of networking must be interpreted and not objectively discovered, that is, we adopt an interpretivist epistemology (Bell et al., 2019). These considerations are reflected in our research question, which predisposes individuals' meaning-making as the relevant trajectory of inquiry. Thus, we adopt a qualitative approach, enabling us to capture individual perceptions and interpretations (Bell et al., 2019). Beyond philosophical anchoring (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2018), a qualitative approach fits our exploratory research question and nascent research area (Edmondson & Mcmanus, 2007). It also suits our topic – networking, which is characterised by individual's interaction, thus enclosing subjective meaning and emotions, both of which a qualitative approach can discover (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). Lastly, we frame context through a gendered perspective, an approach qualitative is well-suited for (Tracy & Tracy, 2013). Furthermore, we opted for an abductive approach, enabling us to reflect on the subjective interpretations our research question is aimed at by iterating between theory and empirical data throughout the research process (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2018).

3.2 Research Design

We employ a cross-cultural comparative case study design, informed by our research question. This approach emphasises the comparison of multiple cases while considering the specific context in which each case is situated (Bell et al., 2019; Welch & Piekkari, 2011), making it suitable for our research question, as we investigate contextual influence. A comparative case study becomes cross-cultural when it examines cases across countries to explore how contextual socio-cultural characteristics shape them (Hantrais, 1999). Given that networking is a social phenomenon underpinned by socio-cultural norms, a cross-cultural design is particularly suitable. Choosing unit of context in cross-cultural comparative designs is challenging (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017). Thus, we follow Hantrais' (1999) suggestions in (1) picking the unit of country and (2) limiting the study to two countries, considering resource availability. Specifically, we selected Kenya and Sweden, based on theoretical and practical reasons.

From a theoretical perspective, Kenya and Sweden are selected for their contrast in gender norms, guided by Eisenhardt's notion of polar cases (1989). Our primary differentiating criterion are gender norms, based on the research question and delimitation (compare sections 1.3 and 1.4). Gender norms are socio-cultural norms underpinning FEs' networking. However, they are subjective and difficult to measure (Mackie et al., 2015). Thus, we rely on external data, e.g., from the UN, to determine Kenya and Sweden as polar in terms of gender norms. Section 4 outlines the case description. Including both a Western and non-Western country responds to critiques of the "Western focus" of entrepreneurship research (e.g., Mestwerdt, 2025), thus increasing theoretical relevance.

Furthermore, we select Kenya and Sweden based on feasibility (Bell et al., 2019). Firstly, language barriers are a significant challenge in cross-cultural research (Aneas & Paz Sandín, 2009; Liamputtong, 2022). We mitigate such challenges because English is an official language in Kenya. Secondly, we had a pre-existing connection to a start-up incubator in Kenya, which facilitated access to interview candidates. We selected Sweden for its' logistical accessibility.

3.3 Data Collection Process

The data collection comprised 22 interviews with FEs, as part of the main study, and 6 background interviews. Given the research question, the background interviews' purpose was to increase our understanding of socio-cultural (gender) norms within the local entrepreneurial environments in both Kenya and Sweden. While not part of the empirical findings, the background interviews supported our analysis process (compare section 3.4). Moreover, we conducted a 1-month field trip to conduct data collection in Kenya.

3.3.1 Interviewee Sampling

We conducted interviews with FEs for the main study and background interviews to assist the analysis process. In the following we describe both sampling processes.

Following our qualitative approach, we used a priori purposive sampling for the main study (Bell et al., 2019), selecting participants based on their suitability in relation to the research question over statistical representativeness. Specifically, we sought FEs who actively network. We

translated this into a criterion by considering research suggesting early-stage ventures network more actively (Khokhawala & Iyer, 2024). As venture age alone does not sufficiently capture the stage of a venture (Rocha & Grilli, 2024), we only included FEs whose venture is less than 10 years old or has less than 15 employees.

We contacted FEs primarily using LinkedIn, assuming active LinkedIn users are more likely to "actively network". In both countries, we attended entrepreneurship networking mixers, approaching possible candidates in person. Additionally, we employed snowball sampling (Bell et al., 2019), asking participants to recommend further participants based on the criterion. In Kenya, snowballing was supported by the mentioned start-up incubator, and in Sweden, through our university. We employed sequential sampling until reaching theoretical saturation (Bell et al., 2019).

We conducted 22 interviews with FEs, evenly split between Kenya and Sweden. Their ventures range from 1 to 8 years in age and employ between 1 and 13 employees (including founders). Participants stem from diverse industries including, e.g., retail, tech and agriculture. The Kenyan and Swedish FE participants are included in Appendices A and B, respectively.

For background interviews, we similarly employed a sequential process with a priori purposive- and snowball sampling (Bell et al., 2019). Background interviews were conducted to increase our understanding of socio-cultural (gender) norms in the entrepreneurial environments in both countries. Inclusion criteria included extensive experience in the respective entrepreneurial ecosystem: either a minimum of three years professional experience in a start-up incubator or an academic position associated with entrepreneurship research. Having established this criterion, we reached out to possible participants. Most participants in the background sample stem from snowball sampling through our incubator contact in Kenya and university in Sweden. Due to prior familiarity with the Swedish context, saturation (Bell et al., 2019) was reached after 2 interviews in Sweden. In Kenya, we conducted 4 background interviews. A list of participants in Kenya and Sweden is included in Appendices C and D, respectively.

3.3.2 Interview Procedure

Below, we describe the procedure for FE and background interviews, noting aspects concerning only one of the two explicitly. While online interviews may impair the interpretation of non-verbal

cues, e.g., facial expressions, in-person interviews are only barely superior (Irani, 2019). Thus, we let all interviewees choose their preferred format resulting in both online and in-person interviews. In total, we conducted 28 interviews, ranging between 30 and 75 minutes. All interviews were conducted in English, and except for one interview, by both authors, increasing interviewing style consistency (Bell et al., 2019). All interviews were semi-structured, based on open-ended questions to encourage interviewees to share perspectives freely (Bell et al., 2019). Interview guides for all interviews were inspired by the initial literature review and are included in Appendices E and F. We employed a relatively unstructured use of the interview guides (Bell et al., 2019), i.e., we adapted question-order and asked follow-up questions based on responses. However, the unstructured use has one exception. We asked all questions explicitly related to gender strictly during the end of the interviews, aiming to mitigate bias and thus increase trustworthiness (Lincoln et al., 1985).

3.4 Data Analysis Process

We transcribed all interviews within 24 hours using software first but manually confirming correctness afterwards. We analysed the data based on reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019) within case and drew on Wutich et al.'s (2021) metatheme analysis for the cross-cultural case comparison. Aligned with our abductive, reflexive approach and focus on uncovering cognitive perceptions, we positioned ourselves as active interpreters of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

Drawing on Wutich et al. (2021), we coded the data from Kenya and Sweden separately to generate themes based on local meanings before the case comparison. Within each case, we followed Braun et al.'s (2019) reflexive thematic analysis process.

To start, we individually familiarised ourselves with the data by reading the transcripts and then created data-driven codes (Braun & Clarke, 2019), i.e., we kept codes close to participants' language. Next, we developed initial, latent themes, grouping codes based on shared meaning, not only topic similarity (Braun & Clarke, 2019). These steps were done individually by both authors for both countries. For the cross-case comparison , we discussed the initial themes together, looking for commonalities, differences, or overlaps where different words could reflect similar

experiences (Wutich et al., 2021). Next, we returned to literature and background interviews, refining our understanding of initial themes. Thereafter, we consulted the initial data again to identify potentially overlooked codes, as per the abductive logic, before constructing metathemes based on recurring cross-cultural themes (Wutich et al., 2021).

We considered reflexivity throughout the process, which is crucial in constructivist, cross-cultural analysis because meaning is co-constructed. That is, the researcher actively shapes the analysis process (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Importantly, we acknowledge our position as "Western" researchers, remaining alert to mitigate interpretative bias. We conducted background interviews with locally experienced stakeholders in both countries, which we consulted during the coding process to increase our understanding. Being aware that Kenya specifically is foreign to us, we aimed to further mitigate cross-cultural bias (Aneas & Paz Sandín, 2009; Bell et al., 2019; Liamputtong, 2022). We conducted a 1-month field trip to Kenya, increasing our understanding of the local context by, e.g., by attending a networking mixer and undertaking data collection on-site. Moreover, we consulted a local entrepreneurship professor[5] during the analysis process, sharing and discussing our findings and interpretations. We further considered reflexivity (Braun & Clarke, 2019) by coding all interviews individually, avoiding mutual bias. We engaged in lengthy discussion of initial codes to determine themes' robustness. For example, we excluded an initially identified theme regarding trust at later stages of the analysis.

Figure 3 below depicts an example of our analytical process. Appendix H includes our complete findings.

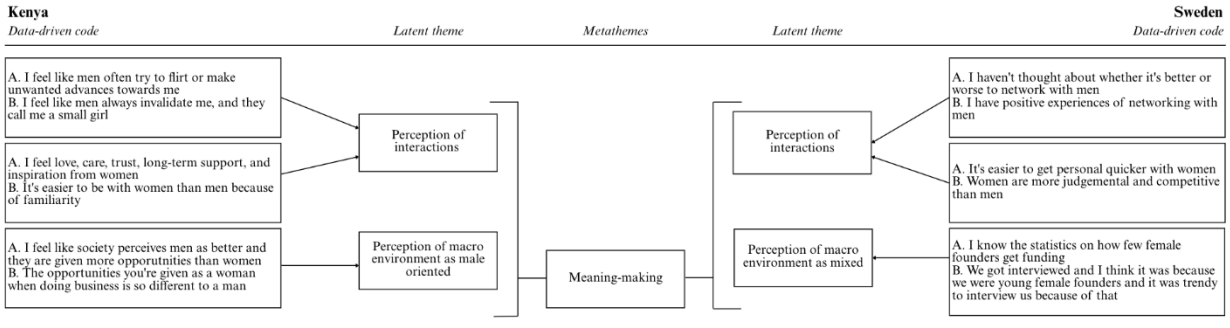

Figure 3: Extract of Methodological Approach.

[5] That had previously participated in a background interview.

3.5 Quality Considerations

3.5.1 Trustworthiness

There is no academic consensus on criteria appropriate for evaluating the scientific rigor of qualitative research (Bell et al., 2019). Yet, scholars maintain that the underlying philosophical stance underpins such criteria (Flick, 2018). Guided by our constructivist stance, we acknowledge the influence of our own beliefs throughout the research process. We invite readers to critically assess this study's trustworthiness (Given, 2008) and outline how we addressed its four criteria below (Bell et al., 2019).

We increased credibility - the alignment between observations, interpretations, and their perceived plausibility (Bell et al., 2019) – by (1) using multiple data sources, FE and background interviews, thus applying triangulation (Guba & Lincoln, 1994), (2) reiterating participants' responses during interviews, ensuring accurate understanding (Bell et al., 2019), and (3) considering reflexivity (Braun & Clarke, 2019), as outlined in section 3.4, which was particularly relevant due to our cross-cultural design (Aneas & Paz Sandín, 2009; Bell et al., 2019).

We increased transferability - the extent to which findings are generalisable beyond the case site(s) (Bell et al., 2019) – by providing rich descriptions of findings. Thus, we enable readers' independent assessment based on empirical validation (Bell et al., 2019; Lincoln et al., 1985).

We increased dependability – the research process' consistency and transparency - by providing detailed records of our process in section 3.4 and interview guides in Appendices E and F. (Bell et al., 2019)

Regarding confirmability – findings' objectivity, i.e., the extent to which findings are grounded in empirical data (Bell et al., 2019) – we acknowledge that absolute objectivity is unattainable given our constructivist stance. However, we reduced bias by considering reflexivity as outlined above regarding credibility.

3.5.2 Ethical Considerations

We informed all participants about the study's purpose, process, and their right to decline recording or skip questions prior to interviews. We obtained consent before participation and anonymised all personally identifiable information. This study thus meets the ethical standards of informed consent, privacy, and the prevention of deception (Bell et al., 2019).

4. Case Description

Sweden and Kenya differ significantly in gender norms. In their Gender Social Norms Index, UNDP[6] (2023) conduct a large-scale survey discovering attitudes towards women's role in society among four dimensions: (1) political (e.g., perceived importance of women's inclusion in politics), (2) educational (e.g., perceived importance of university education for women), (3) economic (e.g., views on women's leadership and job rights), and (4) physical integrity (as a proxy for intimate partner violence and reproductive rights).

Results in Sweden indicate that 27.91% of respondents hold gender-biased views. In contrast, 95.49% of Kenyan respondents are biased towards women. This demonstrates a stark difference in gender norms between Kenya and Sweden.

Moreover, due to their interdependence, a country's level of gender equality reflects gender norms (World Bank Group, 2023). WEF[7] (2024) ranks countries on gender equality across four dimensions: economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, health, and political empowerment. While Kenya scores 75th (out of 146 countries), Sweden scores 5th, thus further illustrating the difference in gender norms.

Our background interviews reflect these contrasts. In Sweden, women's struggles are acknowledged: "*You just need a mentor and someone to encourage you [...] women are very competent, but maybe they don't believe so much in themselves because of society's messages." (SC-02)*, but partly attributed to broader societal norms; *"Whether you're a man or woman, it's not so encouraging in Sweden because everyone should be equal, no one should stick their shin out or want more." (SC-02).* Contrarily, in Kenya, gender norms are described as structurally limiting, particularly around role expectations concerning family obligations: *"So if you're a mother, you definitely can not stay out longer at mixers. Those cultural realities also sort of stifle [them]." (KC-02)*.

[6] United Nations Development Programme

[7] World Economic Forum

Metric	*Description of metric*	*Sweden*	*Kenya*
UNDP Gender Social Norms Index 2023	Measures views on women's political, educational, economic, and physical rights (Scale: 0-100. Lower score signals lower bias)	27.91	95.49
WEF Global Gender Gap Report 2024	Measures gender equality across economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, health, and political empowerment (Scale: 0-146. Lower score signals higher equality)	5th	75th

Table 1: Metrics used to compare gender norms in Kenya and Sweden.

5. Empirical Findings

5.1 Meaning-making

5.1.1 Perception of Informal Institutional Context

5.1.1.1 Kenya

The descriptions of almost all KFEs depict the perception of widespread, chronically reproduced cultural and societal gendered norms that inhibit women – that is, the perception of the macro environment is male-oriented. These norms often constrain women to traditional gender roles, such as a mother responsible for raising children. Many KFEs describe women's appearance and behaviour being scrutinised in relation to these role-based stereotypes. Judgements about women's personality and competence are passed according to conformity to such norms throughout social interactions, including within entrepreneurial spaces. For example, KFE-01 expresses concern that a high proportion of men in her network may harm her reputation in terms of relational propriety, and KFE-08 feels that men in leadership positions are evaluated based on performance, while women are judged based on their personal lives.

> *"If you marry someone and you divorce them and you're in this entrepreneurial space, they'll be like, no wonder you're divorced. You are like [...], how do these things even come together? How does entrepreneurship and divorce come in one, [...] oh, you know, women who divorce, they might also not keep their contracts. So this cultural thing, it's really deeply embedded.[...] Nobody sees you as an individual!" (KFE-11)*

Many KFEs perceive gender norms and role expectations as constraining resource accessibility. This emerges in different forms. For example, in group settings, scarce resources are disproportionately allocated among male members. KFE-11 notes that men are more frequently designated as influential masters of ceremony in business decision-making settings. KFE-08 observes that men in her family receive preferential access to high-quality educational institutions. Moreover, access to certain resources requires the endorsement of a legitimising male intermediary.

"It's not easy. As a female in this country, for me to get a loan, I would need my father to sign it for me." (KFE-04)

Many KFEs also describe limited access to the spaces where resourced are negotiated. For example, KFE-11 notes that critical networking events are often scheduled late at night, disregarding women's safety considerations, who are then unable to attend. Furthermore, many KFEs observe that men predominantly occupy the top of power hierarchies.

"Most people who are in this like… doing big things in Kenya right now are men and not women." (KFE-08)

The language KFEs use to describe these norms reflects two aspects. Firstly, almost all KFEs associate them with negative emotions, reporting "Invalidation", "Sadness", "Frustration", "Self-doubting", "Disappointment", and "Guilt". Secondly, several KFEs highlight a sense of temporal rigidity. For example, KFE-04 remarks that women have *always* been culturally cut off. However, some KFEs also hint at a change in the current Zeitgeist. For example, KFE-09 accredits her venture's successful admission to entrepreneurial support programs to being a young and female founder.

5.1.1.2 Sweden

While almost all KFEs perceive prevailing norms to strongly favour men over women, the data from Sweden paints a more nuanced view. Many SFEs acknowledge gender disparities in entrepreneurship, framing them as both challenges and opportunities for FEs, not as strictly male-oriented as KFEs. The most salient problem, which many SFEs recognize, is disproportionate allocations of financial resources.

"If we're just looking at the numbers on how many female co-founders in the company gets funding, it's like 1.8%, right? So it says a lot. And then, I really want to switch that. It shouldn't be based on your gender." (SFE-11)

However, SFEs don't attribute these issues to underlying gender norms to the same extent as KFEs, instead attributing it to factors such as women being taken less seriously because they *look*

younger. However, some SFEs perceive women to be more strongly affected by family/work-life balance issues than men.

> *"So the amount of effort and resource that goes into being an entrepreneur and doing a startup or several startups is really quite high. And I think there's a point in life, especially for women who want to have families and children or want a more balanced life, you know, not work crazy, crazy hours." (SFE-03)*

In contrast to Kenya, several SFEs identify disparities that favour women, often through policy initiatives and decision-making processes aimed at increasing representation of female founders. For example, SFE-11 recognizes the existence of women-only fundraising events. Some SFEs observe sympathy towards female founded ventures in various relational settings such as networking mixers.

> *"But we had various papers writing about us. We maybe got interviewed and I believe that it was easier because we were young female founders and it was trendy to start focusing on female founders in Sweden's entrepreneurship scene." (SFE-08)*

Almost all SFEs observe that women are the minority in entrepreneurial spaces. For instance, SFE-06 recalls attending various venture capital events at the beginning of her entrepreneurial journey.

> *"We [her and her co-founder] were always one of very, very few girls. So it was us and maybe… three other girls at the events and 50 guys. [...] We were always alone in the room in a way." (SFE-06)*

Another SFE reflects on being a minority, but claiming this could be helpful because she is remembered better; illustrating the mixed feelings among SFEs. SFE-10 also describes being in minority but thinks this can sometimes be helpful because she is remembered better.

In contrast to Kenya, the language most SFEs use is more ambiguous than that of KFEs. They describe emotions such as "Sadness" when talking about gender differences, but also "Love" when talking about opportunities exclusive to female founders.

5.1.2 Perception of Social Context

5.1.2.1 Kenya

Almost all KFEs report associating male interactions in business contexts with negative emotions. Their experiences range from psychological undermining to inappropriate behaviour. Many KFEs describe men engaging in inappropriate conversations that cross professional boundaries. For example, unwanted flirtatious advances or invitations to non-work settings. One interviewee reflects on meeting a man for a potential collaboration, exchanging phone numbers to set up further meetings, and suddenly being faced with a romantic advance:

> *"This is a man, and then the next thing you know, they're hitting on you. So it becomes so awkward. You're not even able to proceed with whatever you wanted. [...] Then, you know, [he says] I like you… I'm like, this is a business space. Why can't we just be professionals? [...] There was this guy I met, and I thought we were the same. But he just had different intentions. It became so awkward, just like… He's doing this project for youths and all that, and then we met. And the next thing I know; 'Let's go to Mombasa!'. I'm like, why? We are just doing a project. Like it just became so awkward." (KFE-08)*

These experiences are perceived not only as uncomfortable, but also as disappointing. Many interviewees express feeling deeply discouraged in response. They feel that turning down inappropriate behaviour results in the loss of professional opportunity.

> *"It happens a lot. It just becomes so weird [...] I really do feel disappointed when that happens, because now I know it's over. If it's a job it's over, if it's a partnership, it's over, because it's going to be over after that." (KFE-08)*

Many KFEs experience feelings of invalidation, condescension or dismissal in interactions with men. Despite being founders, they describe a lack of respect for their competence and leadership, sometimes even facing explicit dismissal. Several KFEs recount being talked down to or having their legitimacy as founders questioned due to their gender. One interviewee exemplifies:

> *"Sometimes the small girl is pulled on you. Especially by gentlemen or men. Of course, you won't get that from women." (KFE-01)*

Some KFEs discussed how they were advised to include a man in their venture to increase their legitimacy in business interactions, reinforcing the idea that female founders on their own are not credible.

> *"I've also been told so many times to look for a business partner with a man, because he will give you the…he'll make your business look more legible. He goes with you, he makes it look okay, people can work with you." (KFE-07)*

Most KFEs describe feelings of hostility and demeaning treatment when questioning or challenging a man. Such situations make it difficult to maintain mutual respect in business meetings and contribute to perceiving men as unwelcoming towards women.

> *"I felt hostility if I was to question him [...] it was very hostile, it was very condescending, very demeaning." (KFE-06)*

While a few KFEs shared stories of positive male interactions, e.g., being offered valuable advice, support with confidence-building, or non-romantic encouragement, these were rare compared to negative interactions.

In contrast, all KFEs perceive interactions with other women as overwhelmingly positive. Most KFEs associate female interactions with feeling seen, heard, and validated. They perceive interactions with other women as supportive, connecting, familiar and relatable, along with being a source for inspiration.

KFEs commonly discuss the benefit of shared understanding in female interactions. This leads to positive emotions because they perceive no need to over-explain or justify their experience, which enables them to build faster and deeper connections. When discussing interacting with women and the sense of familiarity, one interviewee shares:

> *"I think it's definitely easier with women, just because of familiarity. So if a woman tells me I'm going through this, it's very easy for me to relate to that because I can understand what she's going through." (KFE-03)*

The safety and comfort perceived in interactions with other women does not only come from a shared sense of understanding, but also mutual respect. Even in times of disagreement, KFEs can engage in discussion without fearing condescension or hostility in these interactions.

> *"It feels like there's a mutual respect, I respect their work, they respect my work [...] we can disagree and I can still respect that point of view and they can also respect my position as well." (KFE-03)*

Several KFEs describe interactions with other women as going beyond familiarity and safety, e.g., being a source of inspiration, learning, mentorship and development. Several KFEs perceive that interactions with other women have shaped their entrepreneurial journey, which allows them to relate to and learn from other successful FEs:

> *"I see how I'm slowly becoming a cocktail of their experiences and their wisdom, and the learnings I picked up from them to the point that I want to have more of such women around me." (KFE-01)*

KFEs use overwhelmingly positive words such as love, trust, inspiration, care, and admiration to describe female interactions in the business space. Overall, all KFEs perceive interacting with other women in relation to their businesses positively.

5.1.2.2 Sweden

SFEs report mainly positive and neutral interactions with men in their business context. Although gender dynamics are discussed, most SFEs do not describe specific negative interactions with men. Instead, many SFEs express neutral or positive perceptions, stating that they haven't thought about male interactions as negative or that they don't associate strong feelings with them. These reflections emerged particularly in response to questions about a preference for working with either men or women, where neutral stances were most common. Several SFEs express: *"that [gender] doesn't really matter" (SFE-03)*, *"I think it's very, very equal for me" (SFE-07)*, *"I will say that I prefer a mix, for me now [of men and women]" (SFE-02)*.

In contrast to KFEs, no SFE reports male interaction as consistently negative. Most SFEs cannot recall any specific male interactions in which they perceived gender bias, claiming, for example:

"I haven't felt so much [gender bias]" (SFE-02).

Compared to KFEs, several SFEs describe positive perceptions of male business interactions, highlighting support, respect, and professionality. This was either framed as absence of discrimination, or presence of positive, genuine encouragement. For example, one SFE describes:

> *"I mostly have actually a positive experience of networking as a female entrepreneur and founder in Sweden, I have very positive experience of it. I have a lot of positive interactions with both men and women in the networking scene, I really do." (SFE-08)*

Many SFEs perceive that interactions with other women are friendly, close, and understanding. Some describe relationships with women as developing faster and becoming more personal, which is perceived as positive. They attribute this faster relationship-building to shared understanding rooted in common experience and unspoken understanding.

> *"I think it's a bit easier to get personal quicker and form like a more like maybe close relationship and not just work relationship." (SFE-10)*

Some SFEs perceive female relationships, even if these are described as purely professional, as more meaningful, since they are stronger, deeper, and more authentic, than those with men.

> *"It [relationship with women] can be professional - but it's stronger and deeper. It builds a connection that is much deeper [...] it's real, and maybe it's easier to get that deep when you're the same gender as well because you have, like you, connect easier." (SFE-11)*

This shared understanding is discussed by most SFEs. It is perceived to enable them to speak more freely and fosters feelings of solidarity and support. Several SFEs mention how other women will more easily understand the struggle of balancing work- and family life, which makes it easier to share such experiences without fear of judgement. Moreover, some SFEs perceive that women's shared understanding leads to a higher likelihood of support amongst each other:

"Many women also have this feeling of "I had to work harder to get here, so now I want to help [SFE-05] [...] I have this impression that they might understand me better, in the same way, you might feel a sense of connection when you wear the same cap for the same team. You feel a sense of belonging and are more comfortable." (SFE-05)

While SFEs and KFEs share positive experiences in female interactions, in contrast to KFEs, many SFEs also share interactions with women that lead to negative emotions. For example, feeling judged, scrutinised, or tired due to tension amongst women. One SFE discusses her experience at an investor event that she attended to network with investors and seek funding:

"When I'm meeting female investors it's much harder [...] I was invited to this event [female entrepreneurship event] and one of the investors that I met from this space, she was a women as well, and I felt very judged." (SFE-11)

Another interviewee describes how interactions with women make her feel emotionally taxed. The presence of overthinking is described as a negative aspect of interacting with other women, which has led this SFE to sometimes prefer interacting with men. Moreover, some SFEs describe interactions with women as more competitive than those with men, which leads to uncertainty:

"Sometimes I'm like, Oh my God… I don't… I don't want to work with girls because it's so many thoughts and feelings." (SFE-02)

In summary, the difference between situations for KFEs and SFEs is not necessarily a matter of one being better or worse, but KFEs perceive more recurring, specific, negative experiences in interactions with men, whilst SFEs have a more mixed view, including positive, neutral, and negative interactions. While KFEs describe interactions with other women as overwhelmingly positive, SFEs display a mixed perception of them. While many SFEs share positive experiences, some mention interactions that cause negative emotions.

5.1.3 Attribution of Challenges and Situations to Gender

5.1.3.1 Kenya

Most KFEs use gender as a lens through which they interpret and explain their challenges. For example, most KFEs describe that gender shapes the way in which they are perceived by others, e.g., investors, authorities and customers. They also mention challenges which they associate with gender, such as accessing business opportunities, legitimacy with authority, acquiring customers, and experiencing gatekeeping. Thus, most KFEs attribute their challenges to their gender.

For example, KFE-08 discusses the challenge of accessing business opportunities that require approval from authority, arguing that as a woman*, "you can come the next day, and come the next day… But for a man, it's so smooth." (KFE-08)*. She specifically compares the differences in experiences, stating *"the benefits or opportunities or the leeway they give you [a woman] as compared to a man, are very different." (KFE-08).* Thus, the challenge of losing a business opportunity is directly attributed to being a woman.

Difficulties in receiving funding or affiliations are also attributed to gender. One KFE speaks about her experience of seeking business connections through a man in her network, attributing his unwillingness to do so to her gender: *"He was giving that intuition that I am not capable of doing it [her business] because I am a woman." (KFE-07*), after which she goes on to describe what happened as him gatekeeping her, partially due to her gender.

We also found that difficulties acquiring and convincing customers may be attributed to the gender, as illustrated by a KFE in the agriculture industry:

> *"Being a lady and having to issue instructions can sometimes be a bit tough [...] you feel like maybe initially, like you will see, people really are wondering, are you serious? Like, you know, they're not taking that seriously as they should." (KFE-05).*

We found that many KFEs acknowledge that both male and female entrepreneurs face challenges, however, they perceive that gender-specific difficulties are of different quality:

> *"The challenges that we face a s women differ from the challenges that men face [...], granted, there are some challenges which are the same across the board [...], besides the usual challenges you'd face within a company, there are also certain*

challenges that you face externally that also affect the business, more so on the woman compared to the man." (KFE-03).

5.1.3.2 Sweden

In Sweden, almost all SFEs hesitate to attribute challenges to their gender. Instead, they emphasise the importance of individual traits or business type. Many SFEs do not identify themselves as female entrepreneurs, but simply as entrepreneurs, thus downplaying gender. For instance, one SFE says: *"I just think of myself as an individual. I don't think of myself as a female.". (SFE-01)*

Whilst SFEs acknowledge challenges, in contrast to KFEs, they don't attribute them to gender. For example, SFE-08 remarks: *"I never put on that victim coat and say oh, I'm a woman, everything's gonna be much harder for me." (SFE-03)*. Even SFEs that do identify as female entrepreneurs are hesitant to attribute any challenge to their gender. Instead, they attribute challenges to, for example, knowledge differences.

"Obviously I'm aware there are a lot of inequalities and injustices and so many more male entrepreneurs get funding. But for me, I see the reasons why more males get funding. It's not only because of prejudice or biases, it's because they are in areas that need more funding [...] When someone turns me down, I never thought of that as oh, they turned me down because I'm a girl or a woman. They turned me down, because they don't like my ideas, or they don't see value in this business case. So that's just my worldview." (SFE-01)

While discussing women's struggle to be taken seriously in business mentions, one SFE mentions *"It's difficult to know what's a man and woman thing, and what's just a knowledge thing. (SFE-02)"*, demonstrating the hesitance in gender attributions. Others are uncertain about the reasons behind difficulties, refraining from gender attributions. Most SFEs display awareness of and do mention statistics showing FEs' challenges, yet they do not perceive such statistics as applicable to their individual situation.

"It's not something I constantly think about. I don't feel affected by the numbers that are often mentioned about who gets funded, and so on. So, I don't feel directly

impacted by that, and I don't feel really limited by it either. I don't really think about it that often." (SFE-05)

5.1.4 Value placed on emotional support

5.1.4.1 Kenya

Almost all KFEs emphasise emotional support not only as a benefit, but as essential necessity in their entrepreneurial journey. Most KFEs construe emotional support as a remedy for isolation, a source of encouragement and confidence, and as protection and psychological safety.

Several KFEs describe entrepreneurship as lonely and isolating. One KFE recounts struggling to find a community after previous support from their family was withdrawn, which left her feeling stranded. She explains that securing alternative support was essential for her to continue running their venture. This illustrates that emotional support is vital for entrepreneurial survival. Sharing challenges, community, and understanding with other entrepreneurs is highlighted as important.

"To network with other entrepreneurs is very important because in entrepreneurship you can kind of be just alone doing your own thing, but it gives you a community that you can, you know, share your challenges." (KFE-05)

Many KFEs describe emotional support as essential for encouragement, excitement, and building confidence. Several KFEs describe how encouragement and support from the people around them can become a decisive factor in deciding whether to continue their venture. One interviewee describes how emotional support from her father helped build her confidence in her abilities despite continuous self-doubt:

"He was my support in terms of guiding me and telling me you can do this because I wasn't sure about myself. I wasn't sure if I can run a business and I'm young and I'm a girl and you know those things that prevent you [...] doing what you want. But then,[...] he's always encouraged me to like, do what you want to do. You know that kind of advice when you feel like, okay, I'm giving up, I don't know what to do anymore." (KFE-07)

Such reinforcement and encouragement also foster resilience, which several KFEs describe as essential. In particular, the support from close relationships is described as crucial during periods of entrepreneurial hardship.

> *"Having her not only as an inspiration, but also as a friend, being able to see struggles and businesses has really like helped me understand what it actually means to be resilient [...] I think those two relationships that I have, have been tremendous in kind of kickstarting and assuring me that, okay, I might not have the support that I thought I was gonna have going into this business, but I do have inspiration and I can make my own support as well." (KFE-06)*

Overall, KFEs construct emotional as vital foundation of their entrepreneurial success and survival. Many KFEs describe entrepreneurship as isolating and overwhelming. Emotional support acts as lifeline, mitigating this void by providing encouragement, fostering resilience, and creating a sense of community - elements many KFEs highlight as essential in continuing their venture.

5.1.4.2 Sweden

Most SFEs appreciate emotional support but, contrarily to KFEs, do not construct it as a critical foundation of their entrepreneurship. SFEs mention emotional support alongside other types of resources received through their network. Yet, they primarily describe emotional support as source of comfort and validation, rather than as something indispensable to their venture's continuation. SFEs describe emotional support as valuable, not vital.

> *"Your female networks can be support networks… It's a nice support network for sure. You can go to meetups and you can share your experience in a different way, but ultimately, at the end of the day, you go home and you run your business." (SFE-03)*

Many SFEs describe emotional support as helpful for building confidence and fostering a sense of assurance and capability. Yet, their descriptions do not express that emotional support is a necessary precondition of feeling capable; they rather describe it as one factor that can enhance their confidence with regards to their venture. For example, emotional support can provide validation and reassurance that their business idea is viable.

"I think getting that positive feedback from her was very comforting. And seeing that she was so willing to do whatever just made us believe that this can actually be something, we can actually make something out of this." (SFE-06)

5.2 Networking attitudes

5.2.1 Self-policing and hesitance in forming connections

5.2.1.1 Kenya

Many KFEs describe feelings of discomfort and risk when forming new network connections, which reduces their willingness to initiate relationships. Sometimes KFEs have the opportunity to form a new connection but decide not to. Many KFEs describe engaging in a practice we refer to as *self-policing* during male interactions, which is associated with negative emotions and emotional labour. Self-policing entails KFEs continuously questioning how their (male) counterparts perceive, interpret, and act, upon their actions, attitude, and appearance, and potentially modulating their own behaviour in response. Self-policing appears to be an internalised, learned practice that KFEs adopt in response to a constant need for awareness in male interactions.

"I always have in the back of my mind that in any kind of interaction with men [...] I am more aware of how I need to behave when it's with men, than with women [...]." (KFE-04)

This constant awareness is associated with negative emotions like guilt or confusion. Some KFEs describe how self-policing influences their behaviour around men. This includes setting clear boundaries, presenting themselves in certain ways, and being careful on how and when to contact men in their network. For example, one KFE questions how they present themselves: *"It makes me question myself, how am I presenting myself? What did I say for this person to start thinking in that particular line?" (KFE-08)*

One KFE describes setting up a meeting with a potential new partner for their venture, who instead initiates a flirtatious advance. This results in feelings of disappointment for the KFE, knowing that they must discontinue further contact with the man, despite the relationship's potential value for their venture:

"Then the next thing I know, 'OK look, can we meet…' I'm like, 'OK, yeah, is it business based?' Then, 'You know, I like you' … So you go and you want to work with someone who is a man, and then now when that comes in, I also become uncomfortable [...] So I really feel disappointed when that happens because now I know it is over. If it's a job, it's over. If it's a partnership, it's over." (KFE-08)

Some KFEs describe being invited to meetings and events that could offer significant value for their venture. Yet, they feel uncertain or unsafe about attending due to their anticipation of gendered experiences associated with negative emotions. For instance, one KFE notes:

"This late night party is going to end at what, 2:00 AM or 1:00 AM and I have to think about safety… So we do see this a lot, it's not a levelled playing field." (KFE-11)

Almost all KFEs acknowledge creating new connections as an important entrepreneurial outcomes However, the emotional labour associated with gendered risks in male interactions, e.g., unwanted flirtation or safety concerns, and self-policing, lead some KFEs to feelings of discomfort and hesitation regarding developing relationships.

5.2.1.2 Sweden

In stark contrast to KFEs, no SFE reports consciously adjusting their behaviour nor experiencing the inner monitoring associated with self-policing in male interactions. SFEs do not explicitly express hesitation to network with men.

5.2.2 Valuing specific network content

In both KFEs and SFEs descriptions, the value of networking emerges as one of the most frequently recurring themes. That is, KFEs and SFEs describe the value of facilitating new connections through affiliation as crucial, because such referrals enable them to find, build and foster trust in new relationships quicker. To illustrate this similarity in expressed views, we present a representative quote from Kenya and Sweden respectively:

"I introduced myself as who I am. But then I had to mention the linkage I had. So then that would make them automatically more friendly 'cause they already had friendly relations with my entry points [...) It's not very easy for them to just take in a

stranger and be like, OK, you can ask us questions. So it's just always easier to have the access entry points." (KFE-10)

"I believe it's super important to have a context and kind of a natural introduction to a person. That's crucial. I would say it's the best way." (SFE-08)

KFEs and SFEs were both asked to describe the relationship they perceive as most important in relation to their venture, i.e., the most important relationship (MIR) with some kind of impact on their business. Besides a single exception, all KFEs and SFEs quickly identified one such MIR. Both KFEs and SFEs maintain regular contact with their MIRs, ranging from several times per day to once a week. In both countries, approximately half of the MIRs are men, and the other half are women.

The fact that the FE identifies the MIR as the most important relationship indicates that the FE highly values the network content associated with this connection. The MIRs described by both KFEs and SFEs provide more than a single type of content, i.e., MIRs are perceived as multi-purpose relationships. The descriptions of both KFEs and SFEs include three types of content associated with MIRs: emotional support, business support, and referrals to new connections.

Firstly, descriptions of emotional support encapsulate a range of different contents that aim to support the FE. For example, inspiration, confidence-building, entrepreneurial validation, talking about challenges, and feelings of support and understanding. Secondly, descriptions of business support entail knowledge and expertise (many MIRs have vast experience in the respective venture's industry), as well as advice on business strategy and business decisions. Thirdly, (referrals to new) connections refer to the MIR leveraging their own network to create new connections for the FE, i.e., introducing the FE to people that can be helpful for their business.

Whilst both SFEs and KFEs describe MIRs as multi-purpose relationships and there is an almost equal distribution of male and female MIRs in both countries, the type of contents associated with a MIR depends on the MIR's gender. In Kenya, female MIRs provide both emotional and business support, while male MIRs provide business support and connections. In Sweden, female MIRs

provide emotional support, business support, and connections, whereas male MIRs provide business support and connections.

Table 2 and 3 below summarise the gender and content associated with each MIR in Kenya[8] and Sweden, respectively.

Entrepreneur	MIR gender	Content of MIR (representative)	Content of MIR (summarised)
KFE-01	Man	Mentor, knowledge, strategy, introductions/connections/network	Business support, connections
KFE-02	Woman	Discussing career, inspiration	Business support, emotional support
KFE-03	Woman	Feedback, bouncing ideas, emotional support, entrepreneurial support	Business support, emotional support
KFE-04	Woman	Validation, information, emotional support, business strategy advice	Business support, emotional support
KFE-05	Man	Technical knowledge, experience, introductions/connections, moral support	Business support, connections
KFE-06	Woman	Inspiration, emotional support, resilience	Emotional knowledge
KFE-07	Man	Business help, knowledge, connections	Business support, connections
KFE-08	Man	Connections/network, complementing skillset, knowledge and past experiences	Business support, connections
KFE-09	Man	Training to build confidence, connections/network	Business support, connections
KFE-10	Man	Mentorship, access to customer network, advice on business matters	Business support, connections

Table 2: Gender and content of MIR in Kenya.

[8]Only 10 out of 11 KFEs are included because KFE-11 could not identify a most important relationships with regard to their venture.

Entrepreneur	MIR gender	Content of MIR (representative)	Content of MIR (summarized)
SFE-01	Woman	Sharing vision, being 'in it together', complementary skill set for business tasks	Emotional support, business support
SFE-02	Man	Financing, knowledge and expertise from industry, Network and introductions	Business support, connections
SFE-03	Man	Technical knowledge, experience in industry	Business support
SFE-04	Man	Knowledge relevant for expansion, Network and introductions	Business support, connections
SFE-05	Woman	Bouncing ideas, solving problems together, feeling like a 'team'	Emotional support, business support, connections
SFE-06	Man	Network and introductions, bringing her to networking events, information and knowledge from industry and previous experience	Business support, connections
SFE-07	Woman	Network and introductions, advise on strategy and product development	Business support, connections
SFE-08	Woman	Network and introductions, funding, inspiration and support	Emotional support, business support, connections
SFE-09	Woman	Complementary skillsets for business tasks, network and introductions, mental and emotional support in entrepreneurial journey	Emotional support, business support, connections
SFE-10	Woman	Business and strategy advice	Business support
SFE-11	Man	Network and introductions, support in business	Business support and connections

Table 3: Gender and content of MIR in Sweden.

6. Analysis

In the following, we analyse the empirical findings to discuss the research question: *How does female entrepreneurs' meaning-making of their socio-cultural context influence their attitudes towards networking?*

In doing so, we adopt the lens of contextualisation (Baker & Welter, 2018), guided by our theoretical framework (compare section 2.3), which is illustrated in figure 4 below. As outlined in section 2.1.1, research on cognitive foundations of entrepreneurship suggests that individuals' attitudes are shaped by their meaning-making, i.e., their perception and interpretation, in relation to contextual influences (Brännback & Carsrud, 2017). Thus, we divide the research question into two sub-questions, to increase analytical clarity and offer a nuanced understanding of the interplay between FE's context and their networking attitudes: (1) *How do female entrepreneurs make meaning of their context?* and (2) *What are female entrepreneurs' attitudes towards networking?* We first analyse how FEs make meaning of their context in section 6.1. Then, we analyse their networking attitudes in section 6.2. On this basis, we then analyse how their meaning-making influences their networking attitudes in section 6.3.

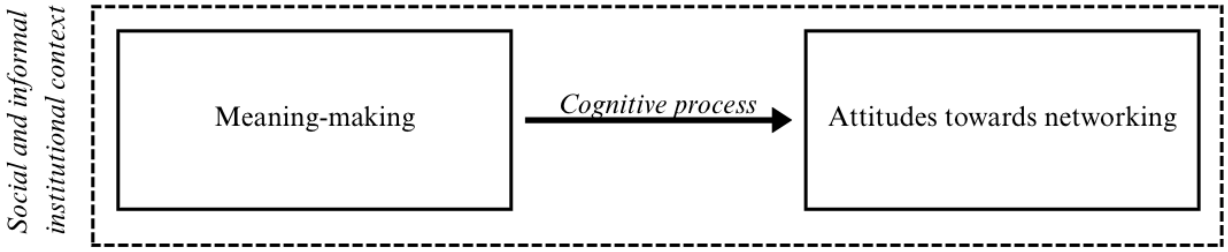

Figure 4: Theoretical Framework

6.1 How do female entrepreneurs make meaning of their context?

In this section we answer the first sub-question: *How do female entrepreneurs make meaning of their context?* Consequently, we analyse FEs' meaning-making of context, i.e., their interpretation of context considering their perception of context (Brännback & Carsrud, 2017). Guided by our theoretical framework, we specifically analyse their perception and interpretation of the social and informal institutional dimensions of their context (Welter, 2011). In doing so, we highlight differences between KFEs and SFEs, informed by our comparative design.

Informed by Granovetter's (1973) terminology, we can begin with stating that all MIRs identified by FEs in both Sweden and Kenya would classify as strong ties. FEs in both Kenya and Sweden have weak ties in their network, for example suppliers, customers, or other connections; but these are not identified as the most important for their venture. It seems that the FEs favour strong ties, due to their identification of a strong tie as their MIR. The preference, and reliance on, strong ties is in line with previous research (e.g., Hampton et al., 2011; Kalafatoglu & Mendoza, 2017). However, the reasoning as to why could be argued to diverge from previous research, instead bringing light to recent discussions as brought forwards by for example Van Burg et al. (2021) and Alakaleek et al. (2024), showing that FEs also display agency in their choice of networking connections, exploring reasons not situated externally to analyse networking of entrepreneurs.

6.1.1 Making meaning of gender

In Kenya and Sweden, FEs make meaning of gender in different ways. KFEs interpret gender as a primary reason for their challenges. Contrarily, SFEs place smaller significance on the impact of their gender and even downplay the influence of gender. This difference in meaning-making seems to stem from their respective perceptions (Brännback & Carsrud, 2017) of their social and informal institutional context (Welter, 2011). KFEs perceive individual interactions with men as overwhelmingly negative, e.g., due to uninvited flirtatious advances or perceived invalidation. Moreover, KFEs perceive societal norms as heavily gendered, favouring men whilst disadvantaging women. Thus, KFEs perceive their social context, i.e., factors in individual interactions within their personal networks (Welter, 2011), and their informal institutional context, i.e., broader societal norms (Welter, 2011), as limiting them, due to their gender. In contrast, SFEs do not share the same unified, negative perception of male interactions in their social context (Welter, 2011), nor societal norms in their informal institutional context (Welter, 2011) as being negative or limiting based on their gender. While some SFEs appear to acknowledge gender differences on a broader societal level, they seem hesitant to attribute these to their personal experience. Consequently, it appears that SFEs, in response to their perception of contextual influences (Brännback & Carsrud, 2017), construct meaning around gender as one possible explanation of their experience but are just as likely to attribute their challenges to other factors, e.g., individual traits or the nature of their business. In contrast, it appears that KFEs, in response

to their contextual influences (Brännback & Carsrud, 2017), construct meaning around gender as a central factor that significantly impacts and explains their experience.

6.1.2 Making meaning of emotional support

The value associated with emotional support differs significantly between KFEs and SFEs. This difference can be linked to their contrasting perception of interactions in their social and informal institutional context (Brännback & Carsrud, 2017). KFEs perceive the informal institutional context as adversarial due to their gender and describe emotional support among the most positive aspects of female interactions. Thus, emotional support is construed through meaning-making as extremely valuable and crucial for the entrepreneurial journey. KFEs describe how they would not be able to continue their business without emotional support due to their challenges, highlighting how they construct emotional support as paramount because of their hardships. In contrast, whilst many SFEs enjoy emotional support, they do not construe it as vital for continuation. Their meaning-making is shaped in different ways: they do not perceive to the same extent as KFEs that interactions with men are negative because of their gender, or that the societal norms are limiting them. Therefore, whilst emotional support is discussed as desirable, because it offers comfort and validation, it is not something the SFEs make meaning of as indispensable for continuing.

There are significant differences in how FEs make meaning of their context, which leads us to believe that context does have some effect on the meaning-making of FEs. KFEs make meaning of their social and informal institutional contexts (Welter, 2011) as challenging *due to* their gender, whilst SFEs hold more varied views perceiving both positive and negative aspects in their social and informal institutional contexts, leading them to a less unified, and less gender-focused, meaning-making. This aligns with arguments that the individual meaning-making is influenced by a person's context (Brännback & Carsrud, 2017), illustrated by how KFEs and SFEs construct their meaning-making differently based on what they (perceive that they) experience.

6.2 What are female entrepreneurs' attitudes towards networking?

This section aims to discuss the second sub-question, focusing on what FEs' attitudes towards networking are; *What are female entrepreneurs' attitudes towards networking?*

6.2.1 Attitude toward building new relationships

KFEs seem to be constantly aware of their gender, and the implications of it; gender is constructed as a fundamental aspect that strongly influences their opportunities and their entrepreneurship journey. This can also be seen in their interactions with men, as described in section 5.2.1. This type of self-policing is described as emotionally draining which indicates that forming connections with men can be taxing and complex for KFEs. To compare, SFEs do not make meaning of their gender as that important, it is not something they consider to the same extent. No SFE reports any self-policing, and thus, we conclude that they do not experience forming connections with men as equally draining.

FEs tend to rely more on family or friends (Hampton et al., 2011; Jamali, 2009; Jennings & Brush, 2013; Kalafatoglu & Mendoza, 2017), which are examples of strong ties (Granovetter, 1973), and women are assumed to use more strong ties, mainly due to accessibility (Berrou & Combarnous, 2012; Mozumdar et al., 2020; Sprecher, 2022), which is something external to the entrepreneur. Since networking is so important for FEs due to resource-constraints (Aldrich et al., 1989; De Vita et al., 2014; Hampton et al., 2011) and FEs face more challenges in building their network (Brush, 1992; Constantinidis, 2021; Kalafatoglu & Mendoza, 2017), it would seem plausible that FEs would take all opportunities to form new connections for their network. Particularly, connections with men could be described as important connections, since they are more likely to have a greater business network with contacts in more central economic positions that could be useful contacts (Aldrich et al., 1989; Greer & Greene, 2003), but our findings indicate that this is not always the case.

We diverge from this stream of literature, highlighting how, even in times where potential weak ties are available, FEs feel hesitant to pursue them due to the emotional toll it would take to do so; constant awareness, negative emotions, and feelings of unsafety (self-policing). The toll it would take to pursue them could be described as a transaction cost of building new connections with men, a cost that is described by KFEs but not SFEs. Whilst the structural perspective tends to posit that FEs lack of weak ties would be due to external reasons, our findings highlight another perspective: that FEs may not prioritize forming weak ties due to the perceived cost of doing so.

6.2.2 Attitude towards value from relationships

We find that almost all entrepreneurs in both countries agree that one of the greatest values of networking is being introduced and referring to new persons you'd otherwise not meet, or that would take much longer to meet. This is aligned with Granovetter's (1973) SWT that argues that weak ties are important to receive new information. Weak ties can bridge the gap between two groups with different information (Granovetter, 1973), and a person able to bridge that gap is precisely the benefit our interviewees describe as one of networking's greatest values. Despite this, when asked to describe the most important relationship for the entrepreneurs' business, we find that half of KFEs describe their MIR being a woman (section 5.2.2). No KFE receives bridging from a female most important person: only business and emotional support. Not one KFE receives bridging support from a female MIR, yet half still define as woman as their MIR. The key difference lies in the type of support provided; women offer emotional support, while men don't. In contrast, while half of SFEs also identify a woman as their most important relationship, they report receiving bridging support from both male and female MIRs. SFEs typically receive two or three types of support from their MIRs, especially when that person is a woman, including business, emotional, *and* bridging support. This suggests that KFEs may place greater value on emotional support than bridging, potentially prioritizing emotional support and displaying willingness to forgo bridging capabilities in favour of it. Whilst the structural perspective typically describes bridging weak ties as the most beneficial for entrepreneurs, our finding adds nuance to this, by highlighting how the value perceived can differ between contexts, and bridging content may not be the most valued – rather, entrepreneurs sometimes choose other content over it.

6.3 Agency in forming attitude

In this section, we combine the two sub-questions and consider how our findings regarding meaning-making of gender and emotional support, and attitudes regarding forming and valuing relationships, relate to each other. In doing so, we highlight the agency of the female entrepreneur. We analyse our findings drawing on the agentic perspective of network research (Scheidgen & Brattström, 2023) emphasising agency (Brännback & Carsrud, 2017)**,** to seeking to nuance the popular strong and weak ties theory (Granovetter, 1973). Whilst most studies on tie formation

follows the logic that structure influences content, our findings relate to discussions by (Van Burg et al., 2022), that an entrepreneurs network content is not only imposed on them due to external reasons, but the entrepreneur takes a more active role in shaping it (Scheidgen & Brattström, 2023; Van Burg et al., 2022).

Attitudes are influenced by internal meaning-making (Brännback & Carsrud, 2017). Thus, we can identify agency in the findings of female entrepreneurs' attitudes towards networking in two ways: the way they form relationships, and why they form relationships.

Starting with the first, it seems that the way they differently make meaning of their context affects their attitudes towards which relationships they want to form. Specifically, the meaning-making of KFEs of the impact of gender, seems to influence their attitude towards forming connections with men. This influence could be associated with the cognitive process previously outlined (Brännback & Carsrud, 2017). The perceived transactional cost of building some types of relationships make some FEs hesitant to prioritize them; in our case, KFEs display a hesitant attitude towards building new relationships with men despite the potential benefits of them. Thus, it seems that FEs attitudes towards networking are influenced not only by the perceived benefits of potential connections, but also by the potential costs. The perceived cost of forming relationships with men is a cost that affects KFEs networking to a greater extent than it does for SFEs, which seems to happen because KFEs make meaning of their gender in ways differently that SFEs due to experiences in their social and informal institutional context (Brännback & Carsrud, 2017; Welter, 2011). This suggests that the potential cost of networking is influences FEs' attitudes towards building new relationships, i.e networking, and that cost is context contingent due to meaning-making.

Moving on to why they form relationships, its seems that the meaning-making of emotional support among KFEs, where they meaning-make emotional support as fundamental and vital for their entrepreneurial survival, is impacting their attitude towards what value they prioritize when networking, as per (Brännback & Carsrud, 2017). Meaning, the way female entrepreneurs make meaning of their social and informal institutional contexts seem to have some influence on what content they value from their network. The different value placed on content received from the

network (i.e. emotional support, bridging, business support), signals difference in attitude towards why relationships are created, which is also contextually bound - as previously discussed, context can affect meaning-making and meaning-making affects attitudes (Brännback & Carsrud, 2017), a notion we can identify in our findings.

Our discussion highlights the agentic perspective, which argues that behaviour is influenced by the attitudes, which in turn are shaped by the meaning-making of the entrepreneur (Brännback & Carsrud, 2017; Van Burg et al., 2022). We find that the FEs meaning-making is context-dependant and influences their attitudes towards networking. Since attitudes, in turn, can affect behaviour (Brännback & Carsrud, 2017), and behaviour can influence structure of network (Van Burg et al., 2022) as per the agentic perspective, entrepreneurs could potentially have different network structures not only for structural reasons but also because of entrepreneurs' differing meaning-making (Brännback & Carsrud, 2017; Smith et al., 2020; Van Burg et al., 2022). In other words, we have found that there seems to be an impact of meaning-making on the attitudes of FEs in relation to how they value relationships, which, if following the agentic perspective, *could* lead to the entrepreneurs' network structure being influenced. This poses an interesting notion. As Smith et al. (2020) would argue, the entrepreneur's meaning-making is influenced by their context, a notion we can subscribe to. Moreover, as (Brännback & Carsrud, 2017) argues, meaning-making influences the attitude of the individual, which is line with our findings. Thus, as the agentic perspective posits that the meaning-making of the entrepreneur influences the *action* of the entrepreneur which in turn shapes the network structure (Scheidgen & Brattström, 2023; Van Burg et al., 2022), our discussion on meaning-making influencing the networking attitudes of FEs offers insights into the, less dominant, discussion on content influencing structure of networks (Van Burg et al., 2022).

Thus, we diverge from the dominant structural view that posits relationships are formed the way they are due to external factors, especially accessibility as highlighted, for example that their relationships look the way they do due to their education (Sprecher, 2022) or their proximity to useful connections (Aldrich et al., 1989; Greer & Greene, 2003). Instead, our discussion brings the agentic perspective to the surface, showing how FEs may actually have different attitudes towards networking.

7. Conclusion

7.1 How female entrepreneurs' meaning-making influences their networking attitudes

Based on our analysis, we are able to answer our research question: *How does female entrepreneurs' meaning-making of their socio-cultural context influence their attitudes towards networking?* The meaning-making of female entrepreneurs is contextually bound and influences their attitude towards networking, meaning that the female entrepreneurs interpret, and make meaning differently depending on what they experience in their context, and this meaning-making influences attitudes towards networking in two dimensions; what relationships are formed and why relationships are formed. Specifically, what relationships are formed seem to depend not only on the benefits the FE can get from it, but also from the perceived cost of the relationship, and why relationships are formed seem to depend on what the entrepreneur values from their relationship. Both of these attitudes are influenced by the meaning-making of the entrepreneur (as per (Brännback & Carsrud, 2017). These findings build on previous research, contributing to strong and weak ties theory by emphasizing the value of agency to explore reasons beyond external, structural reasons as precursors to female entrepreneurs' networking behaviour. Our analysis leads to the developed theoretical framework, which includes the agentic perspective to explore FEs' attitudes towards networking.

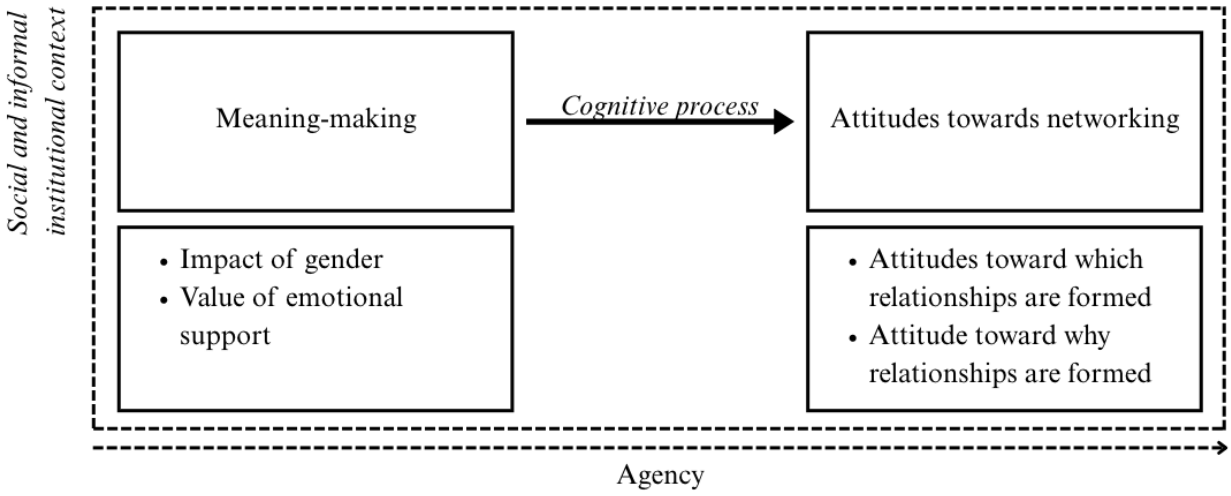

Figure 5: Developed Theoretical Framework

7.2 Theoretical contribution

This study addresses the identified research gap spanning networking and contextualisation by considering agency. In doing so, we bring attention to the context-contingent agency in networking, thereby expanding our understanding of FEs' networking.

We contribute to how context-bound meaning-making influences attitudes towards networking. Specifically, we contribute in two ways; first, we show that FEs' context-dependent meaning-making influences the value they attribute towards different types of network content, thus shaping their attitude towards networking. Second, we show that FEs' context-dependent meaning-making influences the (perceived) transactional cost associated with gendered social interactions, thus shaping their attitude towards networking. Thus, we highlight *agency* in FEs' networking attitude, based on their meaning-making.

Networking research is largely framed by the dominant structural view, which is rooted in strong and weak ties (Granovetter, 1973). We contribute to SWT by incorporating the agentic perspective, meaning our contribution lies in nuancing the analysis of networking. Our contribution to SWT lies in examining networking behaviour from the inside out, demonstrating the significance of the agentic perspective for explaining networking, besides the dominant structural explanation (Granovetter, 1973). Thus, linking context-bound meaning-making to attitudes, has enabled us to capture the contextual nature of networking. Departing from previous research on FEs' networking that frames it as largely shaped by accessibility and structure of network (Aldrich et al., 1989; Granovetter, 1973; Greer & Greene, 2003), our study contributes to the emerging discourse on agency (Scheidgen & Brattström, 2023; Van Burg et al., 2022) advocating that entrepreneurs takes an active role in forming ties.

We have also answered calls for context-contingent investigations of individual networking, and cross-country comparative studies investigating networking (Rodrigue & Kuyken, 2025; Roth & Scheidgen, 2024).

7.3 Practical implications

This study has implications for incubators, support networks, and other organizations aiming to enhance and facilitate FEs and their networking. Our results highlight the need to consider the entrepreneur's context to ensure the greatest benefit for those supported.

Firstly, our study indicates context shapes what resources FEs value. Organizations should adapt content of initiatives to local preferences over generalised approaches. Secondly, context also affects FEs attitudes toward networking. Organizations aiming to increase FE networking must consider local challenges, for example; some FEs may want help building trust-based networks, whilst others may want tools for reaching out to new contacts. Thirdly, our study emphasizes the importance of going beyond the invite. Our findings indicate that, whilst access remains a barrier, another issue is that some FEs choose not to attend because the environment feels uninviting. For example, events late at night may pose safety concerns, so they choose not to attend. Invitations alone are insufficient, organizations must focus on creating a psychologically safe, inviting space for female entrepreneurs to foster trust and inclusivity and encourage participation, learning, and networking.

7.4 Limitations & Future Research

Our findings are subject to several limitations. Firstly, this study's FE participants are not representative of FEs in their respective countries. Kenya has a significant informal economy[9] and because socio-economic status can influence networking attitudes (Sprecher, 2022), it is unclear to what extent our specific findings explain networking behaviour in the informal economy. Future research may thus how contextual influences are manifested in informal economic environments.

Secondly, despite our attempts to mitigate the bias associated with cross-cultural research designs (Aneas & Paz Sandín, 2009; Bell et al., 2019; Liamputtong, 2022), we cannot rule out a degree of bias in the findings from Kenya, since neither author is native to Kenya. As a result, participants may have answered questions differently than they would have if interviewed by local researchers.

[9] Estimations including 29% of the population employed in the informal economy (*Providing, Managing and Promoting Quality Statistics*, 2024), estimating it as 32% of GDP (Murunga et al., 2021).

Thirdly, based on our most salient findings, we focus on meaning-making only with regards to the constructs of gender and emotional support. However, our findings hinted at context-specific meaning making with regard to trust. Future research may investigate how context influences FEs networking in relation to trust, especially what type of trust is valued and why. Moreover, we discovered that 2 out of 11 KFEs experienced suppressive social capital, as discussed by Light & Dana (2013): they had strong ties that were significant for their venture, that stifled their entrepreneurship by excluding them from, e.g., opportunities. This concept appears to relate to the perceived cost of networking, making it an interesting notion for future investigation.

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9. Appendices

Appendix A: Female Entrepreneur Interviewees Kenya

Interviewee	Degree	Industry	Venture age (years)	Employees (incl. founder)	Date	Duration
KFE-01	Master's	Agri-Fintech	1	8	14.02.25	57 min
KFE-02	MBA	Agriculture	6	4	20.02.25	1:05 hrs
KFE-03	Master's	Tech	3	8	20.02.25	58 min
KFE-04	Bachelor's	Culture & Creative	4	4	23.02.25	1:15 hrs
KFE-05	MBA	Cosmetics	4	6	23.02.25	1 hr
KFE-06	Bachelor's	Beauty & Cosmetics	3	6	26.02.25	56 min
KFE-07	Bachelor's	Tourism & Hospitality	2	2	01.03.25	48 min
KFE-08	Bachelor's	Technology	1	3	01.03.25	1:05 hrs
KFE-09	Master's	Agri-tech	2	3	01.03.25	56 min
KFE-10	Master's	Aquaculture	1	9	03.03.25	48 min
KFE-11	Master's	Thinktank	2	10	12.03.25	58 min

Appendix B: Female Entrepreneur Interviewees Sweden

Interviewe	Degree	Industry	Venture age (years)	Employees (incl. founder)	Date	Duratio
SFE-01	PhD	Retail (Hair care, fashion accessories)	6	2	18.02.25	53 min
SFE-02	Bachelor's	Food	2	4	24.02.25	54 min
SFE-03	Master's	Water management/Climate risk management	6	6	13.03.25	1 hrs
SFE-04	Bachelor's	Cosmetics	4	1	17.03.25	45 min
SFE-05	Master's	Healthtech	5	1	19.03.25	48 min
SFE-06	Master's	Community network in start-up space	1	4	19.03.25	48 min
SFE-07	N/A	Tech	5	4	20.03.25	50 min
SFE-08	Bachelor's	Education & Event	8	1	26.03.25	53 min
SFE-09	Master's	Apparel Retail/Ecomm	6	3	27.03.25	50 min
SFE-10	Master's	Software/Logistics	3	13	28.03.25	48 min
SFE-11	Bachelor's	Supply Chain Tech/B2B Marketplace	1	2	31.03.25	50 min

Appendix C: Context Interviewees Kenya

Interviewee	Industry	Role	Date	Duration
KCE-01	Incubator	Venture Building Lead	25.02.25	35 min
KCE-02	Incubator	Country Director	28.02.25	30 min
KCE-03	Academia	Entrepreneurship professor	28.02.25	30 min
KCE-04	Academia	Professor	03.03.25	33 min

Appendix D: Context Interviewees Sweden

Interviewee	Industry	Role	Date	Duration
SCE-01	Academia	Sustainability professor	24.03.25	30 min
SCE-02	Incubator	Founder	21.04.25	30 min

Appendix E: Interview Guide Female Entrepreneurs

Introduction

- Brief introduction of ourselves and the research topic.
- Asked for permission to record the interview.

Introductory questions

- Can you tell us about your venture: which industry are you active in, how old is it, how many employees do you have, and what do you do?

Most important network connection

- What is the most important relationship that has had some effect on your business?
- How did you find this relationship?
- What do you get from this relationship?
- How often are you in contact?
- How does this relationship make you feel?

Using network

- What do you think is the most important things you get from your network?

Usefulness of network

- Do you feel like you get what you want from your network?
- Are you lacking anything from your network=
- Why are you missing it, and why are you not able to get it?

Expanding network

- If you wanted to make a new connection for you network now, how would you go about that?

Gender

- Did you ever experience a situation where something positive or negative happened and you thought it happened because of your gender?
- Do you have more men or women in your network?
- Do you find it easier to build connections with men or women?
- Do you differ in your networking strategies with men and women?

Appendix F: Interview Guide Context

Introduction

- Brief introduction of ourselves and the research topic.
- Asked for permission to record the interview.

Culture

- Would you say that people in Kenya/Sweden are more individualistic or collectivist?
- Is reciprocity important in building relationships, and if so, how?
- How do you think this mindset impacts how businesses operate here?
- Do you see any differences in how this affects men and women?

Trust

- What role do you think trust plays in business relationships in Kenya/Sweden?
- How do people build trust in Kenya/Sweden?

Challenges for entrepreneurs

- What do you think the biggest challenges that entrepreneurs in Kenya/Sweden face?

Networks

- If you think about the entrepreneurs, you are in contact with, do they rely more on their personal networks, or other support systems?
- Do you see any gender differences among those you interact with?

Gender-specific questions

- What do you think about the climate for female entrepreneurs in Kenya/Sweden right now?
- What are the biggest challenges and opportunities for female entrepreneurs in Kenay/Sweden?
- Do you see any changes in the climate since you started working in this field?
- How do you think gender norms influence female entrepreneurs in Kenya/Sweden?

Appendix G: Use of AI

In writing this thesis, four AI tools have been used: ChatGPT 4o, Grammarly, KlangAI, and Microsoft Teams Live Transcription services.

ChatGPT4o was used to suggest synonyms, to broaden the vocabulary used in the thesis and improve the flow of some passages. Importantly, ChatGPT4o was never used for writing, or as a tool for analysis. All text in the thesis is independently produced by us, and ChatGPT4o acted as a tool to improve flow and word diversity. We used ChatGPT4o to increase the quality of the text, by allowing it to suggest words to better explain the meaning in a passage, which ultimately increased the accuracy and quality of the thesis. When using ChatGPT4o, there is a risk of incorrect outputs. To mitigate this risk, we never used it as a source of information and made sure to double-check all outputs. Moreover, we initially briefly tested it to find academic papers on specific topics, however quickly realised its limitations as it suggested non-existing papers.

Grammarly was used to detect spelling and grammar errors in the thesis, with the purpose of enhancing quality, especially in detecting minor grammatical errors that could otherwise easily be missed. There are risks of Grammarly producing wrong suggestions: for example, it often corrected FEs to Fes, changing the accronym. Therefore, whenever Grammarly was used, we analysed the suggested changes to ensure their accuracy.

KlangAI and Microsoft Teams' Live Transcription services were used to generate initial transcription. This made the transcription faster and more efficient. Microsoft Teams' Live Transcription was used for interviews conducted on Teams, while KlangAI was used for interviewes conducted in person. Whilst these services made the transcription process faster, it can come with errors and inconsistencies. Especially when interviewees used a word in their natiev language instead of English. Therefore, we manually confirmed all transcriptions by listening to all the interviews and editing the transcriptions accordingly.

Importantly, all text in the thesis has been manually reviewed and edited by us, the authors, to ensure correctness and reliability. AI tools provided support to increase quality, suggest synonyms, and increase efficiency and flow, but all research and writing was performed independently by us.

Appendix H: Coding Structure

