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Rethinking Agricultural Marketing Middlemen in Tanzania: A Social Embeddedness Perspective

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Humanities, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Development Studies

By

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2024

Declaration

I, **Earnest Musinamwana** (student number 1777042), declare that this PhD thesis is my own unaided work except as indicted in the references. The research was conducted under the supervision of Dr Thabang Sefalafala of the Wits School of Social Sciences. It is submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Philosophy at the University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. This thesis has not been submitted before for any other degree or examination at any other university. This work is not a reproduction in part or in whole of any research presented for the award of a degree.

Earnest Musinamwana



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Parktown, Johannesburg (South Africa)

Signed on the 11th day of October, 2024

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my beloved children: Mukundi, Kundiso and Nyashasikana.

Acknowledgements

This thesis marks the end of a long and eventful journey. I take this opportunity to express my appreciation and gratitude to the many whose company and inspiration I drew upon along the way. First and foremost, my heartfelt appreciation goes to the late Dr Rajohane "Raji" Matshedisho who, as my initial supervisor, ushered me into the scholarly world and meticulously guided me through the proposal development process. The curiosity that he ignited in me remained a key source of energy and hope even when everything seemed not to make sense.

To my supervisor, Dr Sefalafala, my gratitude to you knows no limits. You showed up when I was at the lowest ebb in my PhD journey. After the untimely demise of my first supervisor, you took up the unenviable challenge of adopting me and guiding me through the remainder of the journey. Our first conversation still rings fresh in my mind, and I hope I did justice to your call for me to surmount the tragedy and aim for a triumphant ending. This thesis is the utmost testament to your unfailing tutelage.

I take my hat off to Dr Golden Mahove, my life coach and mentor. Your constant check-ins and encouragement gave me the much-needed boost and dash of optimism. You kept me accountable, and this achievement is as much yours as it is mine. In the same vein, I would like to express my gratitude to my friend, Prof. Nelson Mlambo. His incessant nags and pep-ups lit up my path when the end appeared too far out of sight. To Dr Wilma Chibonore, my ambassador at the Wits campus, I am eternally grateful. When I could not fix things remotely, you were always ready to assist. To all Wits staff, your support and service shall always be cherished. Special mention goes to my tech-savvy friend, Deogratius Kimena, for digitalising my survey tools and standing ready to assist whenever tech challenges popped up.

This thesis would not have been possible without the protagonists of this study: the bean trading middlemen. I thank all my respondents opening their worlds to me. In most of you I gained life-long friends and knowledge that goes beyond the purpose of this study. Ultimately, I thank my wife, Beauty Munozogara. and our children for the many sacrifices they made so that I could concentrate on the endless reading and writing sessions. This thesis is the prize I bring home with pride.

Abstract

This thesis explored how social relations of middleman traders influenced and patterned their entrepreneurial actions in informal agricultural output markets of Kasulu District in Tanzania. The study applied a mixed methods social network analysis design which involved a balanced fusion of personal network analysis and ethnographic techniques.

The study established that middleman traders' personal relationships have a pervasive influence on their entrepreneurial actions. Interpersonal trust emerged as a key mediating factor of entrepreneurial actions. Contrary to the perception that middleman roles are performed by minorities and "strangers", the study showed that trading middlemen emerge from the peasantry and, therefore, represent a form of endogenous entrepreneurship. The study showed that governance of entrepreneurial exchanges occurred mostly through informal personal relationships. The study revealed a tendency for reverse embeddedness involving the overlaying of personal relations on relationships that originate from pure market interactions. The overlaying of social dimensions on pure economic relationships creates a social enforcement mechanism that compensates for the lack of formal rules and regulations. Overall, study results suggest that social embeddedness of informal entrepreneurship manifests through a composite interplay of sociological concepts such as patronage, clientelisation and reciprocity. Based on the study findings, I argue that bean-trading middlemen employ a socially embedded business model in which social relations are accessory to the performance of entrepreneurial actions. In sum, this study has generated new insights regarding the link between social embeddedness and persistence of middlemen in agricultural markets. The integrative theoretical and analytical approach contributes to the quest for a unified approach to studying social embeddedness. Ultimately, the study revealed that, while economic sociology concepts have independent theoretical lives, they are inextricably linked and integrating them is central to understanding the social embeddedness of economic phenomena.

Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction to and background of the study 1
1.0 Introduction 1
1.1 Thesis structure and overview 1
1.2 Research context: informal economy and social embeddedness. 2
1.2.1 Perspectives of the informal economy 3
1.2.2 Intersection of the informal economy, middlemen, and social embeddedness 8
1.3 Research gaps 9
1.4 Statement of the research problem 11
1.5 Significance of the study 13
1.6 Conclusion 14
Chapter 2: Literature review 15
2.0 Introduction 15
2.1 Informal sector 15
2.1.1 Theoretical perspectives on the informal sector 17
2.1.2 Informal entrepreneurship: an emerging concept 19
2.2 Representations of the middleman in informal entrepreneurship 20
2.3. Business model perspective on middlemen 34
2.4 Social embeddedness: Theoretical and empirical literature perspectives 42
2.4.1 Strands of embeddedness 47
2.4.2 Unpacking Granovetterian social embeddedness 49
2.4.3 Review and discussion of key concepts in social embeddedness 54
2.5 Empirical perspectives on social embeddedness of middlemen actions 62
2.6 Conclusion 69
Chapter 3: Theoretical and analytical framework 70
3.0 Introduction 70
3.1 Theoretical foundations of social embeddedness 70

3.2 Concept of social networks 72
Types of social networks 73
3.3 Social network theory 74
3.4 Social network analysis 83
3.5 Definition of key concepts 84
3.6 Typology of entrepreneurial actions 87
3.7 Theoretical framework for the study 89
3.8 Conclusion 95
Chapter 4: Research design and methodology 96
4.0 Introduction 96
4.1 Conceptual clarifications 96
4.2 Research paradigms 98
4.3 Discussion of main research paradigms 101
4.4 Research approach 106
4.5 Research design 111
4.6 Mixed methods social network analysis 117
4.6.1 Network ethnography and the study of social embeddedness 119
4.7 Research design choices and procedures 121
4.8 Data collection methods 128
4.9 Data analysis and interpretation techniques 137
4.10 Research validity and reliability 149
4.11 Challenges and limitations of the study 150
4.12 Conclusion 151
Chapter 5: Presentation of study findings 152
5.0 Introduction 152
5.1 Recap of the data analysis process 152
5.2 Presentation of study findings 154
5.2.1 The bean market structure in Kasulu 154

5.2.2 Typology & characterisation of middlemen traders 158
5.2.3 Middleman trading enterprise characteristics 162
5.2.4 Middleman business model activities 167
5.2.5 Middlemen's personal (egocentric) network characteristics 172
5.2.6 Family embeddedness and middlemen trading activities 182
5.2.7 Associational life of middleman traders 185
5.2.8 Local embeddedness and trading activities 187
5.2.9 Middlemen trader sociocentric network 188
5.2.10 Middlemen transactional behaviour 191
5.3 Conclusion 200
Chapter 6: Discussion and interpretation of findings 202
6.0 Introduction 202
6.1 Recap of the main findings 203
6.2 Discussion of the findings 208
6.2.1 Social embeddedness of middlemen's entrepreneurial actions 208
6.2.2 Patronage and middleman entrepreneurial actions 208
6.2.3 Clientelisation 211
6.2.4 Reciprocity and trader transactional behaviour 212
6.2.5 Political embeddedness 212
6.2.6 Family and relations of affection 213
6.2.7 Trust 214
6.2.8 Resource flows and exchanges: social capital 216
6.2.9 Structural positions and entrepreneurial opportunities 218
6.2.10 Trader networks, risk management and reverse embeddedness 219
6.2.11 Social embeddedness of the middleman trader business model 220
6.3 Research limitations 221
6.4 Conclusion 222
Chapter 7: Summary, conclusions, and recommendations 224

7.0 Introduction 224
7.1 Recap of the research problem and methodology 224
7.2 Synthesis of the main research findings 225
7.3 Contributions to knowledge 227
7.4 Research implications for development practice 229
7.5 Recommendations for future research 229
7.6 Conclusion 231
Reference List 232
Appendices 301

Chapter 1: Introduction to and background of the study

1.0 Introduction

This study explores how entrepreneurial actions of agricultural marketing middlemen are influenced and shaped by their interpersonal relations with other actors. The aim is to understand how the concept of social embeddedness is manifested in informal entrepreneurial settings. This chapter provides an overview and context for the whole thesis. It locates the research problem within its scholarly and research context. It highlights the key theoretical discourses on social embeddedness of the informal sector and flags up knowledge gaps that this thesis addresses. Firstly, it explains how the thesis is organised to provide a clear roadmap for navigating this work. With reference to extant literature, the chapter problematises the research problem and clarifies study aims and the associated research questions. The chapter concludes by recapitulating the research's significance and potential contribution to knowledge.

1.1 Thesis structure and overview

The thesis is organised into seven core chapters. Chapter one provides an overview of the study research problem and context. The research problem is identified and located within its scholarly and research context. Research gaps are identified and problematised in the form of specific research objectives and questions. The chapter highlights the significance of the study and sets the stage for the rest of the thesis. Chapter two consists of a review, synthesis and discussion of extant literature related to social embeddedness of economic actions. It sought to unravel the existing representations of the core concepts of social embeddedness and informal entrepreneurship. At the core of the literature review are the triple concepts of informal sector entrepreneurship, social embeddedness, and middleman trading. Chapter three builds on insights from the literature review chapter and proposes an integrative theoretical and analytical framework based on main social network theories and concepts associated with the notion of social embeddedness. The resultant framework became the main backbone for data collection, analysis, and interpretation. Chapter four presents the research methodology adopted in conducting the study. The chapter provides conceptual clarifications regarding matters of research design and methodology. The

main methodological choices are presented, justified, and explained to provide clarity on the research process followed and methods applied. Chapter five presents and explains the main findings of the study based on the data analysis process. The purpose of this chapter is to provide a comprehensive view of all the findings that could be gleaned from the analysis process. The chapter shares the main themes and trends emerging from the data within the context of the data collection and analysis framework. Chapter six of this thesis discusses the main findings of the study within the context of the integrative theoretical and analytical framework presented in chapter three. The chapter locates the findings of the study within the context of extant literature to establish their theoretical and conceptual associations. Chapter seven of the thesis reflects on the study research questions considering the study findings. As part of the interpretation of findings, the chapter presents some key conclusions in relation to the study research questions. The chapter elaborates the contribution of the study to knowledge and sheds light on areas that need additional research in the future.

1.2 Research context: informal economy and social embeddedness.

Informal trade is the hallmark of agricultural commodity markets in Africa and other developing regions (AGRA, 2019; Defait, 2018; Hull, 2021; Koroma et al., 2017). This situation is consistent with findings from past studies which showed that agricultural marketing in developing countries takes place mainly within the informal economy (Abebe et al., 2016; Defait, 2018; Fuentes, 1998; Hayami et al., 1988). Middlemen – traders who buy and sell agricultural commodities from farmers – are the central actors who drive the informal food commodity trade (Mwagike, 2015; Zamroni and Yamao, 2012). Activities of middlemen within the informal agricultural food markets resemble what scholars have referred to as informal entrepreneurship (Hayami and Kawagoe, 2001; Koshy, 2019). However, understanding of the social embeddedness of informal entrepreneurial activity remains scant due to limited attention from scholars. As stated by Webb et al. (2009:492), “little is known theoretically about how the entrepreneurial process works in the informal economy”. Past attempts at explaining entrepreneurial behaviour in the informal economy have been based mainly on institutional theory (Williams and Krasniqi, 2018). Overreliance on institutional theory renders scholarly efforts vulnerable to the biases and constrictions of that approach. Consequently,

investigations have tended to focus on the meso- and macro-levels of informal entrepreneurial action to the neglect of micro- and actor-level approaches (Corbett and Katz, 2012). The ultimate result is an incomplete understanding of how entrepreneurs operate within the informal economy.

Against this backdrop, this thesis applies the notion of social embeddedness as a theoretical basis for exploring the entrepreneurial actions and strategies employed by agricultural trading middlemen within the informal agricultural commodity trade in Tanzania. Using the agricultural trading middlemen as the main unit of analysis, this thesis draws an area of intersection for the three concepts of informal economy, entrepreneurship, and social embeddedness of economic action. Cognisant of the various interpretations and strands of the embeddedness concept, the thesis draws on Granovetter's conceptualisation of social embeddedness as "the extent to which economic action is linked to or depends on action or institutions that are non-economic in content, goals and processes" (2005:35). Consistent with this conceptualisation, the thesis builds on existing studies to deepen the understanding of how personal social relations, social situatedness and social network structures influence, constrain and enhance the economic actions of middlemen within the context of the informal economy.

1.2.1 Perspectives of the informal economy

Informal economy is a relatively new term. It refers to activities that have been traditionally classified under the rubric of informal sector (Bangasser, 2000). According to the International Labour Organization (ILO, 2002), informal economy "refers to all economic activities by workers and economic units that are – in law or in practice – not covered or insufficiently covered by formal arrangements". This description of the informal economy adopts an exclusionary approach thereby suggesting that activities covered by formal arrangements are the norm. In this dual approach, formal arrangements are taken to represent the modern economy while informal arrangements are associated with pre-modern ways of economic governance. As noted by Gomez et al. (2019), the informal economy is treated as the residual of an old economic order. The treatment of the informal economy as an ephemeral phenomenon has, however, failed to stand up to empirical findings. Roberts (2013) and Clement (2015) observed that, instead of shrinking, the informal economy is growing in both developed and developing nations.

Musara and Nieuwenhuizen (2020) note that the informal economy constitutes about 60% of gross domestic product (GDP) in developing countries and this figure stands at 10% in developed countries. In developing countries in Africa, the informal economy is home to the bulk of agricultural trading activities that take place (Defait, 2018; Vorley, 2017).

While dualist approaches to the informal economy have consistently cast it in comparison to its formal counterpart, existing literature shows the emergence of what can be called a social embeddedness approach (Agarwala, 2009; Dawson, 2021; London and Hart, 2011; Turner, 2009). Building upon Polanyi's embeddedness argument (1944), the social embeddedness approach portrays the informal economy as an extension or natural expression of the underlying social relations and dynamics. Signalling a departure from dualist and legalist approaches, Godfrey (2011:231) defines the informal economy "as activity unregulated by law but governed by custom or personal ties". While Godfrey's definition carries undertones of duality, his description of the informal economy as "governed by custom or personal ties" marks a bold and refreshing break from the standard approach of flipping the other side of the coin. According to Agarwala (2009), there is room for the Economic Sociology field to advance what she calls a "relational" definition of the informal sector. A relational definition of the informal sector "highlights the complex web of personal networks, structural interdependencies, and institutions that intertwine informal economies with formal economies, civil societies, and the state", (Agarwala, 2009:318). Advocating a relational view of the informal economy, Dawson (2021) argues that social and reciprocal exchanges tend to define the nature of informal economy transactions. Aligning with this view, Hyden (2011) asserts that informality is at the centre of any socially embedded economy. Actors operate within an informal economy and share a common set of expectations. They rely on simple forms of reciprocity, use unwritten rules, engage in non-contractual exchanges, transact confidentially, and rely on self-enforcement when there is a breach of agreement (Hyden, 2011). As emphasised by Bejakovic (2016), transacting in the informal economy is embedded in social relationships where mutual trust and informal arrangements matter more than having a formal contractual regime.

Overall, a growing number of scholars are pointing to the close links between social relations and the informal economy (Gaughan and Ferman, 1987; Kebede, 2020; Prelipcean et al., 2016). Lonmitz (1988:43) describes informal economic activities as

"socially embedded transactions that obey a symbolic cultural logic that differs from (and often clashes with) economic rationality or the formal ideology of the state. The rules of sociability that govern informal exchange vary from culture to culture". Echoing the same position, Gaiger (2017:9) asserts that the "informal economy is embedded in a mesh of relationships that, beyond economics, sanctions aspirations and influences behaviours". Similarly, Schoepfle (1993:197) asserts that informal economic activities "are usually embedded in reciprocal modes of social relationships such as family, friends, and local or ethnic ties". Regardless of the strong assertions to the social embeddedness of the informal economy, little is known about how social relations influence economic actions and outcomes of actors. This is consistent with Kinyanjui's (2019) observation that scholarly research on the informal sector has tended to pay limited attention to the actual dynamics of how the informal sector operates at a micro level.

Informal economy and entrepreneurship

The traditional perception of the informal sector as a transient sector led to the view that activities that take place in the informal space are just survivalist in nature and cannot be classified under entrepreneurship (Madichie et al., 2021; Morris et al., 1996; Ram et al., 2017). It was De Soto's (1989) book *The other path: The invisible revolution in the Third World* which cast light on the entrepreneurial endeavours that take place outside the formal sector. De Soto's expository work led to a flurry of studies on investigating entrepreneurship in informal settings (La Porta and Shleifer, 2014; Williams, 2006). Consequently, informal entrepreneurship has emerged as an important research theme. Omotosho (2021) posits that the concept of informal entrepreneurship is still nascent and currently lacks a clear definition. According to Williams (2014), an informal entrepreneur is someone who starts or manages their own business and engages in monetary transactions that are legal but are not officially declared to the state. With regards to the type of entrepreneurial activities that are found within the informal sector, Teltscher (1994) identifies informal trading as the most common activity prevalent within the informal sector. Meanwhile, there is emerging consensus that entrepreneurial activities that take place within the informal economy are embedded in networks and structures of social relations (Portes and Haller; 2010; Williams, 2019).

Agricultural marketing and the informal trade in Africa

According to Defait, (2018), the buying and selling of agricultural commodities in Africa take place mainly within the informal sector under the banner of informal food trade. Meanwhile, Tull (2021) defines informal trade as occurring when "commodity flows outside of the formal system, meaning that activity is not typically recorded in government statistics or inspected and taxed through official channels". According to Cantens et al. (2015:366), "informal trade is the trade that is not reported in national statistics and that this non-report constitutes a definition of informality". AGRA (2019) refers to the trading activities that take place between the farm and end markets as the midstream which includes traders, transporters and food processors. Small and medium enterprises account for 80% of market operatives (AGRA, 2019). The importance of middlemen is further emphasised by Vorley (2017) who describes them as central to the functioning of informal agricultural trade. Within informal agricultural markets "small farmers sell mainly to local traders, often within broader social relations of trust and mutual benefit" (Veldwisch and Woodhouse, 2021:4).

Recent studies have paid much attention to the cross-border dimensions of staple food trading, but not enough attention has been paid to understanding middlemen as the agents of this trade (Bouët et al., 2020). Defait (2018) describes informal food trade as encompassing the activities that are involved in getting food commodities from the field to the market. Contrary to theoretical predictions that the informal sector diminishes with modernisation, informal food trade is observed to grow in tandem with modern food markets (Vorley, 2013). While studies on informal trade are increasing in number, very few have focused on informal trading operators, such as middlemen (Sperling et al., 2020). The lack of attention to informal traders as a category of economic agents has contributed to the current impasse on the role of informal trade in development (Nkendah, 2013).

The exploration is anchored in the entrepreneurial actions of agricultural trading middlemen who are involved in the buying and selling of farmers' crops in informal agricultural output markets. Chau et al. (2009:1) describe middlemen as "trading entrepreneurs who link the backwaters of developing countries to emerging markets nationally and especially globally". The characterisation underscores the status of middleman as the quintessential actor within informal agricultural markets. Actions of

agricultural trading middlemen emerged as a form of socially embedded informal entrepreneurial action. On the back of this interpretation, this thesis grounded its investigation in the triadic concepts of economic informality, entrepreneurship, and social embeddedness. The trading middleman is adopted as the core unit of investigation and analysis in this thesis.

Agricultural trading middlemen

The existence, operation, and persistence of middlemen in agricultural markets has not been adequately explained in literature (Ghosh, 2013). Historically, neo-classical economics theories have not recognised the role of middlemen because markets are assumed to operate perfectly with buyers and sellers transacting directly (Antras and Costinot, 2011; Biglaiser, 1993; Shevchenko, 2004; Wright and Wong, 2014). The reality on the ground diverges from the classical economic assumption of a middlemen-free market as middlemen are observed to play a central role in the proper functioning of markets (Badar, 2008; Ghosh 2013). In rural agricultural markets, middlemen are observed to hold strong bargaining power which derives from having more market information than the farmers from whom they source products (Mitchell, 2011). The argument of a middleman who amasses market power based on differential information access raises questions about how different market actors access information. Past studies suggest that middlemen rely on community and personal social networks to access information about supplies and markets (Ghosh, 2013). According to Ghosh (2013:5) middlemen capitalise on "the informal and personalised nature of their ties with producers" to sustain their position in the market structure. Regardless of the acknowledgement that middlemen activities have a strong founding in social relations, there is a dearth of literature on the link between social and economic dimensions of middlemen's economic actions. Emphasising this knowledge gap, Mitra et al. (2018:1) lament that "trading mechanisms between farmers and traders are (also) not well understood". As advocated by Sitko and Jayne (2014), there is still a need for additional knowledge to deepen the understanding of how middlemen leverage social networks to initiate and sustain their economic actions in rural markets.

The foregoing discussion suggests that the ambivalent perception of middlemen and their role in rural markets is partly due to limited understanding of how middlemen

interact with the market from both a social and economic perspective. The fact that middlemen have continued to thrive in the face of open animosity from governments and demonisation by development practitioners is a puzzle which can only be resolved through closer examination of the relationship between the middlemen and the social context in which they are spatially and socially embedded. Building on a growing scholarship on the role of social relations and structures in the functioning of the informal economy, the link between social embeddedness and the role of middlemen demands further exploration (Hess et al., 2011; Jack and Andersen, 2002; Rockenbauch and Sakdapolrak, 2017).

1.2.2 Intersection of the informal economy, middlemen, and social embeddedness

Recent literature from the economic sociology field has offered new perspectives on middlemen as economic actors operating within the informal economy. There is growing recognition that the logic upon which the informal economy is based differs from the neoclassical perception of markets (Chen and Carre, 2020; Miller, 1987). Echoing Polanyi's (1944) characterisation of a socially embedded economy, Portes and Haller (2010) assert that the informal economy is highly dependent on social ties for its functioning. While the case for the social embeddedness of the informal economy has been amply made, the question of how social relations shape economic activities is not yet well understood (Aryeetey, 2015). Claims of the informal economy's social embeddedness have remained as loose statements that are not supported by systematic scholarly investigations that could lead to some coherent theoretical frameworks on how actors in the informal economy operate. Notably, the investigation of entrepreneurial actions within the informal economy has suffered from a lack of consistent theoretical and analytical frameworks to guide scholarly efforts. The extension of informal sector theorisation to the study of entrepreneurship within the informal sector has the tendency to neglect the micro-level action. This is because theories advanced to explain the informal sector mostly focus on structural dimensions of an economy but neglect actions and dynamics at the level of the individual economic actor. This thesis acknowledges that economic activities within the informal economy are socially embedded. To explore how economic activities within the informal economy are

influenced by social ties, the thesis anchors its investigation in crop-trading middlemen who operate within informal markets for agricultural commodities in Tanzania. The choice of crop-trading middlemen is aptly fitting for this thesis as middlemen are the embodiment of informal economic activity in most agricultural marketing settings across Africa and other developing regions.

1.3 Research gaps

There is growing consensus among scholars that activities conducted within the informal economy are socially embedded. Following De Soto's (1989) exposé of entrepreneurial efforts within the informal economic domain, more evidence has emerged to justify the assertion that entrepreneurship takes place within the informal economy. However, despite the headline acknowledgements of the socially embedded nature of informal economy activity, there is very limited understanding of how entrepreneurial actors within the informal economy operate (Polese et al., 2017; Teltscher, 1994). According to Webb et al. (2009:492), a theoretical understanding of how the entrepreneurial process works in the informal economy is still very scant. Guided by the assumption that the informal sector is an ephemeral phase within an economy, most studies on the informal economy took an approach aimed at seeking policy cures instead of understanding underlying micro-level dynamics of entrepreneurial activities within the informal economy. The earlier portrayal of the informal sector as a collection of survivalist activities with no entrepreneurial ingenuity similarly marginalised the sector in entrepreneurship research. Consequently, there is limited systematic research on entrepreneurial action within the informal economy. Given that the informal economy constitutes a typical socially embedded economy, the absence of a coherent theoretical framework for investigating social embeddedness of economic actions in informal economy settings has been a major gap and setback. The following is a summary of the major research gaps that this thesis addresses.

Limited understanding of how the informal economy functions at micro level

Scholarly research has mainly focused on the macro and meso dimensions of the informal economy and there is limited understanding of how traders in informal markets operate as entrepreneurs, (Mintz, 1964). Despite the boom in entrepreneurship research,

entrepreneurship scholarship has mainly focused on the mainstream formal sector to the neglect of the informal economy (Ram et al., 2017). Gabre-Madhin (2001) similarly laments the lack of attention to the role of middlemen in facilitating exchange processes in markets where formal institutions are weak. In the context of agricultural markets, Hayami and Kikuchi (2000:185) highlight the challenge that few studies have targeted the collection of "microeconomic data to identify the relationships between farmers and middlemen at a local level". The lack of micro-level data makes it difficult to analyse the relational nature of transactions that take place in trading activities and, as a result, claims of social embeddedness remain largely unsubstantiated. To the extent that activities in the informal economy are judged to be entrepreneurial, current research is incomplete as it lacks a plausible action-oriented framework to investigate such entrepreneurial action.

Understanding of social embeddedness and entrepreneurship within informal economy is incomplete

While the social embeddedness of the informal economy is widely acknowledged, current research has not adequately addressed how this is fused with other concepts of informality and entrepreneurship. According to Walther (2015), there is still limited knowledge of how social networks influence business actions and performance. Abeka (2011) notes that research on the relationship between personal networks and enterprising actions is still limited. Corrêa et al. (2020) make a clarion call to scholars to fully explore the repercussions of social embeddedness for entrepreneurship actions. This call echoes Burt's (2000) lamentation of the disconnect between entrepreneurship and social embeddedness, despite the obvious links and interdependence between the two concepts. With specific reference to Africa, Marks and Stys (2019) note that, despite the strides that have been made in social network and social embeddedness research, "very little is known of the ties that bind individual, groups and organizations, how they serve as channels for flows of material and information flows, and how they influence social, economic and political outcomes". This aligns with the predominant view that "little is known theoretically about how the entrepreneurial process works in the informal economy", (Webb et al., 2009:492). Overall, the link between social embeddedness and informal entrepreneurship in Africa has not been adequately

explored. This challenge is aggravated by the lack of a unifying framework that can guide empirical research efforts (Bögenhold, 2013; Krippner, 2001; Rao et al., 2000). Research on social embeddedness is normally fragmented into splinter concepts, such as social capital, social networks, moral economy, and economy of affection, among other concepts. Therefore, social embeddedness, as a central concept in Economic Sociology, stands to benefit from the development of a coherent and unified conceptual framework which can be deployed to guide future research.

1.4 Statement of the research problem

Contrary to the neoclassical economic prediction that informal economic activities (commonly referred to as the informal sector) are a passing phase of the economic transformation, such activities have persisted despite advances in the economic modernisation process. Alongside the persistence of informal economic activities, it has been observed that such activities become increasingly dependent on social ties when they are freed from the grip of state regulation. This poses the problem of what has been referred to as the first paradox of the informal economy (Portes, 2010). According to Portes (2010:137), the first paradox of the informal economy is that "the more it [informal economy] approaches the model of the 'true market', the more it is dependent on social ties for its effective functioning". Basile and Harriss-White (2010) clarify that the model of a true market is represented by the absence of state regulation, thereby approximating pure free market conditions in the neoclassical economic sense. The observation made by Portes and Haller (2010) in relation to informal economy tendencies is paradoxical in the sense that exempting informal economic transactions from state regulation does not result in behaviour that is consistent with the neoclassical prediction of free market behaviour. Instead of exhibiting individualistic and discrete tendencies, the economic actions of actors within the informal economy draw on social relations and influences within the actors' operating context. Stated otherwise, the so-called first paradox of the informal economy is an acknowledgement of the social embeddedness of micro-economic or entrepreneurial action within the context of social and personal relations of economic actors. However, despite the wide acknowledgement of social embeddedness as a strong force behind the staying power of the informal sector, extant literature has neither adequately nor coherently explained how social

embeddedness manifests in economic actions of entrepreneurial actors operating in informal settings, (Gabre-Madhin, 2001; Lyndon et al., 2015; Russel, 1987). As a result, Portes and Haller's (2010) assertion that the informal sector is dependent on social ties for its functioning still lacks solid empirical backing.

Against the above background, this study set out to research the problem of ***how social ties and personal relations influence and support economic actions of entrepreneurial actors operating within the framework of the informal economy.*** The study was pivoted on economic actions of agricultural trading middlemen who were construed as entrepreneurial actors engaged in the buying and selling of agricultural food commodities. The choice of agricultural trading middlemen as a unit of investigation recognises their stature as the quintessential economic actor operating in informal agricultural output markets of most developing countries.

Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study was to explore how agricultural trading middlemen's social and personal relations shape and influence their entrepreneurial actions related to the buying and selling of agricultural commodities. Such an exploration fosters a better understanding of social embeddedness of entrepreneurship action within the informal economy. Positioning the agricultural trading middleman as an informal entrepreneur, the study explored how the middleman's entrepreneurial actions are influenced by the set of social and personal relations around him. In the same vein, the study explored the link between social embeddedness and the persistence of middlemen as dominant entrepreneurial actors involved in agricultural commodity marketing in developing countries. Ultimately, the study findings shed light on reasons behind the persistence of informal entrepreneurial actors and the informal economy in general. Thus, this study deepens an understanding of the interrelationship between social relations and informal entrepreneurial action on a micro level.

Aims of the study

The main aims of this study were set as follows:

1. To explore the relationship between middlemen's social relations and their entrepreneurial (economic) actions.

2. To explore the nature of resource flows that take place between middlemen and their personal and social connections.
3. To investigate how middlemen's social and interpersonal relations influence their entrepreneurial actions.

Research questions

The departure point of this study is that economic actions of agricultural trading middlemen in agricultural markets are a manifestation of entrepreneurial behaviour within the broad informal economy. Acknowledging that informal economy activities are socially embedded, the main research question explored is "how do social relations and personal networks shape, influence and sustain entrepreneurial actions of trading middlemen in informal agricultural output markets"?

The main research question is operationalised through the following sub-questions:

1. How do social relations between middlemen and their transacting partners influence their transaction behaviour?
2. What types of resource flow take place between middlemen and their social connections?
3. How do structural positions in social networks create and sustain economic advantages for middlemen in agricultural output markets?
4. How do social relations influence the business model of a middleman?
5. How do middlemen draw on their social relations and personal networks to cope with business challenges and risks?

1.5 Significance of the study

This study is essential for several reasons. First and foremost, this study represents a critical step in deepening the understanding of the topical issue of entrepreneurship within the informal economy and linking it to social embeddedness of economic action. Although the informal sector and social embeddedness are widely recognised as intertwined, their point of intersection has not been adequately explored by earlier studies. This study contributes to the broader scholarly efforts aimed at relocating research focus from macro-level investigations to the microeconomic domain where the actual economic actions are undertaken. In other terms, this study is important to the

development of micro-level research for both informal economy entrepreneurship and social embeddedness concepts.

This study introduces a sociological perspective of middlemen which is largely missing from the economics-dominated scholarly narratives on agricultural markets. The study goes beyond neo-classical economic investigations to proffer a unified social embeddedness framework as a theoretical basis for understanding entrepreneurial actions within an informal economy context. The application of a social embeddedness lens to the investigation of middlemen activities is valuable in uncovering hidden dynamics of how social relations shape and sustain informal entrepreneurial activities within the informal economy.

1.6 Conclusion

This chapter has elaborated the research problem and located it within its scholarly context. It has demonstrated that that entrepreneurial actions of agricultural marketing middlemen constitute a form of socially embedded entrepreneurship within the informal economy. Within this context, the thesis set to explore how the social embeddedness manifests within the entrepreneurial process. The next chapter delves into the review of extant literature on the core concepts of social embeddedness, informal entrepreneurship and “middlemanship”.

Chapter 2: Literature review

2.0 Introduction

This chapter presents a synthesised analysis of both theoretical and empirical literature on the key concepts that are central to this thesis. Central to this thesis are the tripple concepts of middlemanship, informal sector entrepreneurship and social embeddedness. The concept of informal sector entrepreneurship is anchored in the role of trading middlemen in informal agricultural output markets. Therefore, this section presents and discusses literature on the informal sector, middlemen and social embeddedness. This literature review clarifies the key concepts and show how these concepts are linked to social embeddedness of informal entrepreneurial actions.

This chapter is organised into three subsections dedicated to the three main concepts of informal sector, middlemen, and social embeddedness. The first sub-section of this literature review chapter is an exploration, discussion, and critique of the concept 'informal sector'. A review of the informal sector draws the context for the discussion of middlemen who constitute a specific thread within the broader informal sector domain. The review of the middlemen concept explores both theoretical and empirical literature to understand how the conceptualisation of the middleman has evolved through economic history. Multiple theoretical perspectives of the phenomenon of middleman are discussed and contrasted to arrive at a reconciled view. A comprehensive understanding of the middleman as an economic actor is constructed. The last subsection of the literature traces and discusses the concept of social embeddedness and links it to the informal sector and the specific strand of middlemen.

2.1 Informal sector

This section provides a review of the informal sector and its associated concepts. Emphasis is placed on how the concept has evolved since its introduction and highlights the current debates and thinking. The section provides a context for a more detailed exploration of trading middlemen as the archetype of informal entrepreneurship in agricultural output markets.

Defining the informal sector

Several definitions have been put forward to describe the informal sector (Bruton et al., 2012;). All definitions converge on the point that informal sector activities do not comply to government legal requirements and therefore operate without requisite registration. A more comprehensive definition is provided by Hart (2011) who describes the informal sector as a set of economic activities taking place outside bureaucratic public and private sector establishments. Roberts (2013) broadly describes the informal sector as the part of the economy that does not fall under the purview of organised economic activities. It is important that most of the definitions used to describe the informal sector are value laden and tend to reflect each scholar's school of thought with regards to the role and purpose of the informal sector within the economy. On that basis, existing definitions can be classified into negativist and positivist categories. The negativist category consists of definitions that emphasise the ills of the sector, such as illegality, tax evasion and criminality (Chowdhury, 2005; La Porta and Schleifer, 2008;). Positivist definitions mainly highlight the dynamism, resilience and entrepreneurship associated with the informal sector (de Soto, 1989; Nagler ad Naude, 2017; Welter et al., 2015; Williams and Kedir, 2018).

For the purposes of this study, an informal sector entity is defined as an individual or entity that is involved in the conduct of legal economic activity with partial or no compliance with government rules and regulations applicable to the economic activity in question. This definition is consistent with the definition used by Kent and Mushi (1996) in a study of informal enterprises in Tanzania.

Concept of the informal sector and its evolution

Origins of the informal sector concept are traced back to Hart's (1973) report on employment studies conducted for the International Labour Organization (ILO) in Ghana. Since Hart's ground-breaking report, the concept has evolved with emergence of new characterisations such as the hidden economy, underground economy, grey economy, "jua kali" sector and shadow economy (Hope, 2014; Kiondo, 1990; La Porta and Schelifer, 2009; Papp, 2011). These various descriptions mirror the different interpretations that scholars and practitioners assign to the informal sector. However, amid this discordance, there is near consensus on the defining characteristics of the sector.

Gibson and Kelley (1994) claim that the sector is reliant on rudimentary technologies and productivity is typically low. This view is consistent with observations made by other scholars that the informal sector is capital-poor in relation to its formal counterpart (Hillenkamp et al., 2014; Lewis, 1979). Another uncontested characteristic of the sector is that it is marked by partial or no compliance with formal government regulations (Webb et al., 2013). Overall, the concept of the informal sector comes back to institutional economics. The use of the phrase "informal sector" is clearly with reference to the informal institutions that govern the sector's activities (North, 1991). In line with this position, Webb et al. (2013) stress that informal activities fall outside formal institutional boundaries but "remain within informal institutional boundaries for large segments of society".

It is also essential to note that due to challenges experienced by scholars and practitioners in operationalising the concept of informal sector, the phrase "informal economy" has been introduced as a much broader concept. According to Chen (2007) the coining of the term informal economy represents a broadening of the initial concept of informal sector and accommodates certain types of employment not covered by the earlier concept of informal sector. The OECD (2019:155) defines the informal economy as "all economic activities by workers and economic units that are – in law or in practice – not covered or insufficiently covered by formal arrangements". In this new definition, the informal sector refers to "a subset of unincorporated enterprises not constituted as separate legal entities independently of their owners" (OECD, 2019:). Despite the terminological refinements, Bureau and Fendt (2011) still note that the informal sector or economy is a complex and heterogenous phenomenon that is difficult to capture with precision.

2.1.1 Theoretical perspectives on the informal sector

The informal sector concept lacks a coherent theoretical explanation. The theoretical stunting of the concept is linked to the misconception that the informal sector as an ephemeral phase would disappear as the formal economy reached optimal performance (Lewis, 1979). Attempts at theorising the informal sector have seen the emergence for four schools of thought, namely the dualist school, structuralist school, legalist school and voluntarist school (Chen, 2012). The dualist school treats informal sector activities as

marginal, which are distinct and unrelated to formal activities (Chen, 2012; Hart, 1973). According to this view, informal sector activities are a coping mechanism and survival strategy for poor people who are excluded from the informal economy. Notably, this view resonates with Lewis' (1979) treatment of what he calls the in-between sector. A closer reading of Lewis' (1954) dual sector model also hints at an insignificant transitory band of activities between transition from agriculture to the modern capitalist economy. Specifically, petty trading (which now constitutes a significant part of the informal sector) is cited as one of the transitional economic activities. In this sense, the dual sector perspective of the informal economy predates the popularisation of the informal sector concept by Hart (1973). In the dualist tradition, the informal sector emerges because of the failure of modernisation strategies (Hillenkamp et al., 2014).

The structuralist school perceives the informal sector as subordinated and inextricably linked to the formal sector (Meagher, 2013). According to this view, the informal sector is complementary to the formal sector and helps the latter improve efficiencies through sub-contracting arrangements (Saracoglu, 2015). This school advocates the promotion of linkages and cooperation between informal and formal sectors of the economy (Chen, 2012). Lacking in the structuralist school is an elaboration of the processes that support the functioning of the informal economy. While acknowledging the link between the formal and informal processes, it falls short of specifying the role that social relations and structures play in facilitating activities of the informal sector.

The legalist school sees the informal sector as symptomatic of difficult regulatory and bureaucratic requirements which end up pushing entrepreneurial individuals into the informal sector (De Soto, 1989; Williams, 2014). Critiques of this school of thought have derogatively termed it the "romantic view" of the informal sector (La Porta and Schleifer, 2014). According to this view, actors in the informal sector are a neglected entrepreneurial class that has potential to positively contribute to the economy if fully supported (Thai and Turkina, 2013).

The voluntarist school of thought attacks informal sector actors as a renegade group of entrepreneurs who deliberately seek to by-pass laws, evade taxes and free-ride on the benefits generated by the formal sector (Chen, 2012; Özveren, 2005). According to this view, the informal sector actors enjoy unfair advantage and exhibit free-riding tendencies. Some scholars have dubbed this the parasitic view (Gibson and Kelley, 1994). This view

agrees with the legalist view on the point that informal sector actors avoid compliance with formal laws. The point of difference between the two schools is on the motive for such avoidance. In the legalist school, non-compliance is forced on the entrepreneurs whereas in the voluntarist school non-compliance is a deliberate and crafty way of creating an unfair advantage over entrepreneurs in the formal sector.

2.1.2 Informal entrepreneurship: an emerging concept

Early literature on the informal sector portrayed informal sector actors as poor and struggling labourers which gave rise to the traditional view that the informal sector is synonymous with poverty (Portes and Haller, 2010). Generally, informal sector operators were not regarded as entrepreneurial and so informal entrepreneurship was mainly sidelined by management research (Ram et al., 2017). However, De Soto's (1989) book *The other path: The invisible revolution in the Third World* changed the direction of thinking and gave birth to new scholarship on what is called informal sector entrepreneurship *(*Williams and Kedir, 2018). Williams and Kedir (2018:155) define informal sector entrepreneurship as "starting-up a venture on an unregistered basis". Welter et al. (2015:296) define informal entrepreneurship as "activities aimed at earning an income and carried out more or less regularly". According to Webb et al. (2013:589) the "informal economy consists of economic activities that occur outside of formal institutional boundaries, but which remain within informal institutional boundaries for large segments of society". The latter definition is more inclusive of most economic operators within the informal sector. Further, Morris et al. (1996) suggest that an "entrepreneurial sector" exists as a sub-set of the broad category of the informal sector. This distinction is important to the extent that the informal sector is diverse and not all informal sector actors would strictly meet the conventional definition of an entrepreneur (Ikiara, 1994).

Recently, there has been a growing wave of studies that adopt an entrepreneurial paradigm in exploring informal sector dynamics (Acs and Virgill, 2009; Webb et al., 2013). These studies are at the centre of a revival and re-interpretation of the informal sector concept whose evolution has gone contrary to earlier theoretical predictions (Gibson and Kelley, 2013; Hart, 1994). The transition from the depiction of informal sector actors as struggling workers to viewing them as entrepreneurs marks a progressive

departure from the labour-focused view nurtured by the International Labour Organization (Kyle, 1999; Welter et al., 2015).

2.2 Representations of the middleman in informal entrepreneurship

Informal trade constitutes a significant proportion of the informal sector in Africa and accounts for most of the informal self-employment outside agriculture (ECA, 2015; Heintz and Valodia, 2012). Trade in the informal sector is mostly conducted through middlemen and their informal networks which cover a wide range of functions, such as commodity sourcing, financing, and transportation (COMESA, 2019; Koroma et al., 2017; Pedroza, 2012; Trommer, 2012). Literature shows that, apart from being a prominent feature of intra-African trade, middlemen have always been active in the African economic scene (Holt and Littlewood, 2014; Nwabughuogu, 1982). While several studies have been conducted on informal trade, none of the studies specifically addresses middlemen as economic operatives. This subsection zooms in on literature about middlemen and their role in informal agricultural markets.

Defining the middleman

The study of the middleman as an economic actor is often undermined by a lack of definitional clarity which characterises most scholarly works on the subject (Doerflinger, 1986; Spinks, 1971). Olsson et al. (2013) note that the concept of middlemen is very diffuse and subject to multiple interpretations. The vagueness of the definition can be attributed to the tendency to use the term middleman loosely and in relation to economic actors that span a wide range of diverse roles and functions (Gadde and Snehota, 2001, Law & Smullen, 2008). Kenton (2019) posits that the term “middleman” is just an informal word used to refer to an intermediary. At a generic level, a middleman is an actor who stands in between two other actors (Attaie and Fourcadet, 2003, Berkowitz at al, 1989, Castano, 2002; Law, 2009). According to this definition, a middleman mediates interactions between other parties, but mediated interactions cut across different realms which include economic, social, political and others. Because the interest of this thesis is on middlemen who mediate interactions of an economic nature, such a generic definition is too broad to serve as a basis for scholarly investigation. Therefore, operationalisation of the term is predicated on proper contextualisation and scope definition. Taking an economic perspective, Chowdhury (2004) describes a middleman as an economic agent

who specialises in buying and selling products. The Merriam Webster dictionary defines a middleman as both an intermediary and an agent. Law and Smullen (2008:286) define a middleman as "a person or organization that makes a profit by trading in goods as an intermediary between the producer and the consumer". This description of a middleman is echoed by several other scholars (Biglaiser, 1993; Keys, 2005; Watanabe, 2010). A cross-cutting characterisation of the middleman is that he is not involved in the production or physical transformation of the products but facilitates their movement from producers to consumers. This view underscores the utility of a middleman in the functioning of the market. Most scholars concur that the market is the central organising framework in which economic middlemen perform their functions (Bliss, 2019; Meijerink, 2014).

In the context of this thesis, the category of middleman which is of interest is the agricultural marketing middleman and, specifically, the middleman who is involved in the selling of agricultural produce. This middleman is differentiated from the one who is involved in selling agricultural inputs to farmers. In the literature on agricultural marketing, a middleman is defined as an individual or organisation that is involved in purchasing produce from farmers and selling it to other buyers further down the marketing channel (Chigusiswa et al., 2013; Mintz, 1956). Of note is the point that a middleman can be either a natural person or an incorporated enterprise. This attests to the diversity of formality and scale at which middleman activities are conducted. According to Abbott (1987:1) enterprises that undertake agricultural marketing tasks include a range of "independent individuals, partnerships, joint stock firms, cooperatives, mixed private and government bodies, autonomous state corporations, semi-autonomous parastatals or departments of government". While both formal and informal enterprises are involved in agricultural marketing, there is widespread recognition that, in developing countries, most agricultural output marketing takes place within the informal sector and informal entrepreneurs are the main actors involved (Defait, 2018; Hayami et al., 1988; Keys, 2005).

To the extent that this thesis is pre-occupied with the function of the middleman within the agricultural output marketing context of developing countries, its focus is on individual persons who are involved in the buying of agricultural commodities from farmers and selling them to other agricultural output market buyers. Throughout this

thesis, the words middleman, intermediary and marketing intermediary are used interchangeably as is often the norm in most literature on the subject.

2.2.1 Theoretical perspectives on the middleman

This section presents a critical review of the different theoretical perspectives that have been put forward to explain the existence of the middleman as an economic actor. As mentioned earlier, the concept of middleman transcends various disciplines, such as economics, sociology, politics, and marketing. Below is a review and discussions of the dominant scholarly positions on the middleman as an actor within social and economic domains. The analysis provides some theoretical foundations that investigate and evaluate the actions that middlemen engage in.

Neo-classical economics perspective

The role of the middleman is largely ignored in classical economics theory (Bardhan et al., 2013; Blume et al., 2007). The neglect of the middleman is attributed to the neoclassical economic assumptions of perfectly competitive markets in which buyers and sellers are efficiently guided by the price mechanism (Landa, 2006, Wong and Wright, 2011). To neoclassical economics scholars, coordination and information failures that exist in markets are treated as frictions and temporary conditions (Spulbur, 2003; Watanabe, 2018; Winkler, 1989). Such scholars view middlemen as a mechanism for managing frictions as the markets search for an equilibrium position. Specifically, the new institutional economics position views middlemen as a temporary corrective institution that arises to correct market frictions and imperfections (Rubinstein and Wolinsky, 1987; Shevchenko, 2004; Watanabe, 2018). Acknowledging the imperfections that exist in markets, the middleman emerges as an actor who reduces transaction costs and exploits information asymmetries to enable transactions between buyers and sellers (Chowdhury, 2002; Imai et al., 2004; Yu and Kwan, 2015). Some scholars have advanced the argument further and claim that the middleman, who is often treated as a transitory figure in the market is, in fact, playing the role of an entrepreneur who identifies opportunities and exploits them in a way that enables the market to function more efficiently (Boldorf, 2017; Landa, 2006; Walker, 1986). The middleman-entrepreneur is treated as an institution that facilitates trading within the market (Abebe et al., 2016; Rubinstein and Wolinsky, 1987). The view of the middleman as the institution that

facilitates buying and selling departs from the classical economics view that assigns the trading role to the producer.

A notable departure from the mainstream economic thought has been the Austrian School of Economics, as represented by Kirzner (1973). To Kirzner (1973), a middleman is an entrepreneur or arbitrageur who benefits from the imperfections that exist within the market system. In the Kirznerian view, market frictions are the source of entrepreneurial opportunities, and the middleman is an entrepreneurial figure who profits from such. This treatment of the entrepreneur as a coordinator and arbitrageur in markets is tracked back to the Walrasian theory of exchange, which forms the backbone of the classical economics position on the functioning of markets (Walker, 1986). This stance is well summarised by Gwartney et al., (2014:22) who assert that "because it is costly for buyers and sellers to find each other and to negotiate the exchange, an entrepreneurial opportunity exists for people to become middlemen".

In sum, the neoclassical economics scholars do not have a common view on the role and significance of middlemen in markets. However, the emerging consensus is that middlemen are critical to efficient functioning of markets. Their coordination and cost-reduction role in markets is widely recognised in economics. However, what is lacking is a coherent theory of how middlemen function within markets. While some advances have been made in understanding the operation of formal firms as intermediaries, the individual entrepreneur has tended to be neglected in scholarly research.

Sociological perspectives

In sociology, the middleman phenomenon has been theoretically linked to the concept of brokerage and is firmly rooted in network theory (Burt et al., 2013; Obstfeld, 2005; Walther, 2015; Yong et al., 2020). Brokerage is described as a process by which intermediary actors facilitate transactions between other actors who lack access to or trust in one another (Gould and Fernandez, 1989).

Brokerage is broadly defined as a situation in which an actor connects or facilitates interactions between other actors (Chaudhary et al., 2015; Gould and Fernandez, 1989; Obstfeld et al., 2014; Stovel and Shaw, 2012). Stovel and Shaw (2012) use the term middleman brokerage to describe situations in which a third party facilitates transactions between otherwise disconnected parties. They emphasise that middleman brokerage is a

common feature of economic exchanges. An actor who happens to occupy an intermediate relationship within a social structure is referred to as a middleman or broker (Gilles et al., 2004; Koster and Leynseele, 2018; Stovel et al., 2011). Several sociological theories have been put forward to explain the existence of middlemen in social and economic spheres. According to the structural holes theory, a hole is a network position that connects otherwise disconnected parties (Burt, 1992, Nee and Swedberg, 2008). According to this theory, occupying a middle position within a network creates opportunities for some individuals to act as middlemen intermediating between members on either side of the network. Any actor who occupies such a position occupies a middleman position which bestows some competitive advantage in the flow of information and other resources (Burt et al., 2013; Lingo and O'Mahony, 2010; Borondo et al., 2014). In recognition of the potential economic opportunities which come with occupying an intermediate position within a network, Burt (2019) refers to occupants of such positions as network entrepreneurs. According to Hauberer (2011), this is called a "Tertius" position, and it bestows entrepreneurial profits derived from the intermediation role. This interpretation of network middleman as entrepreneurs links well with the Kirznerian portrayal of entrepreneurs as actors who identify and exploit economic opportunities arising from market imperfections. In this case, the disconnection that happens in a network constitutes a market information failure which creates arbitrage opportunities for the well-placed middleman entrepreneur.

Another prominent theoretical attempt to explain the presence of middlemen in economic structures is what Bonacich (1973) refers to as the "minority theory of middlemen". According to this theory, middlemen roles are assumed by ethnic minority groups that mediate economically between an economical elite class and a lower class consisting of the societal majority (Fernandez and Gould,1994; Kalupahana, 1999; O'Brien and Fugita, 1982). Zhou (2004:1041) defines middleman minorities as "those ethnic entrepreneurs who trade in between a society's elite and the masses". The characterisation of the middleman entrepreneur evokes the meaning implied by Simmel (1950) in his depiction of the trader as a kind of stranger (Dobbin, 2004; Light, 2007). Significant in this middlemen minority theory is the acknowledgement that the trading role played by middlemen is of an entrepreneurial nature. This acknowledgement is important because the image of the middleman that is painted in literature is often derisory

and riddled with negative connotations. However, it is important to note that this middlemen minority theory has some shortcomings. Firstly, the challenge with the middlemen minority theory is its narrow focus on ethnicity. In this theory, ethnicity is a strait jacket which limits its power to explain the middlemen phenomenon when it occurs outside the boundaries of ethnicity and other minority designating factors. By focusing on readily observable factors such as ethnicity, the theory risks missing the underlying and more generic forces that tend to foster success among minority entrepreneurs. In agricultural marketing, several studies have shown that middlemen do not hold a separate identity from the farmers with whom they transact (Hayami, 2004). Instead, there is no distinct line between middlemen and farmer roles as the latter often double up as middlemen when buying produce from their fellow farmers (Hayami et al., 1999; Hayami and Kawagoe, 2001). In this respect, the middleman roles are occupied by members who are ethnically part of the majority group.

While the concept of bridging and "middlemanship" (intermediation) is common in social network theories, its application in explaining the existence of middlemen in agricultural markets has been limited.

Marketing perspective

The concept of middlemen is integral to the theory of marketing as a field of study. As stated by Kotler (2002: 236), "most producers do not sell their goods directly to the final users". Thus, while middlemen can count as buyers, theirs is entrepreneurial buying as they buy in anticipation of making a profit upon re-selling the same product. This contrasts with the final users who buy for the purpose of consumption. While divergent views exist on the subject, the term middleman is often used to "refer to those who do the work of marketing" (Shaw and Jones, 2005:251; Tracey-White, 1999). From an agricultural marketing perspective, Ghafoor et al., (2017:127) describe middlemen as "all individuals or businesses who specialise in performing various marketing functions along the agricultural value chains from producers to consumers".

The theme of middlemen as the performers of various marketing functions marks a point of convergence for most marketing scholars (Perreault and McCarthy, 2002). This characterisation of middlemen is derived from the simplified view of marketing as the practice of buying and selling (Jones and Tadajewski, 2016; McVey, 1960; Weld, 1915). A historical analysis of the field of marketing also shows that marketing functions evolved

out of what were initially referred to as middlemen functions (Shaw, 1912, Weld, 1917). The shift from middleman functions to marketing functions stemmed from the realisation that, while marketing functions must always be performed by someone, it is not necessarily the middleman who must perform them (Kotler, 2010; Perreault and McCarthy, 2002). Thus, the middleman is one of the many actors who can take responsibility for performing marketing-related activities. Meanwhile, from the marketing perspective, middlemen are treated as the backbone of the marketing channel theory (Abbott, 1987, Alderson, 1965; Bucklin, 1973, Meulenberg, 1997; Sandika, 2011; Segetlija et al., 2006; van Driel, 2003). Coughlan et al. (2013:2) describe a marketing channel as "a set of interdependent organisations involved in the process of making a product or service available for use or consumption". From a marketing channel perspective, a middleman is defined as "any channel member other than the manufacturer or end user" (Coughlan et al., 2013:15). As marketing channel actors, middlemen constitute an indirect channel of product distribution (Berkowitz et al., 1989; Tinsley and Agapitova, 2018; Wilkinson, 2001). The alternative indirect channel distribution is direct channel distribution as constituted by direct transactional dealings between producers and end users of their products. The direct distribution channel structure is what is envisaged in the neo-classical economics position of perfect markets. Contrary to the neoclassical economics stance, the marketing perspective makes provision for multiple buyers and sellers between the producer and the ultimate user of a product. The marketing channel approach advances the middleman from a generic and abstract figure portrayed in sociological and classical economics theories to a distinctive economic actor whose role is to undertake specific marketing functions. Thus, in marketing, the middleman assumes clear identities such as retailer, wholesaler, advertiser and auctioneer (Kotler, 2002; Segetlija et al., 2006).

In sum, it is important to note that the marketing perspective is not divorced from the economics and sociological perspectives presented earlier. While the former approaches focus more on understanding the theoretical roots of the concept of middleman, the marketing perspective is more about the application and operationalisation of the concept in practice. Overall and taken together, the different theoretical perspectives confirm that the concept of middleman is as much a sociological construct as it is an economic and business construct: it is a socio-economic construct.

The treatment of the middleman concept in this thesis is informed by and balances the various perspectives reviewed and discussed above.

Typology of agricultural marketing middlemen

This section takes a closer look at middlemen as a category of economic actors within the context of agricultural marketing. The section clears the confusion often created by the inconsistent terminology employed in literature. This confusion emanates from the fact that the word "middleman" refers to a variety of actors involved in the economic exchange process (Gwartney et al., 2014; Radford, 1945; Weber, 1968:158). One way to arrive at a better understanding of a phenomenon is to use a clear typological framework. According to Rak (2018:235), a typological framework is a set of typologies consisting of the ideal types of the theoretical categories which are subject to typologisation and the relationship between these types. Olsson et al. (2013) and Gadde and Snehota (2001) note that the typologisation of middlemen is mainly based on their roles and functions. Past studies have largely relied on the role and function approach as a basis for identifying middleman types. However, this approach has faced a lot of criticism due to the conceptual conflation that often happens between the terms "role and function" (Olsson et al., 2013: Urias, 2018).

Existing representations of middlemen in literature show that the term middleman is often used as a catch-all phrase with bloated and overlapping meanings. As noted by Serova and Khramova (2003) the term middleman is used to describe economic actors that range from individuals operating as sole proprietors to large corporates. Some scholars used the word middlemen synonymously with brokers (Abebe et al., 2001; Jyothi, 2014). Rosenbloom (2013) clarifies that the word middlemen or intermediary is the umbrella title for all actors engaged in performing marketing functions in between the point of production and the point of consumption. The consequence is that the ranges of actor that fit the description of middlemen are many and varied.

First and foremost, it is important to clarify the relationship between a merchant and a middleman as these terms are often used interchangeably. Yet sometimes they are used to insinuate different actors. With regards to merchants, there is consensus that a merchant is an economic agent who is involved in the business of exchange (Ogawa, 2006; Wayland, 1906; Watanabe, 2010). In this sense, a merchant is synonymous with a

trader. However, Greif (1989:865), draws a distinction between a merchant and trader, arguing that "the term 'merchant' denotes an individual who receives the residual revenue after the agent receives his compensation. The term 'trader' refers to both agents and merchants". Some scholars refer to agents as commission merchants (Vance, 2006). It is noteworthy that, in seeking a meaningful definition for agricultural marketing middlemen, the term "middlemen" is not sufficiently instructive on its own. This is because without any other qualifying word, the term is so generic as to lack any actionable meaning. To the extent that it denotes the position of the actor, the term middleman is just a positional adjective which does not say much about the core action. Conversely, the term "trader" is sufficiently informative of the role performed by the subject. Given that the conventional characterisation of a trader is involved in the business of exchange (not production), the trader is inherently a middleman.

Agricultural commodity marketing literature is awash with typologies of middlemen. Some scholars classify middlemen based on the nature of the marketing functions performed (Jyothi, 2014). Classification of middlemen on this basis gives rise to categories such as collectors, aggregators, wholesalers, and retailers (Haapanen, 2011; Ranjain, 2017). Some scholars have classified middlemen based on their business models. The business model categorisation considers the level of investment, compensation method and degree of autonomy exercised by middlemen in the transaction process Through this categorisation, middlemen forms that emerge include that of the broker, commission agent, matchmaker, and merchant (Kohls and Uhl, 2002; Lindquist, 2015; Surtida, 2000). Other attempts at classifying middlemen have focused on the geographical area of operation. According to this criterion, observable middleman types include village collectors, inter-village collectors, village assemblers and local assemblers (Hayami and Kawagoe, 1993; Sitko and Jayne, 2014).

While there is a proliferation of middlemen categories, Cranston (2021) argues that these are simply variations of the core forms, namely the merchant and the agent trade. This view is corroborated by Ghafoor et al. (2017). According to Ghafoor et al. (2017), agricultural marketing middlemen fall into two broad categories of merchant middlemen and agent middlemen. Merchant middlemen buy, own, and resell produce and get their reward from the mark-up profit (Hayami et al.,1999; Kohls and Uhl, 2002; Kotler, 2002; Pang and Shi, 2010; Say, 2001). Conversely, agent middlemen act on behalf of other

buyers and do not take ownership of the physical goods stock (Gabre-Madhin, 2001, Kotler, 2002; Surtida, 2000). Agent middlemen are further classified into commission agents and brokers (AGRA, 2019; Ellis, 2003; Lindquist, 2015; Weill et al., 2006). Their reward is in the form of commission which is paid for their services. While a differentiation line is often drawn between merchant middlemen and commission agents, past studies have revealed that practice traders tend to combine mark-up and commission models (Amirali, 2017, Beninger and Shapiro, 2018**).**

Overall, the investigation of the middleman as an economic actor suffers from the lack of a clear and exhaustive typological framework. This study focuses on the middlemen who operate at village level, regardless of the business model or mix of functions performed. This is in congruence with the view espoused by Gautier et al. (2016) that, in real life, middlemen do not represent pure forms but conduct overlapping roles.

Perception and characterisation of middlemen in literature

The depiction of middlemen in literature is characterised by polarising views with regards to their role, function, and usefulness within markets (Carlan, 2016; Graber, 2013; Krakovsky, 2015; Milford, 2014; Musa et al., 2013). While the function of middlemen is credited for driving the growth of commerce before and after the industrial revolution, the predominant view is that they are unnecessary economic actors who do not add any value and benefit unfairly from the work done by producers. According to this view, middlemen are people who engage in malpractices, such as cheating, hoarding, and unfair pricing (Musa et al., 2014; Yankson et al, 2016). Because of the perception that middlemen earn undeserved profits, they are often described as parasites and exploiters (Beckman, 1988; Kohls and Uhl, 2002; Mintz, 1964; Osborne, 2013). The perception that middlemen are an exploitative group constitutes the most dominant view regarding the role of middlemen in markets (Beninger and Shapiro, 2019; Oka and Kusimba, 2008). Scholars have tracked this perception to the assumption that middlemen make huge margins when they mediate trade between producers and consumers (Amirali, 2017; Meliala et al., 2018; Mitra et al., 2018; Visaria, 2017). Middlemen are accused of capitalising on information asymmetries to offer low prices to farmers and then sell at higher prices (Barolli et al., 2018; Magesa et al., 2020; Oguoma et al., 2010). However,

empirical studies on profit margins earned by middlemen have failed to support this view (Hayami and Kikuchi, 2000; Stover, 1981). Empirical evidence shows that scholars often fail to differentiate between marketing margins (the spread between the producer and consumer price) and the actual profit appropriated by the middleman (Bardhan, 2013; Eskola, 2005; Hadi, 2016; Mitra et al. 2013). Scott's (1985) investigations of middlemen margins and profits in potato marketing in Peru showed that, despite large marketing margins, the actual profits made by middlemen were modest due to high transaction costs. A similar observation was made by Hayami et al. (1999) in a study of rice marketing by middlemen in the Philippines.

While neoclassical economics scholars now acknowledge that middlemen play an important role in reducing transaction costs, the common perception remains that they add unnecessary costs to the exchange process (Casaburi et al., 2017; Keys, 2005; Milford, 2014; Munger, 2015). The contradictory view of middlemen as cost-generating instead of cost-saving institutions reflects a convolution of the cause-and-effect order in the emergence of middlemen. The allegation that middlemen add to the cost of transacting implies that markets without middlemen could operate perfectly and it is the introduction of middlemen which brings imperfections. However, this has often failed to stand the scrutiny of empirical evidence which shows that middlemen lower costs for both sellers and buyers by intermediating in trade transactions (Boldorf, 2017; Ju et al., 2010; Mmari, 2012).

The negative portrayal of middlemen in literature has not gone unchallenged. In defence of middlemen, some scholars have emerged and criticised common derogatory narratives and accusations as unfounded and ideologically loaded (Badar, 2008; Dillon and Dambro, 2017; Halow, 1980; Krakovsky, 2015). This clique of scholars' views on the figures of middlemen are disguised attacks on the capitalist system which is perceived to be extractive and exploitative (Banaji, 2016; Chayanov, 1991; Landa, 1994; Russel, 1987; Vidal, 2000). According to Abbot (1987), the Marxist view of marketing makes no provision for a middleman who stands between the producer and consumer. In the same vein, the middleman is reviled as an agent of merchant capital which is deemed to be unproductive and, therefore, unnecessary (Eriksson, 1993; Hodgson, 2014; Littlefield, 1978; Zack-Williams, 1982).

Contrary to the common view that middlemen do not offer any value to the economic process, Hisrich and Peters (2001:230) note that "middlemen such as wholesalers and retailers can add important value to the product". The position that middlemen create and add utility to products while executing their trading functions is a common theme among pro-middlemen scholars (Badar, 2008; Ghafoor et al., 2017; Munger, 2015;). It is noteworthy that divergent views on the usefulness of middlemen in exchange markets is closely tied to the definition of value creation. Scholars have approached and interpreted the concept of value creation differently (Argandona, 2011; Botha and Pietersen, 2020; Leyden and Link, 2015). In the classical economics tradition, value creation is closely associated with the process of production which is defined as the act of making products useful (Khols and Uhl, 2002). In the transaction cost economics world, value creation is said to be a function of cost savings which happen during the market exchange process (Bliemel et al., 2015). The common perceptions of middlemen as actors who do not add any value are aligned to the limited view of value creation as taking place within the context of physical transformation processes where tangible products are produced. However, those who view middlemen as value creators base their arguments on a more expanded view which considers time, place and possession utility as integral elements of the value creation process. Resonating with the transaction cost economics view is the marketing perspective which treats middlemen as key actors in creating and adding utility to the marketing system (Badar, 2008; Boudreaux, 2016; Krieberg and Steele, 1972). Central to the marketing perspective is the treatment of marketing as a value creating process and the categorisation of middlemen as agents of the marketing process.

Yet another perception of middlemen is that they are entrepreneurial actors who engage in buying and selling of goods as part of their entrepreneurial pursuits (Do, 2017; Hayami and Kawagoe, 1993; Munger, 2015; Mynborg et al., 2016; Weijland, 1994). In line with this perspective, Stanton (2000) describes agricultural marketing middlemen as localised agribusinesses that help rural populations capture value add that would otherwise be lost to external agents.

Despite the existence of contradicting perceptions of middlemen, there is consensus that the functions that they perform within the market exchange process are essential. The foregoing shows that serious points of divergence centre on the fairness of the value

appropriated by middlemen in the process. This presents a perpetual dilemma which results in a situation where middlemen's persistence in markets is reduced to a "necessary evil".

Middlemen as an entrepreneurial actor

Existing literature presents conflicting positions on the entrepreneurial status of middlemen. This sub-section presents and discusses the common scholarly positions that have been advanced regarding the position of middlemen within the entrepreneurship discourse. Scholarly views on the economic role of middlemen have often contrasted sharply (Abebe et al., 2016; Chau, 2009; Prahalad, 2010). One view treats the middleman as an economic actor who exists outside the entrepreneurial sphere (Bharadwaj, 2017; Msamula et al., 2016). Thus, middlemen are viewed as non-entrepreneurial actors who hamper the processes of value creation and delivery. For instance, in discussing the structure of the rug industry in India, Prahalad (2010) distinguishes middlemen from weavers to whom he accords the status of entrepreneurs. Similarly, Hegde (2005) insinuates that farmers are the real entrepreneurs while traders are characterised as "hijackers" of economic opportunities that emerge from agricultural activities. This view is echoed by Keys (2005) who describes middlemen as "coyotes" who exploit farmers in the marketing of agricultural produce. The underlying thread in the exclusion of middlemen from the category of entrepreneurs is the argument that they are not directly involved in the production of goods that they deal in. This stance mirrors the industrial bias that accompanies the elaboration of the theory of entrepreneurship as expounded by Schumpeter (1954). Ideologically, this position is inclined towards the Marxist view which makes no room for intermediaries between producers and consumers (Abbot, 1987). Though they are fundamentally different, both the Marxist view and the classical economics view of a frictionless market do not recognise the role of the middleman in the economy. This non-entrepreneurial view of middlemen aligns with the perception that merchants and traders represent merchant (trading) capital, which is considered unproductive (Banaji, 2016).

The contrasting position on middlemen casts them as fully entrepreneurial actors. Casson (2003) argues that middlemen perform entrepreneurial functions which are essential for the smooth operation of the market. Hebert and Link (2006) bolster this

viewing and justify the entrepreneurial status of middlemen on the basis that they face market uncertainties and risks in conducting their business activities. Dumett (1983) argues that the range of entrepreneurial activities is broader than the role of industrialists and asserts that traders should be treated as entrepreneurs. This view is supported by other scholars who argue that merchants and traders constituted the bulk of entrepreneurial activity before the dawn of the industrial age (Allis, 2018; Brown and Thornton, 2013; Boutillier and Uzunidis, 2016; Dana, 2008; Say, 2001). The entrepreneurial status of middlemen is aptly captured by Gadde and Snehota (2001: 4) who observe that the "middleman trader exercises the essential entrepreneurial functions of exploring and creating market exchange opportunities and bears the risk entailed in this task". This resonates with the assertion of Chau et al. (2009:1) that middlemen are "trading entrepreneurs who link the backwaters of developing countries to emerging markets nationally and especially globally". Overall, the entrepreneurial view presents middlemen as profit-seeking economic agents who seek to profit from entrepreneurial actions (Gulumser et al., 2009; Nurmsoo, 2006; Sandika, 2011). This depiction of the middlemen's entrepreneurial functions matches the conventional view of an entrepreneur as an opportunity seeker, resource organiser and risk bearer (Cuervo et al., 2007; Mishra and Zachary, 2015; Srya et al., 2015; Stuart and Sorenson, 2004).

It is noteworthy that the scholarly position which portrays middlemen as entrepreneurs is associated with the Austrian economics school of thought (Foss, 1998; Klein, 2010; Yu & Kwan, 2015). According to the Austrian school of thought, entrepreneurs are treated as arbitrageurs who spot opportunities from conditions of disequilibrium within markets (Cassis and Minoglou, 2005; Dana and Anderson, 2007; Kirzner, 1973; Mises, 2004; Rosen, 1997). Central to this view is Kirzner's assertion that entrepreneurship is a function of alertness to opportunities (Botha and Pieterson, 2020). In entrepreneurship theory, this is linked to the discovery school of thought which asserts that entrepreneurial opportunities exist in the market realm and entrepreneurs discover them before taking entrepreneurial action (Klein, 2008; Siqueira et al., 2012). In the context of middlemen, this ties in well with what Peng and Wang (2002) call the intermediation-based view of entrepreneurship. Essentially, this view asserts that information asymmetries and associated market failures lead to the emergence of opportunities for entrepreneurial individuals to engage in market intermediation.

It is evident that, despite some scholarly reservations regarding the entrepreneurial status of middlemen, this thesis conceptualises agricultural middlemen as socially embedded entrepreneurs whose actions are executed within a context of social and personal relations. This conceptualisation follows the direction set by Hayami and Kawagoe (2001) who characterise agricultural marketing middlemen as village-based entrepreneurs who exploit their community networks and relations to develop their trading activities. The thesis frames the middleman's economic actions as entrepreneurial functions which include identifying opportunities, mobilising resources and undertaking business functions, such as buying and selling, to profitably meet identified business opportunities.

2.3. Business model perspective on middlemen

The analysis of middleman activities is traditionally approached from multiple perspectives but there is no universally recognised analytical framework. Consequently, it has been difficult to adopt a consistent approach to assessing the participation of middleman actors in economic activities. Despite the admission that middlemen are key actors in business transactions, the analysis of their activities has often been done in a disjointed fashion. As highlighted in the section on the typology of middlemen, analysis is often centred on roles and functions. Such analysis does not go deep enough to assess how middlemen operate as business actors. This section introduces the business model concept as a framework for analysis of the actions of middlemen. The business model concept is introduced and defined following which its components are used as a basis for explaining the organisation of middlemen activities in the marketspace.

Definition of the business model concept

The first comprehensive definition of a business model was put forward by Osterwalder (2004:15) who defined this as "a conceptual tool that contains a set of elements and their relationships and allows expressing a company's logic of earning money. It is a description of the value a company offers to one or several segments of customers and the architecture of the firm and its network of partners for creating, marketing, and delivering this value and relationship capital, in order to generate profitable and sustainable revenue streams". Building on this definition, Osterwalder and Pigneur (2010)

assert that a business model is a description of the rationale of how an organisation creates, delivers, and captures value. What is discernible in these characterisations of a business model is the centrality of an economic actor (a company) that engages in value creation and capture through interactions with other actors. While this definition assigns the role of the economic actor to a formalised entity, other scholars have expanded the realm of this role to cover different types of business actors (Aithal, 2015; FAO, 2015; Miller, 2012; Stieglitz and Foss, 2009). While most definitions use the business enterprise as a unit of analysis in business model literature, Morris et al. (2005) extend the business model concept to include the entrepreneur as the central economic actor. This has ramifications for the scope of business model since the focus on the entrepreneur implies consideration of entrepreneurial actions of enterprise formation, instead of confining the analysis to the actions of an enterprise that is already in existence. Moreover, while the business model theorisation was initially anchored in business activity configurations within a formal economic setup, some scholars have expanded the application of the business model to incorporate the informal sector and the enterprises operating therein. Acknowledging differences between the way business is organised in formal versus informal sectors, Saripalli et al. (2017) assert that entrepreneurs operating within the informal economy do have their own business models configured to suit the unique circumstances of the sector. This position is echoed by Pfeifer et al. (2017) who claim that microbusinesses operating within the informal sector have discernible business models.

Despite the existence of slightly divergent approaches to the elaboration of the business model concept, there is wider consensus that a business model is a conceptual representation of how an economic actor participates in the creation, delivery, and appropriation of economic value (Demil et al., 2015, Fielt, 2014; Nosratabadi et al., 2019; Spector, 2013, Tell et al., 2016). In this sense, economic value is taken to mean the value that a buyer attaches to a good (or service) based on the benefits that are derived from such a good or service (Anderson and Narus,1998; Doleski, 2015; Slávik and Bednár, 2014; Vargo et al., 2008; Vermeulen and Cotula, 2010). It is important to note that, although a business model approach can be applied in a meso or macro sense, it is principally an actor-oriented approach whose primary unit of analysis is the individual economic actor. This economic actor can be an individual entrepreneur, a micro-

enterprise or a large corporation. As argued by Aithal (2015), a business model provides an important framework for analysing economic actions and relationships of business actors while pursuing their business objectives.

As argued by Lambert (2008:278), a business model "depicts the value exchanges within a business network and focuses on the interactions of the entity with others in the value network". Consistent with this view, Morris et al. (2005) argue that the business model is linked to the strategic network theory because of the centrality of relationships to the value creation process. Vorley et al. (2008:2) describe the business model as "the way by which a business creates and captures value within a market network of producers, suppliers and consumers".

The fundamental aspect of a business model is a combination of business activities that shows the blueprint for how an organisation makes profits (Daeyoup and Jaeyoung, 2015:2). A "business model" is a description of the entire marketplace and the relationship of the company to that commercial environment (Nielsen et al., 2013).

Based on this review, a business model can be summed up as a representation of the ways in which an economic actor creates and captures value in relation to an identified market opportunity.

Analytic components of the business model framework

Since its popularisation, the business model has been hailed as a potential analytical framework and central construct for conducting research on entrepreneurial and business activities (Lambert, 2008; Morrisa et al., 2005, Zott et al., 2011). However, for such analysis to be undertaken in a systematic fashion, it is crucial to have a clear identification of the key components of the model. The analytical components that have been proposed tend to vary in level of detail and style of presentation, but they are all aimed at painting a picture of the critical actions and choices that need to be undertaken to realise business objectives. Osterwalder (2004) identifies nine component parts to the business model, which constitute what he calls the business model canvas. The constituent elements included in the business model canvas include key partners, key activities, key resources, value propositions, customer relationships, channels, customer segments, cost structure and revenue streams (Malmström et al., 2017; Osterwalder, 2004;). The detailed components of the business model canvas can be treated as an elaboration of the different

business choices that a business operator has to make in undertaking the creation, delivery and capturing of economic value, (Henderson et al, 2002). Johnson et al. (2008) crystallise the building blocks of the business model into four elements, namely customer value proposition, profit formula, key resources and key processes. This clustering of business model components closely resembles the criteria proposed by Lambert (2008). Lambert (2008) underscores the importance of having a clear value proposition, defined customers, suppliers, value creation partners and value-adding processes. While proposed business model configurations tend to vary between scholars, there is growing convergence on what constitutes the major or core components. It is generally agreed that a business model framework for analysis should define a clear value proposition, elaborate how the value is created, identify the key value delivery activities, clarify how value is appropriated (captured) and identify the key resources required to support value creation and capture. Slávik and Bednár (2014) describe the role of a business model as an analytical tool for systematically assessing the structure and nature of value creation and capturing activities as undertaken by economic enterprises that take a myriad of organisational forms and typologies. This view is anchored in the belief that any business activity is pursued within the context of a business model, regardless of the organisational form of the actor involved.

Against the above background, the following sub-sections employ the dimensions of the business model analytical framework as a basis for exploring scholarly presentations of the middleman as an entrepreneurial and business actor. Acknowledging that the business model concept can be applied to different levels of investigative depths, the three broad themes of value creation, value delivery and value capture constitute the guiding pillars for the ensuing analysis. The use of the business model analytical lens to analyse middlemen actions takes cognisance of their nature as business actors who pursue business goals. A business model approach represents a more structured and consistent basis for interrogating their actions.

Middlemen and value creation

According to Vargo et al. (2008), the creation of value is central to the process of economic exchange. Mizik and Jacobson (2003) describe value creation as a process which is aimed at improving the perceived usefulness of a commodity or product by customers. Thus, value creation is equated to the process of customer value. According

to Macklin (1921) both producers and middlemen are at the centre of a value creation process which he describes as comprising product elementary utility, form utility, place utility, time utility and possession utility. It is from a combination of these utilities that a product gets its economic value, which determines its usefulness to the buyer.

The role of middlemen in value creation and appropriation is a topical question that cuts across most literature on middlemen (Cooke, 2000). The traditional sentiment is that middlemen do not create any value within the market process (Bartels, 1976; Bharadwaj, 2017; Monieson, 2010; Oguoma et al., 2010; Scott, 1985; Scott and Halligan, 2010). However, a growing body of scholarship recognises middlemen as an important category of economic actors who add value to the economic exchange process (Boudreaux, 2016; Casson and Casson, 2013; Edelman, 2014; Hisrich and Peters, 2001; Munger, 2015). According to Monieson (2010), middlemen perform marketing functions, and such functions add value to the goods that they deal in. Some scholars have argued that middlemen engage in product transformation which increases the exchange value of such products (Sheel, 1989; Spulbur, 1996; Wohlgenant, 2014). This assertion is confirmed by Karuho and Collins (2020) who report that, in Africa, middlemen are extensively engaged in crop grading and quality improvement to render it suitable for specific end market needs. Echoing this viewpoint, Pirrong (2014) refers to the creation of different forms of utility as transformations that enhance the value of the commodities handled by middlemen enterprises as a form of arbitrage. While the conventional view is that middlemen's arbitrage actions are exploitative, Pirrong views such arbitrage as an important function that transforms commodities from low-value to high-value status.

The most prominent explanation for the value creation role of middlemen is rooted in transaction cost economics. According to the transaction-cost economics perspective, value is created through cost savings that are realised in the process of conducting exchange transactions (Achyut and Bu, 2009; Bliemel et al., 2015; Wong and Wright, 2014). This position is best captured by Osborne's (2013) characterisation of middlemen as people who make money by searching and finding more efficient ways of getting goods from those who make them to the users of such goods. In line with this perspective, Boldorf (2017) observes that middlemen create value for all exchange partners by saving on time, effort and other resources that are required in the exchange process. Gadde and Sinehota (2001) point out the middlemen's ability to pull volumes together and create

economies of scale helps to lower transaction costs incurred in the exchange process. In the agricultural marketing context, Woodhouse et al. (2017) and Karuho and Collins (2020) posit that, by mediating between farmers and ultimate produce buyers, middlemen assist farmers to save on time and financial resources which could be expended if farmers were to directly search for buyers. All of these views are an apt reflection of Osborne's assertion that "middlemen are people who make money by searching for (actually, by finding) more efficient ways to get stuff from those who make it to those who want it" (2013:102).

In sum, the value creation argument for middlemen is centred on the reduction of transaction costs as it focuses on the utility enhancements that middlemen bring to the commodities that they deal in.

Middlemen value delivery

According to Donaldson and Walsh (2015), the essence of a business' existence is to create and deliver value in a manner that enables the business to make a profit. At the core of middlemen business actions are the buying and selling activities which constitute a central element of their business model. Sukmaya and Jakiyah (2021) highlight the complex mix of activities that are undertaken by middlemen in the process of ensuring that producers and buyers of goods are connected to the satisfaction of their mutual needs. Thus, the question of how middlemen deliver value in the market exchange process cuts across various business functions which include purchasing, financing, processing, selling and distribution. Nilsson and Thalin, (2017) use the term value delivery to refer to the main activities that a business entity performs to reach its customers so that they acquire an experience represented by the sales offering.

It is noteworthy that the line between value creation and value delivery in the context of middlemen activities is very thin. As discussed earlier in this thesis, middlemen activity is at the core of the market exchange system where they facilitate and simultaneously undertake business transactions involving buying and selling. Thus, the question of how middlemen deliver value is intricately connected to the often-bloated question of what roles middlemen play in markets. As argued by Zott and Amit (2010), and Gaspareto and Henriqson, (2020), the focus of the business model approach on activities, and not roles, is more helpful for investigating the value delivery actions of

business actors such as middlemen. As demonstrated in the literature on middlemen in agricultural settings, the core activities that middlemen perform are buying, aggregating, processing, storing, transporting and financing commodities in between production and selling. These are the activities which this thesis builds on to investigate the social embeddedness of middlemen activities.

Middlemen and value capture

Profit-making lies at the heart of the classical business enterprise. Friedman (2007) argues that profit is the primary purpose for a business' existence. According to Roberts (1988:138), "profit is revenue realized in excess of costs incurred". This definition implies that profits are made while conducting business transactions that inherently come with both expenses and revenues. In business model discourse, profit-making is conceptualised in terms of value capture or value appropriation. As articulated by Mizik and Jacobson (2003), value appropriation happens within the realm of the market exchange process when sellers sell their goods at a price which enables them to make a profit. Echoing the same approach, Daeyoup and Jaeyoung (2015:2) describe value capture as the "activity of making profits and appropriating from the value what floats on the process of value delivery". To the extent that value capture constitutes the profit-making process, a business model should clarify how the value extraction is structured within the market exchange process. Several scholars refer to the value capture mechanism as the profit model of a business (Meliala et al., 2018; Zott and Amir, 2010;). Literature on middlemen business models within the commodity sphere identify a couple of approaches to building in profit within the exchange transaction structure. Tinsley and Agapitova (2018) note that putting a margin on top of the price that the customer pays is the most common way in which middlemen extract value. This mark-up approach is used by middlemen of all sizes, although highly formalised dealers have other innovative ways to capture value (Kenton, 2019; Trafigura, 2018; Zimmerman et al., 2009). In agricultural markets, Murphy (2007) and Meliala et al. (2018) note that the mechanisms used by middlemen to create a better margin are a major source of contention as they are often perceived to limit the cost base at the lowest possible price from farmers. Since the profit made by middlemen is based on buying at low prices in one market and selling at higher prices in another, some scholars refer to the resultant value captured as arbitrage profit

(Abebe et al., 2016; Landa, 1987, 2006; Watts, 2018). In cases where the buying and selling is timed to coincide with price peaks due to temporal price differences, the profits so obtained have also been referred to as speculative profits (Smith, 2000).

According to Perreault and McCarthy (2002), another way in which middlemen can make profit is by charging for their intermediation services. Gabre-Madhin (2001) notes that fixed commission payments are a common way of compensating middlemen in Ethiopian grain markets. Tumbo et al. (2017) also report on the prevalence of commission-based payments for middlemen involved in rice trading in Tanzania. Abebe et al. (2016) report that commission payments to middlemen are normally borne by traders (buyers) who use the services of such middlemen. In contrast to the fixed commission approach, they note that commission paid to middlemen tends to vary in function based on the prices that are negotiated with farmers.

The existing literature clearly shows that the mark-up profit model is used in cases where the middleman buys and sells commodities on their own account while commission applies in cases where the buying function is executed on behalf of a principal who is responsible for funding the buying transaction. However, there is a dearth of literature on how the various profit modalities are used in combination.

Resource mobilisation

Business model literature identifies key resources as a vital component of any business model (Osterwalder, 2004; Zott and Amit, 2010). Resources are regarded as key to the pursuit of business and entrepreneurial activities in general (Huang, 2016; Kriesberg and Steele, 1972; Rawhouser et al., 2016; Welsch, 2004; Yin et al., 2020). Thus, to engage in the processes of value creation, delivery and capturing, economic activities must have access to different types of resources. In contemporary literature, the process through which economic actors gain access to resources has been broadly referred to as resource mobilisation (Clough et al., 2019; Villanueva et al., 2012; Zehra, 2018). Resources that entrepreneurs and business actors need to undertake their business activities are generally classified into tangible and intangible categories (Lee, 2017; Mosakowski, 1998; Slavik and Bednar, 2014; Xu et al., 2009). Resources that are required to support business activities have also been traditionally referred to as factors of production and, in entrepreneurship research, they are frequently referred to as entrepreneurial resources

(Aldrich and Zimmer, 1986; Kristiansen, 2004; Ozdemir et al., 2016; Spinelli and Adams, 2016). In a broad definition, Xu et al. (2009:219) define factors of production as "resources required to produce goods and services". Within a market process, such resources are obtained from an input or factor market (Haessel et al., 1972). Donaldson and Walsh (2015:182) define a factor market as "the market where resources and capabilities necessary to produce a good or service are bought and sold". Lee and Barney (2016) stress the role of factor markets in enabling business actors to acquire resources needed to implement product market strategies.

Working definition of middlemen

The foregoing review of literature has demonstrated that scholars have diverse perspectives on the middleman as an economic actor. Despite these divergent views, there is concurrence that middlemen play a central role in facilitating the market exchange processes of buying and selling commodities. The analysis has also shown that middlemen act in pursuit of profit. Based on the literature review above, this thesis views "middlemanship" is a form of entrepreneurship and treats agricultural marketing middlemen as entrepreneurial actors who are primarily involved in the business of buying and selling agricultural commodities.

2.4 Social embeddedness: Theoretical and empirical literature perspectives

This thesis concerns the social embeddedness of economic actions that agricultural marketing middlemen perform as entrepreneurial actors operating in rural agricultural markets. The concept of social embeddedness is hailed as the bedrock of economic sociology but its theorisation and application remain elusive (Cotterrell, 2013; Frank et al., 2019; Muennich, 2017; Prechel and Zheng, 2012). This chapter traces the origins and evolution of the concept to create an understanding of its contemporary application in the fields of entrepreneurship and business. Different strands of embeddedness are presented and discussed, drawing on extant theoretical and empirical literature. Ultimately, this chapter delivers a synthesised view of the social embeddedness concept and how it was applied as a theoretical lens and methodological tool for this thesis.

Defining social embeddedness

Despite being a central concept in the economic sociology field, social embeddedness suffers from a lack of clear and theoretically distinct definition. This definitional ambiguity is traced back to the original use of the word by Karl Polanyi in his treatise entitled "The Great Transformation" (Polanyi, 1944). It is important to note that Polanyi did not particularly use the phrase social embeddedness but referred to a "disembedded" economy. By using the word "embedded" without clarifying its meaning, Polanyi left the room open to a wide range of interpretations and applications of the concept (Gemici, 2008). Given the definitional vacuum created by Polanyi's initial use of the word "embedded", the meaning and interpretation have constantly evolved and assumed multiple meanings since its coinage (Bogenhold, 2013; Szanto, 1995). In a contemporary sense, social embeddedness is broadly used to refer to the tendency of economic phenomena to depend on social relations and other non-economic influences (Granovetter, 1985; Ratajczak-Mrozek, 2017).

Polanyi (1944) and Granovetter (1985) are the two leading figures associated with the embeddedness concept. While Polanyi pioneered the concept, Granovetter is the one who is credited for elaborating it in a manner which turned it into the centrepiece of the economic sociology field (Krippner, 2001; Muennich, 2017). Despite the close resemblances of Polanyi and Granovetter's depictions of embeddedness, a closer review of their conceptual articulation points to some important differences which provide a better understanding of the concept. The section below provides an analysis of both the Polanyian and Granovetterian perspectives on the concept of embeddedness.

According to Granovetter (1992:25), "economic action (like all action) is socially situated and cannot be explained by reference to individual motives alone". Social embeddedness refers to the extent to which organisations are connected to other actors via linkages of a social network or the extent to which human action of consumers (including their economic behaviour) takes place within a web of social attachments, such as friendship and kinship (Hess et al., 2011). The concept of social embeddedness expresses the idea that social actors exist within relational, institutional and cultural contexts and they cannot be seen as atomised decisionmakers who are maximising their personal utility (Hess et al., 2011).

Towards a working definition of social embeddedness

Overall, the use of the term embeddedness in literature is fraught with inconsistencies. In a lot of instances, the word is used in its literal sense to indicate that something is located or secured within a larger entity or context (Ratajczak-Mrozek, 2017). Jack (2005) concurs that embeddedness denotes the nature, depth and extent of an individual's ties with the environment. This use of the word embeddedness is distinct from the meaning implied by "social embeddedness" which is about the influence of social relations on economic actions. Indeed, the literal meaning of embedding or the process of becoming a part of a structure is important to social embeddedness, but it should not be confused with the process of "social embeddedness". This study treats social embeddedness as the meaning that was articulated by Granovetter (1985) in his seminal article. Thus, social embeddedness is taken to mean the influence of relational and structural social ties on the economic actions of concerned actors. While Granovetter's (1985) conception of economic action was left open and broad, this study conceives economic action as the actions of entrepreneurial individuals. Such a conception of economic action allows for a deeper and far-reaching exploration of the entrepreneur's actions as the quintessential economic agent (Apata, 2015; Ebner, 2005).

The Polanyian perspective

Karl Polanyi's (1944) observation that the economy was "disembedding" was made in the context of a huge ideological debate between advocates of a free-market economy and those who held alternative ideological views with regards to the organisation of the economy (Katalin, 2015; Ratajczak-Mrozek, 2017; Vancura 2011). As interpreted by Gemici (2015), Polanyi's main argument was that the liberal market order was reversing a historical trend in which human economic behaviour was subordinated to social, political and cultural institutions. Of note in Polanyi's argument was the level of economic analysis at which he made his observations. Considering that the economy is normally analysed at micro (enterprise and individual), meso (groups and organisation networks) and macro (aggregate) levels, Polanyi's analysis is evidently concerned with the behaviour of the economy at societal level. While individual economic actions are subsumed in the macro dynamics, Polanyi does not devote attention to the discussion of individual actions. Instead, his treatise refers to non-economic institutions of a social, political and historical nature. In this regard, it can be inferred that the types of embeddedness and disembeddedness that pre-occupied Polanyi were of a macro nature,

operating at the level of the society. In this way, Polanyi's idea of embeddedness mirrors what Wood et al. (2019) refer to as societal embeddedness. According to Wood et al. (2019:935), "societal embeddedness refers to the ways actors are influenced and shaped by the institutional, social, and cultural heritage and context in which they are located". Jessop (2001) differentiates between institutional embeddedness and societal embeddedness. His argument is that societal embeddedness is the amalgamation of various institutional orders which exist between the micro and macro levels of analysis, (Jessop, 2001). This argument implies that forms of political, social, and cultural embeddedness are components of a much broader type of embeddedness that cut across a whole society. Consequently, there is no consensual and coherent scholarly position on levels of analysis in embeddedness research (Mckeever et al., 2014).

Polanyi's pre-occupation with institutional and societal embeddedness is understandable when read within the context of his main goal being to provide a critique of the liberal market concept as an ideological position for governing economic behaviour within and across nations. While the term social embeddedness gained popularity among later scholars, Polanyi's work insinuates that embeddedness is a much broader phenomenon that cuts across many more spheres than just the social sphere. The result has been the birth of several strands of embeddedness based on a broad interpretation of what Polanyi called "non-economic institutions" (Beckert, 2003; Hess, 2004; Zuckin and DiMagio, 1990;). Notably, embeddedness as a concept has generally been over-extended and diluted to the extent that it is often used in confusing and even contradictory ways (Dudek, 2016; Kołodziejczak, 2016).

In the end, the main takeaway from Polanyi's embeddedness argument is that economic activities are not divorced from social, political, cultural and historical structures. The Polanyian embeddedness is a macro-type of embeddedness that operates beyond and above the level of the individual or single economic agent.

Granovetterian perspective

While Polanyi is hailed as the founding father of the embeddedness concept in economy sociology, Granovetter (1985) is equally revered for popularising and bringing the concept into scholarly discourse through the publication of his seminal paper entitled *"Economic action and social structure: the problem of embeddedness*". In the preamble to the paper, Granovetter clearly states that his intention was to make an exposition on

"the extent to which economic action is embedded in structures of social relations, in modern industrial society" (Granovetter, 1985:481). This statement holds a great deal of significance as it signalled the scholar's intent to focus on one form of the many forms of embeddedness that had been hinted to by Polanyi (1944). By singling out social relations as a predicating factor for economic action, Granovetter articulated social embeddedness as a major form of embeddedness. His choice of social relations as the basis for investigating the embeddedness of economic action is not surprising given his preceding work which focused on social networks and their impact on economic outcomes (Granovetter, 1973). According to this scholar "the Granovetterian understanding of embeddedness involves identifying the relational basis of social action in economic contexts (Christoforou and Lainé, 2014:163).

Building on this, Uzzi (1996:674) describes embeddedness as "the process by which social relations shape economic action". Linking back to his 1985 seminal paper, Granovetter (2005:35) defines social embeddedness as "the extent to which economic action is linked to or depends on action or institutions that are non-economic in content, goals or processes". Central to this articulation of social embeddedness is the recognition that social actors exist and act within relational, institutional, and cultural contexts.

While Polanyi's (1944) characterisation of embeddedness was stated in terms of the macro societal changes and processes, Granovetter's (1985) exposition brings the concept to the personal and individual level. Through his focus on the influence of interpersonal relations on individual economic behaviour, Granovetter departs from Polanyi's macro perspective to introduce a micro dimension of embeddedness (Lin and Qede, 2011; Maurer, 2012; Szanto, 1995). By emphasising the social embeddedness of individual economic action, Granovetter creates a marriage between the concept of embeddedness and microeconomics. According to Barkley (2019), microeconomics is primarily concerned with the study of individual decision-making units that include natural persons and enterprises. As noted by Maurer (2012) and Melé and Cantón (2014), Granovetter's migration of embeddedness into the microeconomic context challenges the classical economic model of man (homo-economics) by demonstrating the role and influence of social relations in economic decision making and action. Granovetter's introduction of embeddedness into the microeconomics sphere is logical and complementary to Polanyi's macro-level depiction of the concept. In new institutional economics tradition, the

institutional embeddedness which Polanyi alludes to creates the overall context for action by economic actors (North, 1991). Adam (2014) asserts that the application of social embeddedness to the microeconomic domain provides valuable insights into how economic actors relate with one another in pursuit of economic outcomes.

While recognising the macro-level embeddedness which formed the main theme of Polanyi's founding observations, this thesis has approached and investigated from a micro-level perspective, which is more in line with Granovetter's concept of social embeddedness. In pivoting the study on a micro-level, the thesis does not deny the existence and validity of macro-level embeddedness which was advocated by Polanyi. Instead, this thesis acknowledges that Polanyian type of embeddedness is at a higher level of analysis, which is about the institutional frameworks that define rules of action for economic actors at higher levels. By taking a micro-level approach to analysis, the thesis observes the usual boundaries of analysis which are used in economic analysis in which microeconomics and macroeconomics are treated separately.

2.4.1 Strands of embeddedness

This section presents and discusses the main conceptualisations of embeddedness that emerged following Granovetter's (1985) seminal paper. The different strands of embeddedness reflect the various scholarly interpretations that have emerged and have been built on Polanyi's embeddedness argument. A discussion and critique of the various conceptualisations helps to locate the Granovetterian social embeddedness within the broader discourse of embeddedness of economic action. Whereas Granovetter (1985) anchored his scholarly thought in social embeddedness of the economy, other scholars have emerged with alternative but related forms of the concept (Barberis and Solano, 2018; Moran, 2005; Welch and Wilkinson, 2004). Forms of embeddedness identified in contemporary literature include political embeddedness, cultural embeddedness, territorial embeddedness, and mixed embeddedness (Baker and Faulkner, 2009; Hess, 2004; Korsgaard et al., 2015; Zuckin and DiMageo, 1990). In fact, the definitional vacuum left by Polanyi (1944) has led to an over-extension of the concept which creates theoretical discord (Kołodziejczak, 2016).

Scholarly attempts to explore ways in which political institutions influence the economy have birthed what is commonly referred as political embeddedness (Cooksey,

2012; Liu and Halliday, 2011). Okhmatovskiy (2010) takes political embeddedness to mean all forms of ties that connect an economic actor to the state. This interpretation of political embeddedness is shared by Michelson (2007) and Farzard et al. (2019). According to this perspective, the state is the ultimate holder of political power and economic actors who have ties to state structures are deemed to be able to use such ties to obtain favourable economic outcomes (Haveman et al., 2017; Prechel and Zheng, 2012;). Bharadwaj (2017) views political embeddedness much more broadly as the fact that all economic actors must exist within a framework of politically determined laws and rules with consequences for economic transactions. This view is shared by Jacobson et al. (1993) who argue that political conditions are material to the understanding of costs of economic transactions. In a study on small business performance in West Africa**,** Kuépié et al. (2016) observed that ties to the state yielded support that assisted in improving the economic performance of recipient business.

Another common strand of embeddedness is the territorial embeddedness linked to the work of Hess (2004). Also referred to as spatial embeddedness, this concept contends that the place where an actor comes from matters and influences the economic actions of the actor (Bika and Kalantaridis, 2006; Hess, 2004; Resseau et al., 2015). This view is echoed by Ratajczak-Mrozek (2017) who postulates that territorial embeddedness considers the extent to which an actor is anchored in territories or places. Korsgaard et al. (2015) refer to territorial embeddedness as "placial" embeddedness and use it to denote an entrepreneur's knowledge and use of the physical, cultural, and historical landscapes as well as the entrepreneur's concern for the well-being of the place in which he operates. With reference to firms that operate in global value chains, Staritz and Morris (2013) describe embeddedness as the extent to which firms and owners of firms are enmeshed in local social networks.

It is notable that territorial-based conceptualisations of embeddedness keep referring to the role of social relations within specific spatial contexts (Andersen, 2011; Nadvi and Schmitz, 1993). What this suggests is that spatial clustering or co-location of economic actors does not have a direct impact on economic actions but only facilitates the formation of social relations which then influence economic actions as initially posited by Granovetter (1985). It therefore suffices to say that the concept of territorial embeddedness link social relations with the spatial and temporal dimensions.

Another strand which has received attention in recent years is what Kloosterman (2010) refers to as "mixed embeddedness". Kloosterman came up with this description based on studies of migrant entrepreneurs in Europe. As observed by Barberis and Solano, (2018), the term mixed embeddedness is an acknowledgement that multiple forms of embeddedness can be in operation simultaneously. In the case of Kloosterman (2010), it was observed that economic actions of migrant entrepreneurs were subject to both institutional and social structures. A weakness of the mixed embeddedness approach is that it is more of a methodological approach than an alternative theoretical construction. Its narrow application to entrepreneurs in migrant contexts tends to limit its wider application. In the end, mixed embeddedness appears to be a repackaging of existing strands of embeddedness and does not really bring new insights into the fundamental factors driving the embeddedness of economic action.

Notwithstanding the importance of the other formulations of embeddedness to the economic sociology field, this thesis adopts the Granovetterian perspective as the main theoretical departure point guiding this research. Granovetter's (1985, 2005) conceptualisation of social embeddedness is best suited to the exploration of entrepreneurial activities which are undertaken by agricultural marketing middlemen as the main unit of investigation in this study.

2.4.2 Unpacking Granovetterian social embeddedness

This section elaborates on the concept of social embeddedness as put forward by Granovetter (1985, 2005) and as elaborated on by other scholars (Monteiro and Lima, 2021; Roscoe, 2013). As demonstrated in literature, the Granovetterian social embeddedness concerns the influence of social relations on economic decisions and actions at the micro level of the economy (Hess et al. 2011:157). In contrast to Polanyian embeddedness, which deals with macro- or society-level structures, Granovetterian embeddedness is about understanding transactions and decision making within the micro-economic sphere. This is the domain of individual economic actions. In classifying levels of economic phenomena, Granovetter (2017) identifies three levels: the individual economic action level, the economic outcomes level and the institutions level. Translating this to the field of economics yields the micro, meso and macro levels, respectively. Granovetter's sense of social embeddedness normally applies to the level of individual

economic action although there has been a tendency to extend it to cover the meso (economic outcomes) level (Czernek-Marszałek, 2020; Moran, 2005). It is necessary to clearly specify the patterns of social embeddedness as presented by Granovetter in his seminal paper and later publications (Granovetter, 1985, 1992, 1995, 2005). The key defining characteristic of Granovetter's social embeddedness concept is that it is founded on and grounded in social network theory (Halinen and Törnroos, 1998; Hess et al., 2011; Maurer, 2012; Xin & Qin, 2011). Consistent with the typological characterisations used in network theory, the Granovetterian social embeddedness is categorised into relational and structural embeddedness (Burt et al., 2013; Christoforou and Lainé, 2014; Moran, 2005; Todeva, 2011; Shahmehr et al., 2015; Song et al., 2020). Below is a presentation and critique of each of the two strands of social embeddedness.

Relational embeddedness

In the social embeddedness theorisation, relational embeddedness is the most basic form of embeddedness that can exist in a socio-economic context (Chan, 2009; Moran, 2005). Hess (2004:170) describes relational embeddedness as "the nature or quality of dyadic relations between actors". Echoing the same view, Shahmehr et al., (2015:62) characterise relation embeddedness as "a range of integration activities that focus on dyadic ties in a social context". In relational embeddedness, emphasis is placed on the closeness and strength of the relationship that exists between any two individuals (Bliemel and Maine, 2008; Burt et al., 2013; Li, 2016).

There is consensus among scholars that relational embeddedness is concerned with the effect that the relationship between any two actors (dyadic relation) has on their economic interactions (Loveseth, 2000; Maurer, 2014; Ratajczak-Mrozek, 2017). It is essential to note that within social network theory a dyadic relationship constitutes the lowest rung within a network structure. Bliemel and Maine (2008) underline that relational embeddedness applies at tie-level and not at the level of the whole social network. Therefore, relational embeddedness is a characterisation of the exchanges, flows, transactions and influences that are based on two social actors who have an ongoing relationship between them. Borgatti et al. (2014) and Li (2016) stress that relational embeddedness is determined by the strength and cohesiveness of the relationship between any two social actors. Thus, relational embeddedness is associated

with strong and lasting relationships between connected actors. According to Shamehr et al. (2015), relational embeddedness helps economic actors to develop trust and transact with ease. However, Andersson et al. (2005) assert that the interdependence between actors and the exchange of resources are the main defining aspects of relational embeddedness.

From the scholarly views presented above, it can be deduced that relational embeddedness exists between individuals. In the case where decision-making units are organisations or groups, the human agency in forging and nurturing social relations remains of primary importance. The link between relational embeddedness and the dyadic ties in network theory show that relational embeddedness is the lowest level of embeddedness and the foundation for any higher-level form of embeddedness. In a relational embeddedness situation, the core action agents are individuals. This point underscores the need to apply this concept to a microeconomic perspective.

Due to the emphasis of relational embeddedness on interpersonal relations, extant literature associates it with such concepts as trust, reciprocity patronage and clientelisation, (Gaggioli et al., 2019; Granovetter, 2005; Kurniawan and Sakti, 2014; Li, 2016;). It is through relationships of trust, reciprocity, and patronage that the social embeddedness of economic action is often manifested (Eisenstadt and Roniger, 1980; Geertz, 1978; Spaan and Hartveld, 2002; Nakamura, 2011).

Structural embeddedness

Structural embeddedness constitutes the second strand of Granovetterian (social embeddedness of the economy. While relational embeddedness is based on the relationship between any two actors (dyadic network relations), structural embeddedness refers to the extent to which mutual contacts of any two actors are connected to one another (Burt, et al., 2013; Granovetter, 1992; Simsek et al., 2003). As noted by Pavlovich and Kearins (2004), structural embeddedness moves away from individual actors and looks at how connections between social actors create opportunities and constraints for the actors within a network structure. Dudek (2016:208) describes structural embeddedness as the "perception of economic activity through patterned and lasting interpersonal relations in which the network is the main axis of reflection". For structural embeddedness analysis to exist, there must be at least three connected actors, and, for this

reason, structural embeddedness has also been referred to as "triadic" structural embeddedness (Kim and Skvoretz, 2012). Instead of looking at individual decision making, structural embeddedness moves a step up to consider the effect of network positions on access to opportunities, information, resources and other forms of support that flow through the network (Burt, 2001; Uzzi, 1996;). The main premise behind structural embeddedness is that the way in which actors are connected influences the way they interact, how they share resources, and it fashions the way in which they engage in socio-economic exchanges (Bengt et al., 2010; Granovetter, 1985; Moran, 2005).

While the value of relational embeddedness is linked to the quality and cohesiveness of relations between any two actors, structural embeddedness is based on both strong and weak relations (Capioto et al., 2019; Rowley et al., 2000). The association of structural embeddedness with both sets of ties is logical because embedding of economic activity takes place within the context of the whole social network – a social network that consists of both weak and strong ties among actors. Unlike relational embeddedness, which takes a strictly microeconomic perspective, structural embeddedness straddles the line and incorporates a meso-level (intermediate level) which Granovetter (2017) refers to as the economic outcomes level of analysis. This aspect of structural embeddedness partially explains the widespread research on organisational networks and cluster networks (Mountford and Kessie, 2017; Nadvi and Schmitz,1993; Ramirez, 2018).

Defining economic action

Given the centrality of economic action to Granovetterian embeddedness, it is vital to have a clear definition of what constitutes economic action. The question of economic action has been approached differently in both sociology and economics (Bogenhold, 2018; Khalil, 1996; Udéhn, 2001). Weber (1968:63) famously defined economic action as "any peaceful exercise of an actor's control over resources which is in its main impulse oriented towards economic ends". Underpinning this definition is the emphasis on economic motives in the execution of action by a human agent. Weber views economic action as a strand and component of social action (Collet, 2003). The classification of economic action as social action aligns with Weber's fundamental belief that the basis for any action by human agents is social (Pimpley, 1987; Prosch, 2004). According to Weber

et al. (1947), economic action falls under the category of what are called rational or instrumental actions. These are actions that are undertaken in pursuit of an actor's valued goal (Carvalho and Freston, 2008). Economic transactions that are undertaken within the course of market exchange are typical examples of instrumental actions. While Granovetter (1985) did not engage in an exposition of what was meant by social action in his seminal paper, he resorted to Weber's conceptualisation of economic action some years later (Granovetter, 1992).

To cast light on what he meant by economic action, Granovetter does not offer theoretical definitions. Instead, he draws on examples of actions which served to illustrate his thinking. Particularly, Granovetter extensively used the example of job-seeking behaviour to illustrate the social embeddedness of economic behaviour. In this instance, "job seeking" is cited as an exemplary type of economic action. This type of action is individual in nature and the economic gain associated with it is the income to be earned from the job. Although this example sufficed to advance Grovetter's argument, it also presented a dead end in terms of opportunities to explore economic action more broadly. Noticing this gap and seeking broader scope for applying the social embeddedness concept, scholars have pushed the boundaries of economic action to encompass entrepreneurial action (Martinelli, 2001; McMullen and Shepherd, 2006). Mote (2012) describes the entrepreneur as the "quintessential economic actor" and, therefore, it makes sense to treat entrepreneurial actions as typical economic actions. Consistent with the Weberian conceptualisation of economic action, entrepreneurial actions are largely considered to be instrumental in nature (Hunt and Lerner, 2018; Kuratko et al., 2001). To underscore this interpretation, Andersson et al. (2005) equate exchange transactions between two economic actors to Granovetter's (1985) use of the term economic action.

Notwithstanding the various approaches to defining economic action, there is consensus among scholars that such action is undertaken by human agents for the purpose of satisfying defined economic motives. Emphasising the social embeddedness dimension, McWatters and Lemarchand (2013:53) describe economic action as "purposive action, situated in on-going systems of social exchange".

2.4.3 Review and discussion of key concepts in social embeddedness

The social embeddedness of economic actions is mainly explored through a variety of secondary concepts such as trust, patronage and clientilisation. This section provides a theoretical discussion and critique of these concepts so that their use in this thesis is understood consistently.

Trust

Trust is a concept that occupies an integral place in social embeddedness literature. Despite its wide recognition in economic action, trust is generally described as an elusive concept (Nooteboom, 2003). Granovetter (2005:33) defines trust as "the confidence that others will do the 'right' thing despite a clear balance of incentives to the contrary". Berzina (2011) characterises trust as the goodwill that an actor enjoys from others within a transacting environment. This view is shared by Jackson (2020) who views trust as a form of reputational capital that is accrued to an actor due to the reliability and dependability emanating from their actions. In literature, trust has also been associated with the concepts of reciprocity and trustworthiness (Welter, 2005). Nooteboom (2003:6) describes trustworthiness as "the degree to which others can be relied upon to perform promised actions that may or may not be in their own pecuniary interest". Claro and Laban (2011) argue that trustworthiness makes it possible for actors to access resources that exist within their network. In a trading context, the emergence of trust is associated with prior existence of interpersonal relations and repeated business exchanges (Jan, 2019).

According to Granovetter (1985), trust facilitates economic transactions by preventing opportunistic behaviour and building confidence between transacting partners. According to Burbidge (2013), economic transactions happen on a foundation of trust. Lomnitz and Sheinbaum (2004) assert that trust determines the nature and content of exchange relations. Echoing this view, Choi and Storr (2020) identify trust as an essential element of most market interactions. Moreover, based on a study of rural produce markets in China, Zhou and Ai (2014) observed that trust that existed between farmers and local middlemen facilitated market exchanges even in the absence of on-spot cash payments. By making transactions simpler and faster, trust is associated with a reduction in the transaction costs of doing business (Granovetter, 1992; Landa, 2006). The facilitating role

that trust plays in smoothening trade transactions and encouraging cooperation has seen trust characterised as an informal institution (Igarashi et al., 2008; Newell et al., 2019; Odera, 2013)

Most scholars treat trust as a function of interpersonal relations between actors (Boit et al., 2014; Eskola, 2005; Gabre-Madhin, 2001). Hansen (2012) observes that the personal reputation of middlemen is essential to their continuity in business. Machado (2014) argues that trust is central to mercantile actions of buying and selling. He notes that trust is closely tied to the notion of business reputation and creditworthiness. Meanwhile, Glaisyer (2004) reports that trust was a critical element of mercantile trade in pre-industrial England and its importance persists. In a study of informal cross-border trade in West Africa, Greif (1993) and Walther (2015) noted that traders involved in long-distance trade relied heavily on mutual trust to conduct their business activities. In cases of informal trade relations, trust is used as the basis of cooperation and acts as a substitute for legal contractual agreements (Fafchamps, 2001). In a study of Ethiopian grain markets, Gabre-Madhin (2001) and Granovetter (2017) considered trust to be a critical asset in business. In Ethiopian grain markets, Gabre-Madhin (2001) identified the lack of such trust as a barrier to entry into middlemanship. The importance of trust in facilitating trade between middlemen and farmers was confirmed in a study conducted by Do (2017) in which he noted that relationships based on kinship, common group membership and locality made it easier to do business without formal contracts. In a study of agricultural trading among the Yoruba people of Nigeria, Sudarkasa (1985) observed that trust was a key consideration in the selection of trading partners.

This study analyses an unexplored issue of how trust, framed as an informal institution, plays an important role in business operations in the informal sector by filling the vacuum left by the lack of formal institutions (Gaggioli et al., 2019; Odera, 2013; Vorley, 2013; Zanini and Migueles, 2013).

Clientilisation

In agricultural markets, transacting partners have been observed to engage in repeated exchanges which span over a long period of time (Blume and Tardos, 2007; Eggleston et al., 2002; Landa, 2006). In a study of agricultural commodity marketing in Morocco, Geertz (1978) used the term clientilisation to refer to the tendency of buyers to establish

lasting relationships instead of establishing new trade partners each time. In his studies on rural markets in Morocco, Geertz (1978) observed the tendency of market actors to engage in repeated transactions with the same clients, despite the existence of incentives to the contrary. According to Geertz (1978), clientelisation was a mechanism through which market actors in informal market environments dealt with the imperfections of information asymmetry and the resultant risk involved in selecting trading partners. Landa (2006) notes that clientelisation is rooted in reciprocity which is underpinned by the expectation for continued mutual gains for each party involved. As underscored by Groysberg (2010), clientelisation emphasises the behavioural tendencies of buyers in relation to their dealings with sellers of goods and services. Considering the dual role of middlemen as buyers and sellers, existing research has not adequately addressed the sources and consequences of clientelisation.

Clientilisation is associated with a departure from competitive market outcomes (Swedberg, 1993). In peasant markets, Granovetter (2005) reports that clientelisation results in payment of commodity prices that exceed the competitive levels. By promoting exclusive dealings between buyers and sellers, clientelisation detaches price setting from the competitive market mechanism. In Ethiopia, Gabre-Madhin (2001) observed that most trade relationships between large-scale commodity buyers and smaller middlemen were based on repeated interactions and exclusive relations. A similar observation was made by Blume and Tardos (2007) in relation to the behaviour of traders in financial markets; they observed that traders tended to do repeated business with a small clientele.

Hayami (2004) and Degenhardt and Marx (2016) caution the interpretation of clientelisation. Based on studies in Asian peasant markets, Hayami (2004) noted that the tendency for long-term trade relationships between farmers and middlemen existed, but such relationships were only maintained to the extent that they were considered beneficial by both parties. In a study of livestock marketing in Kyrgystan, Degenhardt and Marx (2016) found that long-term trade relations did not play an important role, and traders did not have permanent buyers.

Existence of social relationships between middlemen traders and farmers has been observed to create a relationship lock-in which perpetuates the dependency of farmers on middlemen (Abebe et al., 2016). Similarly, Hayami (2004) reports that middlemen and their commodity suppliers tend to maintain long-term trade relationships if they both

continue to perceive the relationship as mutually beneficial. Likewise, in a study on seaweed marketing, Hanse (2000) reports that mutual relationships between middlemen and farmers are an important factor in sustaining trade. In a study focused on agricultural traders in Madagascar, Minten and Fafchamps (1999) observed that traders with quality social relationships tended to succeed in business.

Kuépié et al. (2016) link clientelisation to the development of business trust which helps traders to access the resources they need to carry out their business activities.

Clientelism

Clientelism is widely recognised as a broadly applied and adaptive concept that has been used to investigate political, economic, and social aspects (Hicken, 2011; Hilger, 2011; Robinson and Verdier, 2013). In literature, the term clientelism is used interchangeably with patronage and patron-client relations (PCR) (Hall, 1974; Hyden, 2013; Roniger, 2015). Fu (2016) asserts that patron-client relations are an essential element of all market relationships. From a political perspective, Hyden (2011:15) defines clientelism as "a set of informal patterns of behavior that has been institutionalized to serve political objectives that cannot be satisfied via formal institutions alone". The concept of patron-client relations has been frequently used to characterise the relationship that exists between agricultural marketing middlemen and farmers (Akhter, 2018; Dayamanti, 2018; Lonmitz, 1988; Nakamura, 2011). According to Michie (1981:23), patron-client relationship "consists of networks of dyadic relations centered on power figures, the patrons, who control resources essential to the survival and well-being of dependent groups, the clients". What defines patron-client relationship is the existence of asymmetrical power relations in which the patron wields more power than the client (Brown, 1996; Plateau, 1995; Spaan and Hartveld, 2002; Stovel et al., 2011). Patron-client relations operate at all levels of the economy and encompass micro, meso and macro levels (Amirali, 2017; Fu, 2016). Fu (2016) points out that clientelism is a feature of the power dynamics that exist among actors within a social network.

The power that the patron holds derives from superior status, influence and control over resources that are beneficial to the client actor (Arsita et al., 2020; Ogawa, 2006; Scott, 1972). Despite the power imbalances between a patron and a client, the relationship between the two is mutually beneficial and is characterised by reciprocity (Ruddle, 2011).

According to Lonmitz (1988:4), “patron-client relations are a form of reciprocity, where benefits to subordinates are traded against loyalty and power”. Thus, the maintenance of loyalty towards a patron is a key feature of a patron-client relationship. In terms of maintaining loyalty between two actors, a patron-client relationship resembles the concept of clientelisation discussed above. The difference lies in the fact that in clientelisation the balance of power is even and there are no overt penalties for withdrawing from the relationship, whereas in a patron-client relationship, a patron can withdraw access to resources as a way of meting punishment (Gibbon and Higgins, 1974; Kurniawan and Sakti, 2014).

Empirical studies on the relationship between middlemen and farmers portray middlemen actors and assign the role of client to farmers (Dayamanti et al., 2018; Hayami, 2004; Lukiyanto et al., 2018). The patronage role of middlemen is mostly attributed to their ability to provide agricultural and other forms of credit to farmers (Eisenstadt and Roniger, 1980; Heliawaty et al., 2015; Long, 1968; Lukiyanto et al., 2018; Patibandla, 2006; Russel, 1987). Patibandla (2006) observed that most middlemen doubled up as moneylenders and credit was mostly extended to farmers on the condition that all or part of a farmer’s produce would be sold to the lending middlemen. Middlemen took advantage of their cash resources to provide informal credit to smallholder farmers and repeated provision of such credit constituted the primary sources of the middlemen’s patronage power (Heliawaty et al., 2015; Ruddle, 2011;). According to Russel (1987), the superior resource endowment of middlemen creates a dependency on the part of farmers. Middlemen’s use of credit provision to acquire patron status has been observed in other economic activities outside agricultural marketing. Ogawa (2006) found that middlemen who traded second-hand clothes provided informal credit to micro retailers and the credit they provided elevated them to the status of patrons.

In situations where more than one layer of intermediary exists, some higher-level middlemen are also assigned the role of patron (Hyden, 2011). In the context of business and entrepreneurship, patronage roles are accompanied by claims and obligations which patrons must fulfil vis-à-vis their clients. This dependency of farmers mirrors what Abebe et al. (2016) observed in the grain markets of Ethiopia where farmers were said to be locked in relationships with middlemen. In a study on seaweed farming in Indonesia, Zamroni and Yamao (2012) observed that middlemen deliberately issued loans to farmers

to maintain an exclusive link with such farmers. The patronage role of middlemen providing credit to producer-sellers is also well demonstrated in small-scale fishing markets where fishermen depend on middlemen for investment and working capital requirements (Kurniawan and Sakti, 2014; Nakamura, 2011; Ruddle, 2011). Nakamaura (2011) notes that the provision of credit within patronage networks is based on mutual trust and enforcement mechanisms are based on the prevailing informal relations. Wibisono and Manaf (2018) observed that the patron-client relationship that existed between fishermen and middlemen consisted of both social and economic dimensions.

The impact of patron-client relations on the economic outcomes of the concerned actors is mixed (Abebe et al., 2016; Sudrajat and Arani, 2016). According to Akhter, 2018), the patron status of the middlemen gives them an advantage when negotiating prices with farmers as sellers. The perceived advantage that the middleman enjoys in price negotiation partially accounts for the common allegation that middlemen exploit farmers through low prices (Hegde, 2005; Ogot, 2009). The patronage network that middlemen create in their dealings with farmers has been observed to be essential in recovering money loaned out to farmers (Akhter, 2018).

Reciprocity

Polanyi (1944) identifies reciprocity and redistribution as two central principles in embedded economic behaviour. Norms of reciprocity in economic transactions are characterised as a manifestation of social embeddedness (Correa et al.., 2020; Molm 2010). Meera and Kumar (2015:85) define reciprocity as "a continuous form of mutually giving and taking among peoples of equal status". Gunnthorsdottir et al. (2002:50) define reciprocity as an act of "voluntarily repaying a trusting move at a later point in time, although defaulting on such repayment is in the short-term self-interest of the reciprocator". Molm et al. (2007:200) define reciprocity as "the act of giving benefits to another in return for benefits received". The above definitions show that the principle of reciprocity is built around the core actions of giving and receiving objects by actors operating within a framework of relations. Underpinning all the interpretations of reciprocity is the emergence of a sense of obligation that arises when someone is at the receiving end of a beneficial act (Brown and McIlwraith, 2019; Hyden, 1980; Plickert et al., 2007; Sergaki et al., 2020). Lonmitz (1988:44) notes that "the practice of reciprocity

is embedded in an ongoing social relationship". Caliendo et al. (2010) associate reciprocal actions with the exchange processes that entrepreneurial actors undertake within their networks.

In literature, reciprocity is mainly discussed under three categories of generalised reciprocity, balanced reciprocity, and negative reciprocity (Sahlins, 2017). According to Sahlins (2017:175), generalised reciprocity refers to "transactions that are putatively altruistic, transactions on the line of assistance given and, if possible and necessary, assistance returned". According to Sun et al. (2020), generalised reciprocity concerns the tendency of individuals to treat others in a way consistent with how they were treated in the past. Hyden (1980) and Ogawa (2006) link this type of reciprocity to the concept of the moral economy, characterised by moral obligations that individuals feel towards each other. Generalised reciprocity is mainly associated with kinship, friendship and communal relations. Within the Tanzanian context, generalised reciprocity was the centrepiece of what Hyden (1980) termed the economy of affection. Based on a longitudinal study of social and economic life in rural villages of Tanzania, Hyden (1983:8) describes the economy of affection as "a network of support, communications and interaction among structurally defined groups connected by blood, kin, community or other affinities, for example, religion". Hyden (2013:75) observed that the economy of affection was "constituted by personal investments in reciprocal relations with other individuals as a means of achieving goals that are seen as otherwise impossible to attain".

Conversely, Sahlins (2017:202) defines balanced reciprocity as the "willingness to give for that which is received". Sugimura (2011) describes it as the give-and-take kind of reciprocity. Balanced reciprocity is understood to be the closest equivalent of market transactions where exchange is conducted based on the measures of value perceived to be comparable (Brown and McIlwraith, 2019). Unlike generalised reciprocity where the reciprocal action is uncertain, balanced reciprocity implies the existence of a firm obligation with defined timelines (Thomas and Worall, 2002). In open market dealings, reciprocity is expected to lead to higher levels of trustworthiness among transacting partners (Fischer and Hartmann, 2010).

Negative reciprocity has been defined as "the attempt to get something for nothing with impunity, the several forms of appropriation, transactions opened and conducted toward net utilitarian advantage" (Sahlins, 2017:177). According to Brown and

McIlwraith (2019), negative reciprocity represents “an attempt to get something for nothing”. In the trading sphere, negative reciprocity is equated with the concept of unequal exchange in which an exchange partner tries to maximise profits at the expense of others (Sugimura, 2011). Meera and Kumar (2015) associate negative reciprocity with impersonal and unfriendly transactions. Such transactions are located completely outside the network of social relations.

Reciprocity is a principle that operates in both market and non-market situations where it tends to motivate and regulate the behaviour of actors (Bell, 1991; Kranton, 1996; Malmendier et al., 2014; Sergaki et al., 2020). Pandya and Dholakia (1992) clarify that reciprocal behaviour is applied in gift-giving transactions as well as in pure marketing exchange transactions. Weber and Gobel (2006) identify reciprocal behaviour as a particularly critical element of informal markets where transactions are not supported by formal contracts. Reciprocal business relationships are observed to be the centrepiece of interactions of informal traders in most African economies where the formal economic institutions are replaced by interpersonal relationships and mutual trust as the basis of conducting business (Berrou and Combarnous 2012; Chirikure, 2017; Fafchamps 2004, Walther, 2015).

The social ties that bind people in Africa are usually seen as extremely strong, since they imply an obligation of reciprocity and assistance but, with the geographic extension of trade networks, more weak ties will be needed to develop business transactions with the rest of the world (Walther, 2014).

In a study on potato marketing in Peru, Scott (1985) observed that merchants and middlemen developed reciprocal relationships which were based on the exchange of value demand and supply information. In Chinese agricultural produce markets, Zhou and Ai (2014) observed that reciprocity between farmers and middlemen made it possible to trade under conditions of market uncertainty and without formal contracts (Zhou and Ai, 2014). In the Southern Highlands of Tanzania, Watts (2018) observed that local middlemen (dalali) built reciprocal relationships with both buyers and sellers, therefore entrenching their position in the marketing chain. This is consistent with the maintenance of reciprocal relationships observed among middlemen involved in second-hand clothes trading in the city of Mwanza (Ogawa, 2006).

2.5 Empirical perspectives on social embeddedness of middlemen actions

Studies on social embeddedness are highly fragmented and are mainly conducted under constituent constructs, such social networks and social capital, with no systematic attempt to link them to the overarching concept of social embeddedness. This is mainly because social embeddedness is a broad concept with various theoretical branches and concepts underpinning it (Lin and Qede, 2011). Based on the conceptualisation of agricultural marketing middlemen as entrepreneurial actors involved in agricultural marketing, this section presents and discusses empirical research findings on the social embeddedness of middlemen's entrepreneurial actions.

Social embeddedness and business opportunity identification

The identification and pursuit of profit-making opportunities is treated as an integral part of entrepreneurial action (Emami et al., 2020; Mishra and Zachary, 2015; Schott and Sedaghat, 2014;). The Global Entrepreneurship Development Institute (2015) defines entrepreneurial opportunities as situations where products and services can be sold at a price greater than the cost of their production. Several scholars view entrepreneurs' social contacts as a rich source of information for entrepreneurial opportunities (Casson & Casson, 2013; Stuart and Sorenson, 2005; Thompson and Huies, 1968). It is important to note that opportunities can be embedded in the content of the information that actors get or can be a function of the position held within a social network structure (Burt, 1992; Jack and Anderssen, 2002). The derivation of opportunities from the content if information is aligned to the Kirzenerian interpretation of entrepreneurship as alertness to market opportunities (Kirzner 1973; Korsgaard, 2011; White 1990). Conversely, the embeddedness of opportunity in network structure is linked to Burt's (1992) structural holes theory which asserts that actors stand to gain by connecting previously connected parts of a network.

In a study of grain markets in Ethiopia, Abebe et al. (2016) found that middlemen relied on their social contracts to establish arbitraging positions and, thereby, served as a link between farmers and markets. This finding corroborates Russel's (1987) findings on the discovery of crop-trading opportunities for middlemen operating in the Philippine highlands. An important finding on the role of social relations in the identification of

profit-making opportunities within agricultural marketing is advanced by Hayami and Kawagoe (1993). In their study of peasant marketing in Java Province of Indonesia, they found that peasants took up entrepreneurial positions as middlemen by building on their nuanced understanding of commodity supply situations in their communities.

One important dimension that has also been highlighted in opportunity identification is the role played by intense family relations in the identification and adoption of agricultural trading opportunities. Due to high levels of trust shared within strong family relations, upstart middlemen traders tend to get confidential information about opportunities from family members who are already in the same line of business (Rousseau et al., 2015). In the context of shea trading in Burkina Faso, Rousseau et al. (2015) observed that some middlemen inherited their businesses from their parents. In Sierra Leone, Jalloh (1999) observed that kinship and marital relations were helpful in securing opportunities to engage in groundnut trade. The importance of family members in business opportunity identification was confirmed by Wang and Altinay (2012) who found that family members acted as a frequent source of business tips and ideas for new entrepreneurs among minority ethnical entrepreneurs in the United Kingdom.

The dynamic and ephemeral nature of agricultural commodity trading means that, apart from the initial identification, middlemen must constantly identify opportunities to trade profitably. In a study of tomato marketing in Tanzania, Mwagike and Mdoe (2015) reported that middlemen often relied on their social network to obtain updated information on supply and demand conditions. These findings underline the importance of social relations to entrepreneurial establishment and the operational stages of a middleman's business.

Access to information

Literature on entrepreneurship identifies information as central to the initiation and exploitation of entrepreneurial activities (Casson, 2003; John and Thomas, 2021; Rhoads, 2016; Vaghely and Julien, 2010). In the context of agricultural marketing, Magesa et al. (2014:264) note that access to "agricultural market information is essential for participating in agricultural markets". According to Wirtz et al. (2015) and Copeland and Friedman (1992), information has business value and accessing the right information is essential for achieving business success. Westhead et al. (2009) note that business

opportunities are embedded in information that is exchanged within the framework of the market process. Information is deemed to be more important for entrepreneurs who operate in middlemen positions because trading opportunities are a function of the information possessed by the actor (Casson, 2003; Chowdhury, 2004; Mitchell, 2011; Morris et al., 2013). This section presents and discusses empirical arguments in relation to the role of social networks in facilitating access to information.

According to Hayami and Kawgoe (1993), agricultural middlemen belong to the social category of peasant farmers, and they leverage social relations to obtain information on supplies of agricultural produce. Based on a study on access to agricultural market information in Tanzania, Magesa et al. (2020) note that middlemen enjoyed a privileged position in trade because they had better access to both supply and market information. In a study of market flow dynamics in Minangkabau Traditional Market in Indonesia, Marleni et al. (2019) observed that traders drew on both strong and weak social ties to obtain beneficial trading information.

In a study on cattle marketing in Malaysia, Lyndon et al. (2015) observed that farmers mostly relied on family and friendship networks for market information. A small proportion were observed to use middlemen as their social network. In a study on tomato marketing in Kilolo District of Tanzania, Mwagike (2015) observed that middlemen relied on their social contacts to obtain information on the source of tomato supplies. This finding corroborates the observation made by Eskola (2005) regarding the utility of a middleman's personal social network in sharing vital business information on trade conditions. These empirical findings are consistent with the theoretical claim that social contacts can be leveraged to get information on business opportunities (Casson and Casson, 2013; Gruber et al., 2008).

Social networks have also been observed to play a central in sharing information among traders and middlemen. Based on a study of agricultural traders in Madagascar, Fafchamps and Minten (1998) noted that middlemen traders tended to share information about the behaviour of buyers and suppliers. Such information is vital in avoiding entering business relationships with untrustworthy partners. In the same study, middlemen were also observed to share information about market opportunities (Fafchamps and Minten, 1998). These findings were echoed by Walther (2014) based on a study of trade networks

in West Africa. Walther (2014) observed that information obtained from trade network partners was more reliable and less costly to obtain.

While it is widely acknowledged that middlemen have a better grip on information, extant literature barely explores how middlemen access the information that forms the backbone of their entrepreneurial actions.

Social embeddedness and resource mobilisation

Access to resources is considered critical for the successful exploitation of profit-making opportunities that entrepreneurs identify (Huang, 2016; Klein, 2010; Rawhouser et al., 2016; Welsch, 2004). From a sociological perspective, the process through which entrepreneurial actors seek and acquire the various resources they need is known as resource mobilisation (Stuart and Sorenson, 2005). Mishra and Zachary (2015:258) refer to the various resources that entrepreneurs need as entrepreneurial capital and they define these as including "human capital, knowledge capital, social capital, family capital, emotional capital, and tangible capital including their financial and physical assets". Ozdemir et al. (2016) describe entrepreneurial resources as all tangible and intangible things that entrepreneurs require to engage in the market processes. Such things include ideas, motivation, information, financial capital, physical assets, and trust (Kristiansen, 2004). Based on this understanding of entrepreneurial resources, this section presents scholarly findings relating to the social embeddedness of the resource mobilisation process.

From the existing scholarly studies on agricultural marketing middlemen, only a handful have addressed the issue of resource mobilisation from an entrepreneurial perspective. Based on a study of Ethiopian agricultural markets, Quattri et al. (2012) concluded that middlemen leveraged their social relations to get information on supplies and prices of agricultural products (Quattri et al., 2012). This is consistent with Casson and Casson's (2013) argument that social contacts provide the entrepreneur with information, workers and market for the product. Fafchamps and Minten (2001) report that, in Africa, social relations play a crucial role in facilitating agricultural traders' access to factor markets. This implies that social relations enable traders to access labour and financial capital by drawing on their social connections and personal relationships.

Based on a study of agricultural traders in Madagascar, Fafchamps and Minten (2002) found that resources needed by agricultural traders to conduct their businesses included working capital, storage facilities, vehicles and equipment. In their study, they observed that traders tended to share equipment and facilities based on kinship relations. As a result, the barriers to entry into trading activities were lower for new entrants whose relatives already owned assets that could be shared. The same study also established that "social networks enable traders to deal with each other in a more trustworthy manner by granting and receiving credit" (Fafchamps and Minten, 2002:203). This finding resembles what Ogawa (2006) observed in the second-hand clothes trading industry in Tanzania. According to Ogawa (2006), informal traders engaged in informal credit transactions known as "*mali kauli"*. This practice involved extension of credit by merchants to middlemen traders based on trust. In a study of financing options for agricultural middlemen in Ghana, Quartey et al. (2012) found that most of the credit that middlemen accessed for trading purposes came from middlemen's informal networks of friends and relatives. Van Donge (1993) made similar findings in his anthropological study of traders hailing from Uruguru area of Tanzania. Van Donge (1993) stated that kinship relations played a key role in supporting trading activities. He observed that kinship networks were an important source of start-up capital and traders with kinship links tended to pool resources and share trading space. He further noted that resource sharing went beyond kinship circles to cover traders who were just familiar with each other. The practice of sharing resources is reminiscent of the concept of pooling which, according to Hyden (2011), represents cooperation among informal groups and networks. Traders were observed to advance short-term credit lines to each other, but such practices were undermined by the general lack of trust and shortage of dependable relationships (Hyden, 2011). Van Donge's (1993) findings underscore the importance of strong social relations as a pre-condition for actors to share resources. The foregoing confirms the claim made by Lin and Sun (2006) that informal finance plays a central role in financing activities of small and medium enterprises in developing countries.

Among the different types of social relations, the family especially has been identified as a social institution that provides a variety of resources to middlemen traders at various stages of their business (Fox and Sohnesen, 2012; Kweka and Fox, 2011). According Kweka and Fox (2011), most agricultural trading business falls under the

category of household enterprises. They are built on the base of household resources which include financial, labour, and infrastructural resources. In Madagscar, Fafchamps and Minten (2002) observed that traders drew on family labour for the day-to-day running of their trading activities. Family members have also been observed to play an important role in providing ideas, mentorship, and motivation in the running of informal enterprises (Greve and Salaff, 2003; Malmström and Johannson, 2017). In Sierra Leone, Jalloh (1999) identified the family as the nexus of trading capital and other resource mobilisation for traders who were involved in agricultural trading activities. These findings are consistent with the theoretical proposition that families act as conduits through which entrepreneurial actors access vital resources (Arregle et al., 2015; Bygrave and Zacharakis, 2011; Casson, 1982).

Overall, existing literature points to the significant role of social networks in the mobilisation of resources that agricultural trading middlemen need to conduct their business activities. However, the literature has not explicitly drawn a link between the resource mobilisation process and the broader research on social embeddedness. The role of strong and weak social relations has not been adequately specified.

Social embeddedness of transactional behaviour

The influence of social relations on actors' transacting behaviour is central to Granovetter's (1985) social embeddedness argument. Bjerke and Hultman (2002) refer to a transaction as any exchange of value between any two actors. Transactions are at the core of the market exchange processes of buying and selling. As trading entrepreneurs, middlemen transact in both factor and product markets. Entrepreneurs acquire entrepreneurial resources from factor markets and sell their goods and services in the product markets (Dillon and Barrett, 2017; Haessel et al., 1972; Kirzner 1973). According to Jack and Anderson (2002), social relations affect transactional behaviour, which includes the choice of investment and trading partners.

Empirical studies that have been conducted have mostly focused on the effect of social relations on the choice of trading partners, price negotiation processes and the nature of business relations (Abebe et al., 2016; Geertz, 1978; Landa, 2006). In a study of Ethiopian grain markets, Abebe et al. (2016) observed that social relationships, such as ethnic and religious ties, influenced the choice of trading partners. Similarly, in a study of peasant crop marketing in Java, Indonesia, Hayami and Kawagoe (2003) observed that

local members of the peasantry used their ongoing personal relations with fellow farmers to source produce for sale. The practice of leveraging social contacts to source and buy commodities was also observed to be prevalent in fish trading (Wibisono and Manaf, 2018). In a study of fish trading practices in Pangandaran area of Indonesia, Wibisono and Manaf (2018) noted that middlemen who engaged in the buying and selling of fish maintained close social relations with fishermen which helped secure fish supplies. Likewise, in Thailand, Kampa et al. (2015) found that fish middlemen drew on their personal and social relations to manage supply and stabilise prices amid conditions of shortage.

Several studies on farmer bargaining practices have shown that social relations between middlemen and farmers tended to have an impact on the commercial outcomes (Effendi, 1999; Lenhardt, 2016). Lenhardt's (2016) study of negotiations between traders and farmers showed that middlemen awarded higher prices to farmers with whom they shared kinship and friendly relations. Mere familiarity between negotiating parties was also associated with more satisfactory price outcomes, (Lenhardt, 2016). In Nigeria, Oluwabamide (2015) discovered that traders tended to provide preferential pricing to clients with whom they shared close social relations. Aside from agricultural marketing trading, the tendency of trading partners to favour each other based on the existence of social relations was observed by Frank et al. (2019) in a study focused on the behaviour of stock market traders in Finland.

Some studies show that transacting behaviour in agricultural markets is strongly influenced by social relations and structures (Eicher and Staatz, 1998). He noted that price setting was affected by the nature of the social relationship between transacting parties. Lenhardt (2016) similarly noticed that social norms and structures and affect the degree of bargaining power of transacting parties when negotiating the sale of their goods. These findings confirm Seppala's (1998) observation that village economic life is a combination of contractual and affectionate arrangements on which the social comes to bear on the economic and vice-versa. Effendi's (1999) study of middlemen and farmer relations in Indonesia confirmed this point, noting that familiarity and informality are the basis upon which the two sets of actors conduct their transactions.

Overall, empirical literature tends to support the view that the transactional life of middlemen is influenced and fashioned by a pre-existing set of social relations. What is

not clear in literature is whether the influence of social relations yields positive or negative outcomes for the transacting parties. This thesis builds on the existing empirical studies to explore the nature and pattern of influences of social relations on the transaction behaviour of agricultural trading middlemen.

2.6 Conclusion

This chapter has presented and discussed theoretical and empirical literature relating to the core concepts of social embeddedness, informal entrepreneurship, and middleman. The purpose of this chapter was to create conceptual clarity by grounding the research in scholarly discourse as reflected in extant literature. In pursuit of that objective, some convergencies and divergencies were highlighted in a manner which established departure points for this study. In the same vein, the chapter proposed working definitions and positions adopted by this study in relation to the key concepts. The next chapter builds on analysis done in this literature chapter to propose and elaborate an integrative theoretical and analytical framework that guides the research process.

Chapter 3: Theoretical and analytical framework

3.0 Introduction

This chapter presents and synthesises existing theories related to social embeddedness of economic action. It culminates in an integrative theoretical and analytical framework that informs the data collection, analysis, and interpretation processes. Drawing from contemporary literature, the chapter starts by providing clarity on the concept of theoretical framework and its attendant concepts. This is followed by a discussion of the core social network theories that undergird the ensuing theoretical and analytical framework. The chapter also provides working definitions of key concepts related to social embeddedness and entrepreneurial action. Ultimately, the chapter presents and explains the integrative theoretical and analytical framework for the study.

Based on the understanding of a theoretical framework as an analytical structure that is borne from a synthesis of relevant theories, concepts and knowledge, subsequent sections of this chapter present and discuss the main social network theories and concepts within the context of entrepreneurial action. The discussion of the key theories and network theories forms the basis of the integrated theoretical and analytical framework proposed for this study.

3.1 Theoretical foundations of social embeddedness

This study's investigation of social embeddedness is rooted in social network theory. Although the social embeddedness concept is widely accepted as a linchpin of economic sociology, it does not have an independent theoretical framework outside social network theory (Machado, 2011, Skårner and Gerdner, 2018). Social network theory frameworks are still regarded as the most dependable theoretical basis for investigating social embeddedness in empirical studies (Meagher, 2005; Migliore et al., 2014). As proven by other scholars who have studied social embeddedness before, the embeddedness of economic phenomena is best investigated using social network analysis (Lin and Xiong, 2016; Mumba, 2016; Schweizer, 1997; Uzzi, 1997). Further, the choice of social network analysis as the main theoretical framework recognises that social embeddedness is a broad concept which manifests in different ways that can be explored using different sub-

theories (Portes and Sensenbrenner, 1993). According to Bögenhold (2013:293), social network analysis *"explores modes and contents of exchanges between different agents when symbols, emotions, or goods and services are exchanged"*. It is in the exchange actions that the social embeddedness of economic actions is made manifest. As observed by Bakhtiari (2016), it is through analysing social networks that social embeddedness patterns of economic actions are discernible and describable. In the context of trading actions, Brønd (2018) noted that social network analysis is useful in uncovering the complexities of trade relations. Borgatti et al. (2014) notes that social network theory has different theoretical strands that are all useful in investigating the nature and pattern of social embeddedness. The most prominent social network theories that have relevance to entrepreneurship and business actions include the strengths of weak ties theory, structural holes theory and the social capital theory.

Theoretical links between social embeddedness and various social network theories are not clearly articulated and have been a cause for confusion and inconsistency among scholars (McClenaghan, 2000; Xin and Qin, 2011). The lack of a unified theory of social embeddedness has resulted in a diversity of theories which seek to explain different aspects of social embeddedness, but a unitary theory on this field has remained elusive (Skårner and Gerdner, 2018). According to Portes (1993), the concept of social embeddedness acts as a theoretical umbrella under which there are several theories aimed at explaining related phenomena. The interpretation of social embeddedness as an all-encompassing description of the sociological nature of economic relations is echoed by Xin and Qin (2011). In elaborating the relationship between social embeddedness, social networks and social capital theory, Xin and Qin (2011: 1) assert that "embeddedness is the basic description of the economic phenomenon". Xin and Qin (2011) seek to clear the confusion that often characterises theoretical approaches adopted to study social embeddedness. What emerges from their argument is that the social embeddedness concept occupies an apex position in the theoretical hierarchy. Social networks are portrayed as the arena or context within which social embeddedness of economic action is observable. Social network theory, in turn, is a generic description of the various theories put forward to explain various phenomena within social networks. The section below presents and discusses the key concepts that are relevant to the scholarly

investigation of social networks and demonstrates their link to social embeddedness of entrepreneurial actions.

3.2 Concept of social networks

Social networks are an important foundational block in the social network theory (Zaheer and Usai, 2004). In literature, the terms social network, social network theory and social network analysis are often used in a confusing way (Zhang and Batinge, 2021). Generally, there is scholarly consensus on the definition of a social network. According to Wasserman and Faust (1994:20), "a social network consists of a finite set or sets of actors and the relation, or relations defined on them". Within an informal economy setting, Meagher (2005:219) defines social networks as "informal organizational arrangements based on social ties". This characterisation mirrors the institutional economics position which sees actor action as governed by a set of formal and informal rules (North,1991). The common thread in all definitions of social networks is ties (relationships) between actors within a social setting (Carrington, 2011; Gilchrist and Kyprianou, 2011; Kadashin, 2012; Kebede, 2015). In his definition of social networks, Scott (2000) emphasises the dimensions of interaction and exchange that take place between any of the connected actors.

The basic building block of a social network is a dyad (Fuhse, 2009). A dyad is a relationship between any two actors (Hite, 2008; Williams and Durrance, 2008). Above the dyad is a triad, which is a relationship consisting of three actors. After the triad, comes the whole network, which is an interconnection of all actors within a defined social space. A tie between any two actors is also described as a flow which represents "a flow of resources that can be material or non-material (Wasserman and Faust 1999: 4). In relation to flows between actors, Podolny (2001) notes that social networks can also be equated to pipes that facilitate the flow of resources between connected actors. In the study of social networks, an actor is also referred to as a "node" and a node can represent individuals, groups, communities, companies or even countries (Borgatti and Foster, 2003; Edwards, 2010; Musial, 2018; Williams and Durrance, 2008; Zyphur et al., 2018). According to Simpson and Loe (2017), human communities comprise a series of overlapping social networks, within which members are connected by a variety of

relational ties. Therefore, it is possible for an actor to belong to more than one single network.

Dudek (2016:208) argues that the social network constitutes the principal axis in the exploration of social embeddedness of social action. This argument acknowledges the fact that social embeddedness takes place within the context of a social network and a study of the network is inevitable when one wants to understand embeddedness as a phenomenon. It is, however, essential to note that the idea of social networks is broad and malleable and depends on the level of analysis. In an informal economy sector setting, any two actors may be investigated as a social network as could a whole sector that consists of several actors. The focus of this study is the personal network (ego-centric network) of agricultural trading middlemen. It is through the personal (ego-centric) network of the middleman that the study explores the social embeddedness of economic activity.

Types of social networks

Scholars have identified three types of networks, namely sociocentric networks, personal networks, and open-system networks (Scott and Carrington, 2011). The generic categorisation of social networks is mainly based on the vantage point of analysis. According to McCarty et al. (2019), social networks have been historically divided into personal and sociocentric or whole networks. Personal networks look at networks from the perspective of a single individual (ego) and are also known as ego-networks or egocentric networks (Wellman, 2007). Ego-networks depict relationships or connections between a single individual and other individuals who are known as alters (Berrou and Cambarnous, 2009). According to Borgatti and Foster (2003), personal networks track the links between the ego and their other connections (alters) as well as the relationships that exist between the alters themselves. Hanneman and Riddle (2005) stress that personal networks are primarily concerned with dyadic relations and exchanges but do not shed much light on what happens at a macro level within the network structure. Crossley et al. (2015) emphasise that the boundaries of a personal network are defined by the reach of the focal actor's direct connections. The personal network's focus on a particular ego or individual actor implies an exploration of the ego's micro-operating environment. Within the economic arena, this focus on the individual falls under microeconomic analysis,

which is concerned with individuals and their interactions (Dopfer et al., 2004; Frerichs, 2009; Freyens, 2008; Barney and Felin, 2013).

Sociocentric or whole networks are defined by "the pattern of relationships between actors in a defined, bounded group or a community or a context" (McCarty et al., 2019:6). Such a network is made up of relational ties among members of a clearly bounded population (Hawe et al., 2004). To the extent that personal networks can be deduced from sociocentric networks, the latter can be construed as an amalgamation of several personal networks. Similarly, a personal network can be aptly described as a subset of a whole network. In this sense a personal network represents a micro level view while a whole network depicts the aggregate or macro view of social connections. This view is consistent with Smith's (2012) assertion that, within the social network domain, microstructures are constituent components of broader macrostructures.

It is also noteworthy that the application of the social network concept in other fields, such as economics, entrepreneurship, business, and politics, has given birth to new network categorisations. In entrepreneurship research, the term entrepreneurial network is rapidly gaining currency (Burt, 2000; Chiesi, 2018; Premaratne, 2002). While the definitions of such networks tend to border on social relations, the word social is dropped in the naming convention and is replaced by the specific purpose which the relations serve. For instance, Chiesi (2018) defines entrepreneurial networks as "the patterns of interpersonal relations emerging from entrepreneurial activities". Likewise, Cvetanović (2015:79) defines an entrepreneurial network as "a personal and business network formed by entrepreneurs in order to realise their entrepreneurial venture". While the word interpersonal connotes the existence of social ties, the overriding emphasis is on the entrepreneurial ends that such ties serve.

In this thesis, the entrepreneur's personal network forms the context within which the social embeddedness of entrepreneurial actions was investigated. According to Kregar and Antončič (2016), an entrepreneur's network consists of a mix of friendship, business and kinship ties. Likewise, Lagha (2020) asserts that an entrepreneur's personal network comprises a combination of affective and professional ties accumulated over time.

3.3 Social network theory

This section presents and discusses scholarly perspectives on social network theory and selected network theories related to entrepreneurship and economic embeddedness. Erçetin and Neyişci (2016:108) define social network theory as "the study of how the social structure of relationships around a person, group, or organization affects beliefs or behaviors". According to Li et al. (2021), social network theory is a perspective for conducting sociological analysis and is an important paradigm for conducting research on social networks and structures. Eisenberg and Houser (2007:4493) describe network theory as "a broader term that represents theoretical developments in all areas of sociology by focusing on the key idea of actors and how they are connected, whereby actors can be individuals or groups or social institutions". Overall, there is scholarly consensus that social network theory is an umbrella term for all theoretical constructs, concepts and theories relating to phenomena that take place within social networks. This implies that there are several theories and concepts that are grouped under network theory but which sometimes assume a life of their own. According to Sih et al. (2009), social network theory is premised on the observation that social structure matters. Borgatti and Lopez-Kidwell (2011) draw a distinction between social network theory and a theory of networks. Their main contention is that a theory of networks is focused on addressing pure processes such as tie formation while a social network theory focuses on the outcomes related to network dynamics. Thus, they define network theory as the "processes and mechanisms that relate network properties to outcomes of interest", (Borgatti and Lopez-Kidwell, 2011:40). Overall, social network theories are concerned with uncovering how the structure and interactions within various social networks influence different outcomes (Kebede, 2015; Li et al., 2015).

Social network theory has been proven to be the most pertinent tool in studying social embeddedness (Lin and Qede, 2011; Uzzi, 1996). It is through the study of networks and network dynamics that the phenomenon of social embeddedness is discerned and qualified (Granovetter, 2005; Uzzi, 1996). Erçetin and Neyişci, (2016:167) assert that social network theories "inform and sustain the methods of social network analysis". This study applies three core theories that are fundamental to the exposition of social embeddedness of economic activities in society. These theories are the strength of weak ties theory (Granovetter, 1973, 1983), the structural holes theory (Burt, 1992) and

the social capital theory (Lin, 1999, 2004). The following section provides a review of each of these social network theories.

Strength of weak ties theory

The strength of weak ties theory is one of the social network theories that explains the impact of network ties on socio-economic outcomes (Granovetter, 1973). The main argument put forward by Granovetter (1973) is that weak social ties have beneficial effects in the social exchange process. To differentiate between strong and weak ties, Granovetter (1973:1361), describes tie strength as a function of a "combination of the amount of time, the emotional intensity, the intimacy (mutual confiding), and the reciprocal services which characterize the tie". Weak ties involve less interaction, emotional commitment, intimacy, and reciprocity between actors while the opposite is true for strong ties (Schensul and LeCompte, 2012). In addition, Carson et al. (1995) note that actors connected by weak ties tend to have less resemblance and are, therefore, likely to belong to different social categories.

Weak ties in an individual's network are characterised as bridges that enable an individual to access opportunities that are not available within that individual's clique of strongly connected ties. While weak ties are exalted for giving the individual access to new opportunities, strong ties are denigrated for being redundant and only capable of relaying more of the same resources. According to Granovetter (1973), individuals are more likely to obtain valuable resources – or information – from weak ties, as these weak ties are more likely to circulate in a higher volume and variety of social networks and therefore to possess different and wider-ranging resources (Klyver et al., 2011).

Based on job search studies, Granovetter (1973) observed that an actor's weak ties were more instrumental in getting useful information about new jobs. He concluded that information that flowed through weak ties had an advantage over information that emanated from strong and close ties. According to Flap (1994), the advantage of information contained in weak ties lies in the fact that it is likely to be new and non-redundant. Further, weak ties are extolled for their ability to facilitate the flow of information from distant parts of a network and from otherwise disconnected network clusters. To this extent, weak ties that exist within a network are characterised as bridging ties that provide individuals who hold such ties (Atterton, 2007; Ganovetter, 1983).

While the usefulness of the "strength of weak ties" theory cannot be doubted, its emergence seems to have had the unintended consequence of insinuating that strong ties are less important. This has been exacerbated by the fact that there is no specific theory that builds on strong ties (Krackhardt, 1994). However, scholarly research has revealed that strong ties also matter (Carpenter et al., 2003; Czernek-Marszałek, 2020; Jack, 2010). Van der Leij and Goyal (2011) argue that strong and weak ties tend to yield optimal outcomes when they are well-blended and leveraged simultaneously. This view corroborates Jack's (2005) argument that strong ties provide the individual with a mechanism for tapping into their weak ties. In the context of entrepreneurship, Portes and Sensenbrenner (1993) point to the importance of strong ties in the initiation of new ventures, but they also caution that such cohesive ties may be a drag to the business because of social claims that are common among strongly connected people.

While the "strengths of weak ties" argument is mainly focused on the access of new information and ideas, strong ties have been associated with the ability to facilitate richer exchanges that depend on trust and regular exchanges between network members (Arregle et al., 2015; Grimm et al., 2013; Jack et al., 2004). Reinecke (2018) argues that strong ties are also an important source of information and both weak and strong ties are instrumental in the acquisition of important resources. Ahrari et al. (2018) argue that, while weak ties are important for accessing new information, strong ties are more effective when it comes to the sharing of tacit information. Further, Bian (1997) argues that under conditions of high uncertainty and informality, strong ties can be leveraged as bridges in the same way as weak ties. Bridging that requires strong ties applies in cases where high levels of trust are required; the bridging tie needs to be highly trusted by both parties to a deal (Hite, 2005).

As observed by Walther et al. (2019), both weak and strong ties do matter. As demonstrated in literature, the two sets of social ties are highly interrelated and interdependent to the extent that any theoretical consideration of one type of tie subsumes the other. Consistent with this analysis, this thesis draws on both strong and weak ties to explore the social embeddedness of trading middlemen's entrepreneurial actions.

Structural holes theory

The structural holes theory focusses on how actors bridge gaps within their social network sphere to connect parts of the network that would otherwise remain disconnected (Burt, 1992; Labun and Wittek, 2018). The theory was developed by Burt (1992) who observed that social networks were made up of clusters of any two strongly connected actors that were separated by gaps. The gap that exists between any of the closely-knit clusters is known as the structural hole (Burt, 1992). The process of occupying a potential gap in a network to connect two disparate parts of a network is known as bridging (Murzacheva and Levie, 2020). Burt's central argument is that structural holes in a network are important for accessing valuable resources and information (Goyal and Vega-Redondo, 2007). Structural holes emerge when certain actors of groups of closely connected actors within a network are not connected. According to Burt (1992), structural hole positions bestow the opportunity for the actor occupying it to act as a broker entrepreneur. Complementing this view, Maurer (2014) describes structural holes as the possibility for some actors to achieve strategic positions within a network structure. A prototypical example of a structural hole is the intermediary position that middlemen occupy in trading networks. This aligns with Burchard and Cornwell (2018) who postulate that structural holes create opportunities and brokerage potential for the focal actor, also known as the ego. Recognising that a society can consist of several weakly connected social networks, Burt (1992) describes a structural hole as a gap between two individuals with complementary resources or information. According to Klver et al. (2011), a structural hole serves the same purpose as the weak tie in terms of providing access to new information and resources. It is the aspect of non-redundancy between two contacts that connects the structural holes theory to Granovetter's (1973) strengths of weak ties theory. Labun and Wittek (2014:2075) define a structural hole as an "empty space between contacts in a person's network". According to the structural hole theory, occupying the space on a bridge that spans a structural hole provides an actor with brokerage potential, gatekeeping power and access to other resources from third parties (Burchard and Cornwell, 2018). This observation aligns with Maurer's (2014) claim that structural holes bestow advantages and strategic positions to some actors within a social network structure. Therefore, in informal trading situations, the structural holes theory is helpful

in exploring and explaining how traders come to occupy brokerage/intermediation positions.

Some scholars have argued that the structural holes theory is a refinement of Granovetter's "strengths of weak ties theory" (Borgatti and Lopez-Kidwell, 2011; Burchard and Cornwell, 2018; Zaheer and Soda, 2009). In as much as these two network theories have significant resemblances, they also have critical differences which have a bearing on their application. It is noteworthy that Burt's (1992) conceptualisation of a structural hole resembles Granovetter's weak tie in the sense that they both represent a kind of peripheral tie that breaks from a closely knit cluster of strong networks. In this sense, the two theories are preoccupied with the connections between a cohesive core and the world outside. The two theories tend to resemble each other in terms of the unit of action and analysis but Burt's orientation leans towards the whole network and subnetworks located within it. While Granovetter's "strengths of weak ties" theory is fully explorable within the context of a personal (egocentric) network situation, the same cannot be said of the "structural holes theory" which requires a view of the connections beyond that of one actor and associated alters. Thus, the "strength of weak ties" theory is largely focused on the quality and content of ties but not on the structural configuration. Meanwhile, the emphasis of the "structural holes" theory is the positional importance of the nodal actor. As has been suggested in literature, an actor occupying a structural role can be strongly tied to actors on either side of the whole (Bian, 1997). It is possible to explore the strengths of weak ties argument by mapping various dyadic relationships which emanate from the ego to different alters. However, it is not feasible to illustrate a structural holes situation without having at least one triadic connection. Therefore, the application of the structural holes theory requires more than just a single personal actor network. As observed by Mejia (2017), the structural holes theory is more useful to the analysis of network dynamics between subnetworks that are part of a much larger network.

Consequently, this thesis investigates the extent to which the emergence and persistence of middlemen is linked to their location within the structure of network relations. This involved analysing middlemen's personal networks to explore how they played a linking role between farmers and other economic actors within the rural agricultural marketing system.

Social capital theory

The third social network theory that is relevant to the investigation of social embeddedness of entrepreneurial activities is the social capital theory. Despite several years of scholarship, social capital remains one of the most elusive and contested concepts in economic sociology (Ali and Yousuf, 2019; Nyangena and Steiner, 2008; Staveren and Knorringa, 2007). The key premise of the social capital concept is that social networks have value (Kadushin, 2012). The value of social networks lies in their ability to facilitate access to various resources that exist within the network structures (Fiorini et al., 2018). The concept of social capital is frequently associated with Bourdieu (1986), Coleman (1988) and Putnam (1995). However, Lin (1999) was the first to attempt the development of a coherent social network theory based on the social capital concept. Burt (2000) continued the effort by linking the social capital concept with his "structural holes" theory, asserting that structural holes facilitate access to social capital. While social capital seems to have assumed a theoretical life of its own, some scholars strongly view it as a manifestation of social embeddedness phenomena (Christoforou, 2011; Lin and Qede, 2011).

Whitehouse (2011) and Fine (2010) note that the treatment of social capital in literature has not been consistent and, as a result, several definitions and interpretations exist. Bourdieu (1986:251) defines social capital as "the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition or in other words, to membership in a group". Taking a similar stance, Scott and Hofmeyer (2007) denote social capital as resource flows within the network. Similarly, Lin (1999:471) described social capital as "resources accessed through social networks". Putnam (1995:66) defines social capital as "features of social organization such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit". This perspective is shared by Woolcock (1998) who emphasises that social capital is mutually exploited by the actors involved. Coleman (1988) is more abstract in his definition and stresses that social capital is "defined by its function". Meanwhile, in his elaboration of a social capital theory, Lin (2004:19) denotes social capital as "investment in social relations with expected returns in the marketplace". This characterisation is typical of Lin's neo-capital treatment of social capital (Lin, 1999). What is evident from the foregoing analysis is that

all descriptions of social capital come down to resources accessible through existing networks of relations and which can be called upon for the social and economic benefit of the social actors concerned. However, there is no clear definition of what qualifies as a resource which renders the concept abstract and difficult to operationalise in practice. The ambiguity of what constitutes a resource raises questions as to why the concept of social capital could not just be accommodated within social resources theory. Social resources theory is much clearer in terms of what constitutes a resource (Anand and Poggi, 2018; Törnblom and Kazemi, 2012).

The difficulty in defining resources is linked to the use of the word "capital" in the phrase "social capital". Whereas the "social" aspect of the concept of social capital is more consistently defined by most scholars, the "capital" element has attracted a myriad of interpretations. Lin (2004) places social capital within the context of capital theory and demonstrates that, like other forms of capital (financial, physical, and human), social capital is accessed and deployed by economic actors in pursuit of economic objectives. In concurrence with Coleman (1988), he indicates that social capital facilitates access to other forms of capital. Drawing on Lin's definition, Xin and Qin (2011) construe social capital as the investment made in building a social network with expected returns. The challenge with the wholesale treatment of social capital as investment is that it assumes that social networks are consciously built by the concerned actors. The assumption of consciously built social networks runs contrary to the observation that networks consist of both ascribed and achieved relations, meaning that some relations are passively inherited (Fafchamps and Minten, 2001; Scott and Carrington, 2011). In the end, all attempts to elaborate on what the "capital" in social capital stands for boil down to resources of some sort. In the context of business and entrepreneurship, these resources translate into tangible and intangible inputs required to carry out the entrepreneurial actions (Huang, 2016; Mishra and Zachary, 2014; Stam et al., 2013; Vissa, 2012).

Another important dimension in the analysis of social capital relates to the debate on whether it is a public or private resource (Beugelsdijk, 2009; Claridge, 2020; Tirmizi, 2005). The treatment of social capital as a public good is mostly associated with Colman (1993) and Colman (1990). To Putnam (1993:170) social capital "is ordinarily a public good, unlike conventional capital, which is ordinarily a private good". Colman (1990:315) claims that "social capital is not the private property of any of the persons

who benefit from it". Similarly, Fine (2010:93) intimates that "social capital stands for anything else not private or tangible that might contribute to economic performance". Fukuyama (2001:8) posits that "social capital is a private good that is nonetheless pervaded by externalities, both positive and negative". This view is associated with the ego-centred view of social networks in which resources flowing through the network are seen as appropriable property of the individual actor (Laurence and Kim, 2021; Van Der Gaag and Snijders, 2005). However, given the multidimensionality and breadth of the social concept, trying to classify it into public or private good categories is a futile exercise. As noted by several scholars, social capital shares the qualities of both private and public goods (Balijepally et al., 2004; Claridge, 2020). As suggested by Lin (2003), social capital can change from a public good, when it is in its latent form, to a private good, when it has been mobilised by a particular actor for their own individual benefit. This is like a fish that is a public good while it is in the ocean but becomes a private good belonging to a particular fisherman once it is fished out. Instead of focusing the debate on whether social capital is a public or private good, it is more useful to look at how social capital is appropriated by network participants.

Overall, past studies on social capital have failed to yield one coherent theory. The multitude of publications on the subject has tended to create more heat than light. Instead of advancing a coherent theory for social capital, studies have focused mostly on proposing competing descriptions of the concept with no logical stacks. What scholars have generally concluded is that social capital is such a diverse concept and is prone to multiple conceptualisations and interpretations (Dudwick et al., 2006; Lee, 2017; Felici, 2019). Consequently, the theoretical and methodological application of the social capital concept remains in question (Gannon and Roberts, 2020). As it is, it is difficult to outline what the social capital theory is without reverting to a discussion on the social network theory in general.

Notwithstanding the several shortfalls of the social capital theory, it still presents an important dimension of social embeddedness of economic actions (Lee, 2017). As a result, the theory is incorporated into a unified conceptual framework to better understand how the resource mobilisation that entrepreneurial actors undertake is influenced by the social network environment in which they are situated.

3.4 Social network analysis

While social network theories provide the theoretical lens for investigating social embeddedness of economic action, social network is widely agreed to be the major methodological tool for conducting such investigation (Chiesi, 2015; Erçetin and Neyişci, 2016; Fiemel, 2017; Scott and Stokman, 2015; Tabassum et al., 2018; Zhang and Batinge, 2021). In literature, social network analysis is treated as both a theoretical perspective and a methodology (Carolan, 2014). According to McCarty et al. (2019:6) social network analysis "is the study of the pattern of relationships between social actors". Understood as both a set of methods and methodological approach, social network analysis involves the collection, analysis, presentation, and interpretation of relational data about actors within a social network (Borgatti et al., 2013; Crossley and Edwards, 2016; Durland and Fredericks, 2005; Erçetin and Neyişci, 2016). Social network analysis enables researchers to understand interaction patterns between actors and to map out relationship structures that emerge in the process (Chiesi, 2015; De Toni et al., 2007). According to Bogenhold (2013), social network analysis is well-suited to investigating social embeddedness of economic action as it can reveal both the patterns of exchange and the kind of resources exchanged by partners. This claim is corroborated by the widespread deployment of this methodological approach by most scholars who set put to investigate the influence of social relations and networks on social actions and outcomes (Berrou and Combarnous, 2012; Scott et al., 2018; Walther, 2015).

Social network analysis is normally divided into two categories, in line with the typologisation of social networks. The analysis of personal networks is known as personal network analysis while that of sociocentric is referred to as socio-centric or whole network analysis (McCarty et al., 2019; Wellman, 2007;). Personal or egocentric network analysis "studies the social networks surrounding selected people", while sociocentric network analysis "studies the pattern of relationships between actors in a defined, bounded group or a community or a context" (McCarty et al., 2019:6). In personal network analysis, information collected from the ego is used establish a network around each individual actor, thereby generating as many separate networks as the number of egos (individuals) interviewed (Perry et al., 2018). Sociocentric analysis maps out all existing and potential ties among all members of a potential group and a single network map is the resultant output (Perry et al., 2018). According to Pescosolido and Smith

(2021), the main strength of the sociocentric approach lies in its ability to capture and visualise the totality of a network. Meanwhile, McQuaid (1996) applauds the personal network analysis approach for its ability to help the researcher to understand the relationships between focal actor and his or her contacts, thereby making it easier to understand the actor's interactions and exchange actions.

In entrepreneurship research, personal social network analysis is commended for providing a fitting analytical framework for investigating the individual entrepreneur and the social structures that influence their actions (Chiesi, 2018; Reinecke, 2018). This is in line with Chiesi's (2007) assertion that social network analysis is effective in understanding social network effects at a micro level of analysis. Within the social capital domain, social network analysis is suitable for investigating the manifestation of social capital as resources that are accessed and appropriated at an individual level (McCarty et al., 2019). Sociocentric analysis is a more appropriate approach for exploring the incidence and accessibility of social capital as a collective resource (Pescosolido and Smith, 2021).

3.5 Definition of key concepts

This section provides a detailed presentation of the overarching framework which informs the investigation of the research problem. Key concepts are presented and described to clarify the meaning to be adopted in this work. Finally, the section puts forward and elaborates on an integrated conceptual and analytical framework which draws from the main concepts and theories reviewed in the preceding sections.

Conceptualising the middleman

The agricultural trading middleman constitutes the pivot investigation in this research study. In an agricultural marketing context, the middleman is unequivocally recognised as the preeminent economic actor who undertakes agricultural marketing functions such as purchasing, bulking, transporting, storing, and reselling agricultural commodities (Ghafoor et al., 2017; Khan, 2012; Pohkrel and Thapa, 2007). Notwithstanding the existence of diverse conceptualisations of middleman character, this study conceives of a middleman as an individual entrepreneur who purchases agricultural commodities from farmers and sells them to resellers or final consumers with the goal of making a profit. Acknowledging that the role of the middleman actor can be assumed by organisations or

incorporated economic entities, the choice to define the middleman in terms of the human agency is informed by the desire to allow for a closer exploration of the social and personal dimensions which tend to be blurred when a middleman role is stripped and detached from the human and social elements. Thus, in this study, the preoccupation is with the middleman as an enterprise owner–operator and not the enterprise per se. Any incorporation action which treats the enterprise as separate from its owner is viewed, therefore, as an act of disembeddedness which abstracts economic action from its human and social context.

Conceptualising the market

To the extent that the economic and entrepreneurial actions of the middleman are domiciled with the market, it is imperative that the concept "market" is clearly and consistently understood within this study. Consequently, this sub-section discusses the concept of the market, and links it to the middleman as the unit of investigation in this thesis. The conceptualisation of the market varies between neoclassical economists and sociologists. To most neoclassical economists, a market is a place where buyers and sellers meet to engage in exchange activities through the medium of the price (Spulbur, 2019; Walras, 2014). Institutional economists tend to occupy the middle ground in their characterisation of markets. Consistent with the institutional economics tradition, they view the market as an institution that facilitates buying and selling through the price mechanism, (Bliss, 2019; Degenhardt and Marx, 2016). Whereas the neoclassical tradition views the market as an autonomous entity regulated by the price mechanism, institutional economists acknowledge that markets are influenced by other factors within the context in which they operate (Baden, 1998; Harriss-White 1996). At the extreme lies the sociological view of markets. According to this view, markets are treated as social structures that are made up of ties and relationships between the various market actors (Flignstein and Dauter, 2007; Gronow, 2020; Jackson, 2007; Porter et al., 2010; Zuckerman, 2003). The actions of buying and selling come together to form relationship networks which constitute the market (Hart and Hann, 2009; Laasch, 2019; Lie, 1991, Marleni et al., 2019). Inherent in this description of markets is a denial of the assertion that markets are impersonal and rational entities that rely on the price compass to navigate their way. It also collapses the argument that market acts are undertaken by anonymous actors under conditions of perfect competition and, instead, emphasises the role of

personal relationships and power dynamics between actors involved in economic transactions. Markets are viewed as synonymous to social networks in which exchange takes place within the framework of established personal relationships (Marleni and Fitlayeni, 2020).

Despite the contrasting views on how markets are constituted and function, there is concurrence that they are central to the economic exchange process (Kriesberg and Steele, 1972). It is also universally agreed that buying and selling of goods are the key activities which take place within the realm of markets (Wang, 1999). Moreover, all schools of thought mutually recognise the important role that entrepreneurs, such as middlemen, play in driving market processes (Lewis and Chamlee-Wright, 2008; Kirzner, 2017; Klein, 2008; Lie, 1991).

The conceptualisation of market adopted in this study leans towards the sociological view of markets as social constructions in which social and economic relations between exchange actors are the basis for observed market transactions. Such an approach is more suitable for investigating agricultural commodity markets where transactions are largely informal and economic actions are often indistinguishable from the non-economic actions of the actors involved. Consistent with the observation made by Hyden (1983), the pragmatism of a sociological conceptualisation of the market lies in its inclusiveness, which allows for the real and complex phenomena that take place within the context of the market. Indeed, a sociological view of the market puts human agency at the centre of economic action, thereby allowing for a fuller investigation of the middleman as an entrepreneurial and economic actor.

Conceptualisation of economic action

The section on the social embeddedness concept reviewed the concept of economic action as it is presented in social embeddedness literature. Having provided clarity on the concepts of middleman and market, it is vital to provide clear direction on what economic action constitutes within the framework of this study. Underpinning the conceptualisation of economic action proffered here is the acknowledgement that agricultural trading middlemen are entrepreneurial actors who engage in economic actions of buying and selling agricultural food commodities within the realm of agricultural commodity markets. Consistent with the characterisation of middlemen as entrepreneurial actors, this study defines economic action as constituting entrepreneurial and business actions that

are undertaken in process of buying and selling agricultural commodities. This notion of economic action draws on the treatment of economic action as action that is carried out by entrepreneurs in pursuit of their business objectives (Correa et al., 2020; Granovetter, 2017). In this study, economic actions are thus treated as equivalent to individual entrepreneurial actions that are exercised by middlemen in pursuit of their business objectives within the context of their social and personal relations. This portrayal of economic action is in sync with Mote's (2012) characterisation of the entrepreneur as the prototypical economic actor. Given the centrality of economic actions to this study, the subsection below provides a detailed elaboration of the core entrepreneurial actions that middlemen undertake in their entrepreneurial pursuits.

3.6 Typology of entrepreneurial actions

Building on the preceding argument that economic action is synonymous with entrepreneurial action, this sub-section identifies and describes the core entrepreneurial actions undertaken by agricultural trading middlemen in executing their core functions of buying and selling agricultural commodities. According to Chen et al. (2018:298), entrepreneurial action is defined as "a process involving goal-oriented cognitive and behavioural activities of individuals to engage perceived uncertainty in creating new ventures". Against the understanding of agricultural trading middlemen as entrepreneurial actors, and entrepreneurial action as a process, the interpretation of entrepreneurial action in this study covers the full breadth of the entrepreneurial process from opportunity identification to resources mobilisation and exploitation of the entrepreneurial opportunity identified (Botha and Pieterson, 2020; Jack et al., 2004; Mathews et al., 2018; McMullen and Shepherd, 2006; Mishra and Zachary, 2015; Schott and Sedaghat, 2014; Shane and Venkataraman, 2000). This perspective aligns with Masaro's (2016) characterisation of the entrepreneur as an individual and the actions that are performed as the process of entrepreneurship. Without disregarding the fact that entrepreneurship actions are many and varied in scope, this study groups entrepreneurial actions into three major groups, namely opportunity identification, resource mobilisation and opportunity exploitation. These major activities subsume more specific ancillary activities but

generally represent the broader spectrum of the entrepreneurial process (Aldrich and Cliff, 2003; Fisher, 2012; Hisrich et al., 2017; Schott and Sedaghat, 2014; Tang et al., 2012). The said entrepreneurial actions constitute the core axis upon which the investigation of the problem of social embeddedness of informal entrepreneurship is pivoted.

Opportunity identification

An entrepreneurial opportunity is widely regarded as the trigger to the entrepreneurial process (Afolabi, 2015; Emami et al., 2020). According to Emami et al. (2020), an entrepreneurial opportunity represents a favourable situation that an entrepreneur can exploit and profit from through the acquisition and profitable deployment of resources. In other words, an opportunity exists when there is a chance that an entrepreneurial individual can make profit by acting on it, such that the costs of doing so are less than the realisable income. According to Stuart and Sorenson (2005), entrepreneurial opportunities are deciphered from information that entrepreneurial actors have access to. However, there are disagreements among scholars about whether opportunities are discovered or created by entrepreneurs (Acs and Audretsch, 2002; Korsgaard, 2011). On the one hand, the opportunity creation school of thought advances that opportunities are created by entrepreneurs (Aldrich and Cliff, 2003). On the other hand, the discovery school of thought believes that opportunities to make profit already exist in the market and the role of entrepreneurs is to identify and exploit such opportunities (Kirzner 1997; Korsgaard, 2011). Consistent with the Austrian school of eeconomics stance of recognising middlemen as arbitraging entrepreneurs, this study aligns with the opportunity discovery perspective. In the opportunity discovery perspective, access to information is highly instrumental to identifying trading and profit-making opportunities (John and Thomas, 2021).

Resource mobilisation

While entrepreneurship scholars tend to hold different views regarding the nature of entrepreneurship, the importance of access to resources for addressing such opportunities is widely acknowledged (Khalid et al., 2016; Klein, 2010; Leyden and Link, 2015). In sociological terms, the process of gaining access to vital resources needed to exploit a particular entrepreneurial opportunity is known as resource mobilisation (Chowdhury, 2004; Stuart and Sorenson, 2005; Zhou and Ai, 2014). In mainstream entrepreneurial

research, this is known mostly as resource acquisition (Klein, 2010; Mishra and Zachary, 2015).

Opportunity exploitation

Opportunity exploitation consists of interlinked core actions that an entrepreneurial actor must undertake to create a viable value proposition, deploy necessary resources and generate profitable returns in a sustainable manner (De Carolis and Saparito, 2006; Fisher, 2012). Opportunity exploitation includes operational actions, such as buying and selling, aimed at generating a profit. Also included under the rubric of opportunity exploitation are such actions as product development and development of strategies that result in the creation of a competitive advantage and generation of more revenues (Cuervo et al., 2007; Klein, 2008). Organisation of opportunity exploitation actions largely conforms to the elements of value creation, delivery, and capture. This is laid out in the relevant section that provides a business model perspective of middleman activities.

3.7 Theoretical framework for the study

The foregoing literature theoretical review demonstrated that social embeddedness represents a phenomenon of the economy that manifests in multiple and diverse ways and for which there is no single theory. Thus, as already noted by other scholars, social embeddedness is a much broader concept which consists of various related theories and constructs (Santos et al., 2021). Past investigations of the social embeddedness phenomenon have been conducted using diverse social network theories (Granovetter, 2005; Meagher, 2005; Uzzi, 1996). This is in line with Eisenberg and Houser's (2007) observation that social network theory has different sub-components that seek to explain different aspects of network phenomena. Past approaches of using social network theories to explain social embeddedness of economic action have mostly seen individual theories applied in isolation (Fafchamps and Minten, 2001; Kebede, 2018; Wang and Altinay, 2012;). None of the existing theories, in isolation, is broad enough to capture the full essence of the social embeddedness of entrepreneurial action.

The theoretical framework put forward for this study falls under the broad category of what is called the social network perspective. According to Kenis and Oerlemans, (2008:289) "the social network perspective refers to a tradition in social science which focuses on the joint activities of, and continual exchanges between, participants in a social

system". The social network perspective has a long tradition in social sciences and Tichy et al. (1979:507) describe it as "an example of a theoretical framework that has developed to the point of guiding data collection as well as data analysis". The theoretical framework adopted for this thesis aligns with relational and structural strands of social embeddedness as put forward by Granovetter (1985; 2005).

Linking past theoretical frameworks to the current study

Departing from the fragmented and piecemeal approaches that have been previously applied to the study of social embeddedness of economic actions, this study developed a unified and integrative framework that drew on existing social network theories and concepts. This study achieved that by picking the most relevant social network theories and concepts to emerge with an overarching theoretical framework that was fit to explore the multiple dimensions of social embeddedness simultaneously. Putting together a theoretical framework in this way is consistent with a deductive approach which involves starting from an existing theory and adopting it as an analytical lens to guide the research effort (Edwards et al., 2021). The theoretical framework adopted drew on a framework that was developed and used by Berrou and Cambarnous (2008) to assess the influence of personal networks on the economic performance of informal entrepreneurs in West Africa. Berrou and Combarnous' (2008:7) framework is shown in Figure 3.1 below.

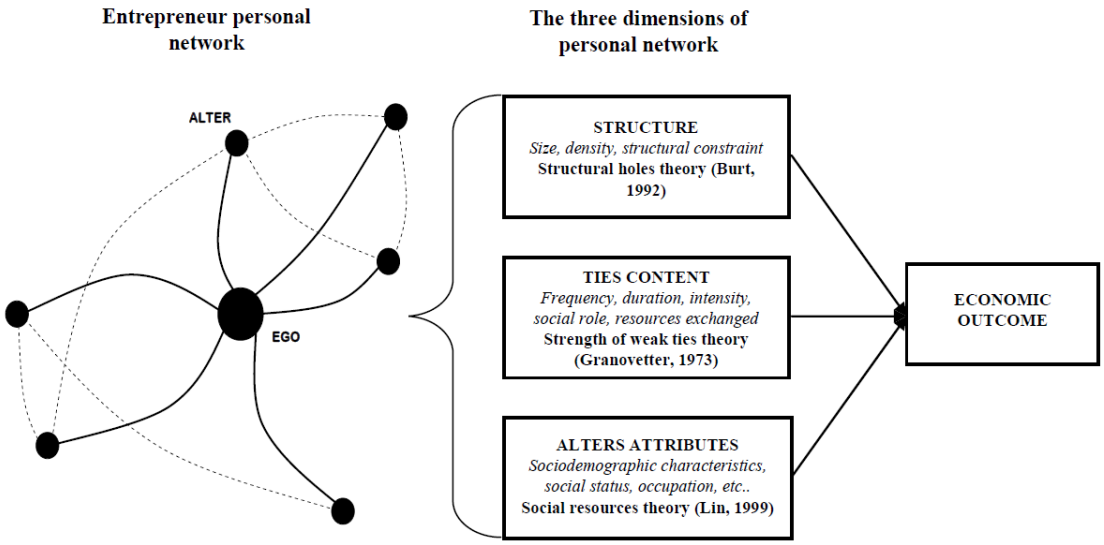


Figure 3.1: Configurations of entrepreneurs' personal network and economic outcomes.

The main hypothesis behind the model in Figure 3.1 is that configurations of an informal entrepreneur's personal network do influence their economic outcomes. They define an informal entrepreneur's personal network as the entrepreneur's "regular social relations conveying essential resources for activities' current exploitation", (Berrou and Combarnous, 2008:6). The personal network configuration is defined in terms of network structure, tie content and member attributes. These aspects constitute the various dimensions used in characterising any personal network. The framework links each network dimension to an existing social network theory, implying that the investigation of each dimension is done through the use of the respective theory. Conspicuous in this theoretical framework is the recurrent reference to resources. This definition reflects a bias towards the notion "capital" which a lot of scholars tend to use interchangeably with social embeddedness of economic action. While the theoretical framework refers to "informal activities" and economic outcomes, it generally remains vague about what that means in the context of informal entrepreneurship. The schematic framework presented in Figure 3.1 completely omits entrepreneurial actions, even though outcomes would naturally flow from specific actions. This tendency to neglect entrepreneurial action has been cited as one of the common errors made by scholars in the study of entrepreneurship (Corbett and Katz, 2015).

Conscious of the shortcomings in the theoretical framework developed and applied by Berrou and Combarnous (2008), this thesis uses the duo's framework as a baseline for developing a more comprehensive and integrated theoretical framework for investing social embeddedness of informal entrepreneurial action. The resultant theoretical framework uses an informal entrepreneur's personal network (ego-network) as the basis for exploring the influence that personal network connections and resource flows exert on an actor's economic actions and, consequently, entrepreneurial (economic) outcomes. As indicated earlier, economic actions are conceived as agricultural trading middlemen's entrepreneurial actions which include opportunity identification, resource mobilisation and opportunity exploitation. The section below provides a detailed description of the theoretical framework that underpins this thesis.

Elaboration of the theoretical and analytical framework

In line with the social network perspective which informs this theoretical framework, the framework is divided into four main components comprising the ego/entrepreneur network configuration, the entrepreneurial action set, the analytical set of theories and the economic/entrepreneurial outcome component.

Figure 3.2 below shows a schematic representation of the theoretical and analytical framework of this study.

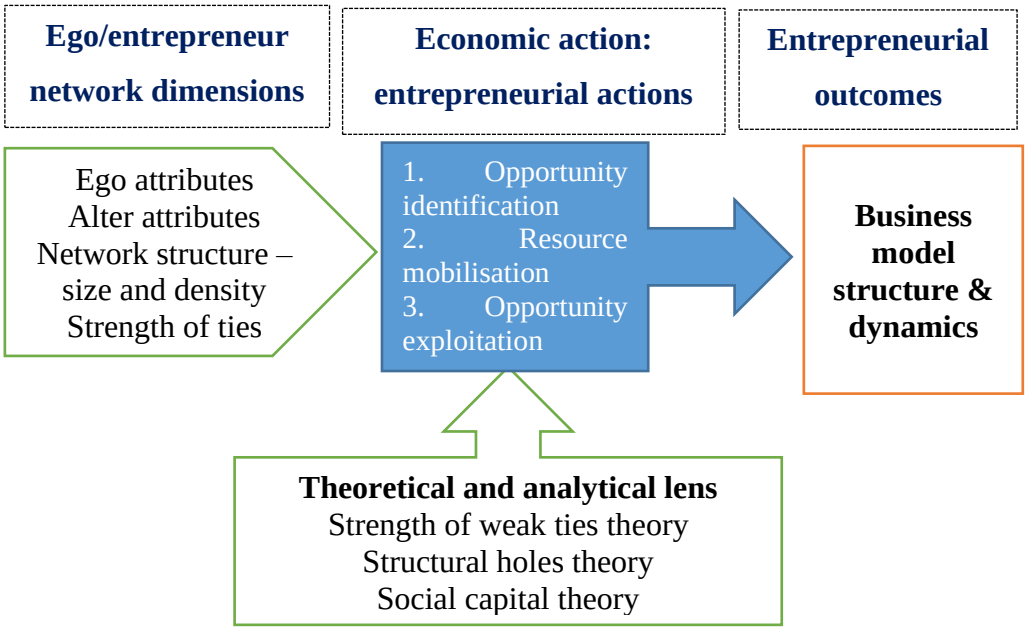


Figure 3.2: Theoretical and analytical framework of this study.

Elaboration of the ego network component

To the extent that social embeddedness is a phenomenon that manifests itself within the context of social networks, the first component in the theoretical framework reflects the need to collect information on the ego or the informal entrepreneur/middleman and his network connections. Perry et al. (2018:6) note that an ego network "consists of the alters connected to ego, along with the ties between ego and alters, and ties among alters". Within the context of entrepreneurship, Ozdemir et al. (2016:51) describe an ego network as the "web of connections that link the entrepreneur and those others to whom he or she is directly connected (the alters)". The rationale for collecting ego network data is that ego network dimensions define the ongoing system of personal and social relations that influences the individual's entrepreneurial actions. The system of personal and social relations around the ego entrepreneur creates a social context within which enterprising actions are undertaken.

Elaboration of the entrepreneurial action component

Following on this thesis' characterisation of economic action as consisting of entrepreneurial actions by the ego entrepreneur, this section represents the nucleus of this framework. In line with the Granovetterian approach of putting economic action at the centre of analysis, this component broadly identifies the key entrepreneurial actions as opportunity identification (recognition), entrepreneurial resource mobilisation and opportunity exploitation. Linking back to the literature review section, the opportunity exploitation component subsumes business model actions of value creation, value delivery and value capture. It is within the context of opportunity exploitation that transactional behaviour and practices of middlemen as informal entrepreneurs are explored and evaluated. This study explored social relations in terms of their strength and influence on entrepreneurial actions of middlemen. Entrepreneurial actions are broadly defined to include decision-making processes on sourcing, price determination and choice of trading partners. Also included under the rubric of entrepreneurial actions are business practices such as the usage or non-usage of formal contracts. Ultimately, this investigation focusses on understanding how entrepreneurial actions are influenced and patterned by social network elements.

Elaboration of the theoretical and analytical lens component

This study used three social network theories to construct a theoretical tripod upon which the investigation of social embeddedness of informal entrepreneurial actions of trading middlemen was based. The three social network theories chosen were the strength of weak ties theory, the structural holes theory and the social capital theory. The strength of weak ties theory was important for the exploration of how the strength (quality) of social relations influenced economic actions and resource exchanges during middlemen's entrepreneurial actions. While the core argument of the strength of weak ties theory is to make a case for the usefulness of weak social connections, the investigation of weak ties inherently includes strong ties as the two sets of ties co-exist. Moreover, the usefulness of weak ties is contingent on the existence of strongly tied groups within a network. While the literature review has shown that the strength of weak ties theory and the structural holes theory are often portrayed as based on the same logic, the latter theory is significantly different as it focuses on access to entrepreneurial opportunities unlike its

counterpart which emphasises access to non-redundant resources, particularly new information.

The inclusion of social capital theory in this framework is not so much in recognition of its theoretical robustness but is an acknowledgement of the usefulness of the metaphor of "social capital" to describe resources accessed via social networks. While past studies of social capital have deployed this as an independent theory framework in exploring social embeddedness of entrepreneurship, in this framework it only represents the dimension of resource flows that take place within an entrepreneur's personal network. Thus, in this framework, social capital is understood to mean resources that are accessed through the entrepreneurial actor's social and personal network. The emphasis is not on the type of resource accessed but on the usefulness of social ties and relations in facilitating access to the resource.

Business model configuration

While past research efforts on social embeddedness (mostly anchored in the social capital theory) have looked at economic outcomes in terms of economic benefits, this thesis conceives of entrepreneurial or economic outcomes in terms of the business model that results from the entrepreneurial process (series of entrepreneurial actions). Treatment of the business model as an outcome of the entrepreneurial process is in line with Sarasvathy's (2001) theory of entrepreneurial effectuation. According to Sarasvathy (2008), effectuation implies that entrepreneurs do not predefine a business model but the same is born out of a process of action and adjustments that take place as the entrepreneur navigates an uncertain future. In this case, the basic premise is that an informal entrepreneur's business model is an intermediate outcome of entrepreneurial actions which are, in turn, influenced and shaped by the entrepreneur's "ongoing system of personal and social relations". An interpretation of the research findings in terms of the informal entrepreneur's business model helps in assessing how the informal entrepreneur is "dependent on social ties for its effective functioning" (Portes, 2010:137). By placing the research findings within the context of the logic that informal entrepreneurs use to create, deliver and appropriate value, the thesis generates important insights into the social embeddedness of the business model.

3.8 Conclusion

This chapter discussed the key conceptual and theoretical elements that informed this thesis, and which culminated in the proposal of an integrative theoretical and analytical framework that was the blueprint for data collection, analysis and interpretation of findings. The development of this framework considered the antecedent and consequent relationships that existed between the concept of social embeddedness and network theory, and specified social network theories (social capital theory, strengths of weak ties theory and structural holes theory). The theoretical and analytical framework departs from the fragmented approach in which each of the social network theories is explored in isolation. This fragmented approach thwarts efforts to present a multi-dimensional view of social embeddedness of economic actions. The next chapter (on methodology) demonstrates how social network analysis and complementary approaches (ethnographic techniques) were deployed as methodological tools for investigating the social embeddedness of economic (entrepreneurial) actions of agricultural trading middlemen.

Chapter 4: Research design and methodology

4.0 Introduction

This research study explored how economic (entrepreneurial) actions of informal entrepreneurs (crop trading middlemen) were influenced and patterned by the ongoing structures of social relations and personal networks. Broadly, the research study explored the social embeddedness of informal entrepreneurial action within rural agricultural settings in Africa. The preceding chapter elaborated on a theoretical and analytical framework which undergirds this study for investigating the social embeddedness of informal entrepreneurial action. This chapter builds on the preceding chapter and delves into detailed discussion on the research methodology employed in conducting this research study. The chapter starts by providing conceptual clarifications regarding matters of research design and methodology. These clarifications are essential to the reading and understanding of the subsequent discussion of research design choices that were taken to guide this study. To pave way for the discussion of the various research design choices, key research paradigms and approaches are presented, and their merits are weighed in relation to the research problem at hand. Further to that, the chapter delves into an exposition of the various research design elements and how they were applied to different steps of the research process. Finally, the chapter concludes by presenting and discussing research design limitations that should be kept in mind when reading and applying the outcomes of this study.

4.1 Conceptual clarifications

Despite the importance of the research methodology to studies, its articulation is often fraught with terminological inconsistencies which make it difficult for readers to read it with ease. Often lost in this terminological confusion is the issue of precedence and antecedence in the relationship between various components of the research methodology. In the end, the relationship between methodological elements is left fuzzy and even illogical. As noted by several scholarly works, the use of terms such as methodology, methods and research design is often done in a convoluted way which obscures the intended meaning (Brew, 2001; Crotty, 1998). This section pre-empts that

potential confusion and provides clarity on the key terms and concepts that were used in this study to ensure that there was coherence in their use and interpretation.

Firstly, it is important to distinguish between methods and methodology as the two are frequently confused. According to Saunders et al. (2016:4), research methods are "techniques and procedures used to obtain and analyse data". In contrast, the term methodology refers to the theory of how research should be undertaken (Saunders et al., 2016:4). Brown (2006) depicts a research methodology as the underlying rationale and justification for the selection of specific research methods. Most scholars concur on the perception of research methods as the specific tools and ways of undertaking scientific investigations (Crotty, 1998; Della Porta and Keating, 2008, McGregor and Murnane, 2010). While research methods are conceived as the practical techniques for undertaking research, it is generally agreed that a research methodology adds a theoretical and conceptual dimension to the choice of methods applied in a study (Alharahsheh and Pius, 2020; Sahu, 2013; Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2009; Tuli, 2011). According to McGregor and Murnane (2010:421), methodology "refers to how each of logic, reality, values and what counts as knowledge inform research". McGregor and Murnane (2010) argue that the term refers to a combined elaboration of research methods used in a study and the "logic" (rationale) behind their use. That logic, in turn, comprises the underlying theories and concepts that inform the research process and are, therefore, instrumental in determining the nature of the research undertaking. The theoretical aspect of a methodology has seen some scholars describing it as a theory, theoretical framework or combination of theories (Della Porta and Keating, 2008; Howell, 2013; Kothari, 2004).

Despite the different conceptualisations and presentations of the methodology concept, most scholars tend to concur on the role that methodology plays in ensuring the research is conducted in a systematic and theoretically coherent manner (Leedy et al., 2019; Patel and Patel, 2019; Sahu, 2013). Against the background that research is a systematic investigation of phenomena, a methodology gives credence to the whole research process. As noted by Tuli (2011), methodology is an overarching synthesis of research philosophies, concepts and practical techniques that guide the research process. In this regard, it suffices to say that research methods are part and parcel of a research methodology. Indeed, a methodology is an amalgamation and representation of several

conceptual and tactical decisions related to the investigation of a research problem at hand.

Noting the potential for misinterpretation of key research terms, this study treats research methodology as an overarching term that encompasses all the articulated research choices, methods, and their theoretical underpinnings. In summary, the research methodology for this study consists of the totality of the contents of this chapter which include the research paradigms, research approach, research design as well as specific methods employed in data collection, analysis and interpretation. In this way, the methodology is an articulation of the main research methods and their underlying logic. This position is consistent with the view that a methodology is peculiar to each research study and not a generic choice to be made off-the-shelf (Judith, 2012). Based on this interpretation of a research methodology, the following sections provide a focused discussion of the elements that, together, constitute the research methodology that guided this research study.

4.2 Research paradigms

The logic and rationale that underlies a research methodology is embedded in defined research paradigms (McEwen and Wills, 2014; Mills and Birks, 2014). According to Hathcoat et al. (2019:100), a paradigm is "an overarching worldview, epistemological stance, shared set of beliefs among specialists, and exemplar for how research is done in a particular area of study". In a more elaborate description, McEwen and Wills (2014:28) describe a paradigm as "an organizing framework that contains concepts, theories, assumptions, beliefs, values, and principles that form the way a discipline interprets the subject matter with which it is concerned". Morgan (2007:50) summarises it as "a way to summarize researchers' beliefs about their efforts to create knowledge". Some scholars have referred to a research paradigm as a theoretical perspective or philosophical position that informs the research methodology (Crotty, 1998; Given, 2008; Hathcoat et al., 2019; Shannon-Baker, 2016). Fundamentally, a paradigm serves to provide some philosophical grounding and theoretical justifications for the choices and actions that researchers make in undertaking any piece of research. According to Žukauskas et al. (2018), research paradigms inform the approaches that researchers take in designing and executing research enquiry.

To the extent that researchers hold varying views about the nature of reality and how research should be conducted, scientific research is guided by different paradigms. The philosophical bases that underpin each paradigm fall into three categories: ontology, epistemology and axiology (Chilisa and Kawulich,2012; Creswell and Poth, 2018; Le and Le, 2013). The section below sheds light on the meaning and characterisation of each of these vital philosophical cogs of the research paradigm.

Ontology

Ontology is considered to be the initial point of any research endeavour as it concerns what it is that the researcher can know (Grix, 2002). According to Gray (2014:16), ontology "is the study of being, that is, the nature of existence and what constitutes reality". According to Moon and Blackman (2014:1170), "ontology is concerned with what exists for people to know about". Ontological questions focus on the nature of reality or what can be considered to be the truth together with its defining characteristics (Creswell and Poth, 2018; DeCarlo, 2019). Putting it within the context of social science research, Bryman (2012:32) asserts that central ontological questions are about "whether social entities can and should be considered objective entities that have a reality external to social actors, or whether they can and should be considered social constructions built up from the perceptions and actions of social actors". Following on from Bryman's definition of the key ontological question, the main ontological positions that have emerged are objectivism and constructionism (Byman, 2012; DeCarlo, 2019).

According to the objectivist ontological position, reality exists as objective facts that researchers have to discover through the research process (Creswell and Poth, 2018). At the centre of the objectivist stance is the belief that there is only one true external reality and researchers must strive to find it through rigorous and repeatable scientific procedures (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). Conversely, the constructivist view of ontology upholds that "social phenomena and their meanings are continually being accomplished by social actors" (Bryman, 2012:33). Departing from the objectivist view of knowledge as detached truths, constructivist ontology believes that several realities exist and these are a function of the social context in which the research process is conducted (DeCarlo, 2019; Hiller, 2016). In other words, the constructivist ontology advances that reality consists of mental constructions of the researchers and there can be

as many realities as there are researchers. In this sense, constructivism views reality as both relative and subjective in nature.

It is important to note that the terminology used by scholars in describing ontological stances tends to vary although the underlying message resonates. In this respect, objectivism and constructionism are sometimes discussed under the banner of realism and relativism, respectively (Andrews, 2012; Hiller, 2016).

Epistemology

Epistemology is generally described as the theory of knowledge (Audi, 2011; Ejnavarzala, 2019; Rescher, 2003). As such, it encompasses the study of knowledge and how researchers should go about exploring this (Edelheim, 2014; Le and Le, 2013; Levers, 2013; Zheng and Dahl, 2010). According to Moon and Blackman (2014:1172), "epistemology is concerned with all aspects of the validity, scope, and methods of acquiring knowledge, such as, with what constitutes a knowledge claim". Molina-Azorín (2016) emphasises that epistemological positions are derived from ontological stances as the researcher's beliefs about reality exert constraints on what are knowable and acceptable ways of exploring such knowledge. The broadness of these characterisations of epistemology suggests that, although this philosophical concept is about the theory of knowledge, in fact a single theory would be insufficient in addressing all the dimensions of the concept. This is, especially, because an epistemological stance is reflected in responses that researchers give to multiple questions regarding how research will be conducted (Crotty, 1998). Consequently, epistemological positions tend to be named after the main established research paradigms. Consistent with this approach, Given (2008) identifies the main epistemological positions to guide research efforts as positivist and interpretivist.

According to Bryman (2012:714), a positivist epistemology "advocates the application of the methods of the natural sciences to the study of social reality and beyond". Once again, this reflects the paradigm of positivism as firmly grounded in the objectivist ontology. On the contrary, an interpretivist epistemology taps into constructivist ontology and adopts the position that the creation of meaning, and knowledge are socially constructed processes that are contingent upon the perceptual actions of meaning-making human beings who are involved in the research process as research subjects and objects (Bryman, 2012; Crotty, 1998; Gray, 2014). In interpretivist

epistemology, human mental perceptions play a crucial role in the creation of a knowledge process.

While different characterisations of epistemological positions exist, it is noteworthy that most variations can be linked to the two main ontological departure points of objectivism and constructionism. While both ontological and epistemological expressions give character to the research paradigms, there is a general tendency to define epistemological positions in terms of the main research paradigms. This mostly emanates from the fact that philosophical concepts start off as sets of questions which are then addressed differently under each research paradigm.

Axiology

Axiology constitutes the third leg of the philosophical tripod that anchors the research paradigm. According to Given (2008:52), axiology refers to the philosophy of values. In another broad generalisation, Creswell and Poth, (2018) assert that axiology addresses the role of values in research. A prominent theme in axiology is the issue of ethics. Chilisa and Kawulich, (2012) state that underlying beliefs within a research paradigm tend to provide guidance to researchers on how to conduct themselves from an ethical standpoint. Given (2008) underscores the ethical dimension of axiology and argues that the provision of an ethical context for any research enquiry provides a basis for the acceptability of the whole endeavour by the research community. Varpio and MacLeod (2020) argue that the focus of axiology is more on the role of values and value judgements in the research process. Axiology helps to define the role of the researcher's personal value system and how this impacts on the conduct of the research and the interpretation of meaning. In this regard, axiology serves as a moral compass for the researcher in a manner that is consistent with the expressed ontological and epistemological positions. Finally, it is important to note the role of values from one research enquiry to another. Thus, ultimately, the axiology pillar of a research paradigm defines the space and role of values within the research process.

4.3 Discussion of main research paradigms

Having explained the main defining elements of research paradigms, this section presents and discusses the main competing paradigms in social science research. It is noteworthy that, collectively, ontology, epistemology and axiology come together to create a frame

of reference that guides the research in the investigation process. As demonstrated in the ensuing discussion, each research paradigm has its own orientation with regards to ontological, epistemological and axiological expression.

The epistemological stance adopted by a researcher has a strong bearing on most methodological aspects of the research study.

Positivism

Positivism is touted as the oldest research paradigm whose origins are steeped in hard natural science research (Bryman, 2012; Leung and Shek, 2018). As a research paradigm, positivism advances the view that "the world exists as an objective entity, outside of the mind of the observer, and in principle it is knowable in its entirety" (Della Porta and Keating, 2008:23). The ontological position linked to positivism is objectivism, which maintains that "reality" is objective, fixed and detached from human consciousness (Ejnavarzala, 2019). This ontological stance relegates the role of the researcher to the discoverer, descriptor and analyser of a reality that is already in existence (Leung and Shek, 2018). Epistemologically, positivism esteems the principles of objectivity, knowability and deductive logic (De Carlo, 2019). In the positivist tradition, the researcher is required to remain detached from the research subjects in order to eliminate bias. Similarly, validity of research results is premised on employed hard scientific approaches, large samples and repeatable data collection methods with a view to generating generalisable results that inform the development of universal laws (Alharahsheh and Pius, 2020). According to Levasseur (2020), positivism places emphasis on methods that involve the collection and analysis of quantitative data from which generalisable trends can be inferred.

Axiologically, positivism seeks to keep the researcher's values out of the research process as they are viewed as subjective preferences that bring bias to the research enterprise (Ejnavarzala, 2019). Overall, positivism views research as value-free and the researcher's values should not play a role in the conduct and interpretation of research results (Chilisa and Kawulich, 2012; Given, 2008). As a resultant, positivism draws a hard line between facts that are treated as objective truths and value judgements that are viewed as subjective and potentially biased.

Interpretivism

Interpretivism is often portrayed as the antithesis of positivism and is sometimes referred to as social constructivism (Creswell, 2014; Powers and Knapp, 2006). It is generally recognised that the ontological basis of interpretivism is constructivism (Given, 2008; Gray, 2014; Ponelis, 2015; Schwandt, 2007). In line with core constructivist ontology, interpretivism acknowledges the role of the human mind in the construction of meaning within the research process. The researcher's perceptions of the researched phenomenon within a particular social context are integral to the creation of meaning (Alharahsheh and Pius, 2020; Powers and Knapp, 2006). Therefore, ontological interpretivism espouses that there is no single objective truth but multiple socially constructed realities that are both relative and subjective (Creswell and Creswell, 2018, DeCarlo, 2019; Edmonds, 1999).

Epistemologically, interpretivism treats the researcher as part of the research and acknowledges that the researcher is highly involved and not detached from the data collection and interpretation process (Žukauskas et al., 2018). The researcher is, thus, a knowing agent who is actively involved in making sense of the world around him (Edmonds, 1999; Hiller, 2016). According to Hudson and Ozanne (1988), an interpretivist approach consists of epistemologies that rely on interpreting or understanding the meaning that humans attach to their actions. This stands in stark contrast to the positivist view that knowledge is already in existence and will remain the same regardless of who identifies and collects it. Al-Saadi (2014) asserts that interpretivist approaches take the position that knowledge is produced by exploring and understanding the social world of people under study, and prioritising their meaning and interpretations of researched phenomena. Uzun (2016) reinforces this by arguing that the interpretivist perspective treats reality as subjective and depends on the person or the context. In terms of methods, interpretivist epistemology advocates the use of qualitative methods that allow for the uncovering of underlying motives and experiences that would, otherwise, be treated as subjective and irrelevant under a positivist perspective (Della Porta and Keating, 2008). The use of small samples is much more acceptable in studies that follow an interpretivist approach (Slootman, 2018).

As argued by Della Porta and Keating, (2008), interpretivism mostly relies on soft methods in which interpretive judgements of the researcher play a more prominent role. By ascribing a key role to the researcher's interpretation of research phenomena,

interpretive epistemology creates ground for multiple interpretations that are likely to emerge, based on each researcher's personal values and convictions. Therefore, unlike positivism, interpretivism does not seek to generate generalisable findings as meaning is taken to be time- and context-bound. In sum, interpretivist epistemology accords primacy to the agency of the researcher in the knowledge creation and, to the extent that the researcher's subjectivities are accommodated in the research process, the nature of the resultant knowledge is, likewise, subjective and relative.

Axiologically, interpretivism upholds that research is value-bound and value-laden, (Chilisa and Kawulich, 2012; Creswell, 2014; Ponelis, 2015). The researcher's experience, prior knowledge and personal interests are recognised as having an impact on the conduct of the research process (Niosi, 2021). The researcher's beliefs and experiences have an effect on how they interpret and decode meaning from the research process. Within the interpretivist paradigm, researchers are challenged to be conscious and openly declare their values in relation to the research to be undertaken (Ejnavarzala, 2019).

Pragmatism

The two paradigms presented above are often portrayed as extremes which has resulted in what have been called paradigmatic wars (Wilding, 2019). In a bid to resolve these paradigm wars, pragmatism has been put forward as a paradigm that "breaks down the hierarchies between positivist and constructivist ways of knowing in order to look at what is meaningful from both" (Shannon-Baker, 2016:325). As a paradigm, pragmatism puts an emphasis on picking elements of what works from both positivism and constructivism. According to McChesney (2021), pragmatism is often put forward as a paradigmatic base to justify the mixing of methods that have been traditionally appropriated by the two competing paradigms of positivism and interpretivism. This argument raises whether pragmatism should really be treated as a paradigm alongside its counterparts. The fact that pragmatism lacks an ontology, epistemology and axiology of its own renders it philosophically vacuous and renders it a mere licence to be exempt from the paradigmatic walls of positivism and interpretivism. The fact that pragmatism lacks clearly expressed philosophical positions makes it appear weak as a foundation for grounding a research enquiry.

The case for an interpretivist paradigmatic approach

Based on the foregoing discussion of the main research paradigms, this section explains the paradigmatic choice made for adopted for this research study.

Several considerations should be made in selecting a philosophical paradigm in which to anchor a research study. According to Chilisa and Kawulich (2012:58), in selecting a research paradigm, the researcher must pose the following four questions:

1. What is the nature or essence of the social phenomena being investigated?
2. Are social phenomena objective in nature or created by the human mind?
3. What are the bases of knowledge corresponding to the social reality, and how can knowledge be acquired and disseminated?
4. What is the relationship of an individual with their environment? Are they conditioned by the environment or is the environment created by them?

Embedded in the four questions above are both ontological and epistemological questions underlying the nature of the research enquiry.

First and foremost, it is important to understand that the central concept under investigation in this study straddles three fields comprising sociology, economics, and entrepreneurship. This locates the subject deeply within the field of economic sociology which Swedberg (2007:1040) defines as "the interpretive study of social economic action, in order to causally account for its course and consequences". This articulation of economic sociology gives interpretivism an advantage as the paradigm of choice for studying socio-economic phenomena. As a paradigm, interpretivism is well-recognised for providing a sound base for broad and in-depth exploration of socio-economic human actions (Bouchikhi, 1993; Hess et al., 2011; Scotland, 2012). With its emphasis on contextual meanings, interpretivism enables an exploration of the social situatedness of entrepreneurial behaviour and processes (Fletcher, 2006). As noted by Packard (2017), interpretivism provides ample philosophical basis for exploring the why, what, and how of socially situated entrepreneurial actions. To the extent that entrepreneurial actions revolve around individuals (entrepreneurs), interpretivism emerges as a fitting paradigm that is amenable to investigations that cut across the micro (individual level) to macro (societal level) (McKeever et al., 2014). The interpretivist approach's emphasis on interpreting and locating individual actions within their social context makes the paradigm a best fit for guiding the exploration of socially embedded entrepreneurial

actions, (McKeever et al., 2014). On a global level, the interpretivist meta-theory forms the foundation of entrepreneurship theories which renders interpretivism a paradigm of choice in the investigation of entrepreneurship behaviour (Johnson-Laird, 1983).

Between positivism and interpretivism, the latter is a more flexible paradigm which is capable of relaxing philosophical boundaries to enable a deeper understanding of issues. For instance, according to Della Porta and Keating (2008:24), interpretivists contend that "objective and subjective meanings are deeply intertwined". This implies some level of combination of approaches derived from positivist and interpretivist paradigms. Emphasising interpretivism's flexibility, Ruffa and Evangelista, (2021) contend that interpretivists can question or relax the assumptions of the other approaches, thereby providing a strong philosophically grounded option to pragmatism. Whereas the positivist stance is concerned with causal relationship, an interpretivist stance emphasises the exploration of actors' own understanding and motivations. Social embeddedness thinking challenges the portrayal of rational economic action by economic actors (including entrepreneurs) and interpretivism provides a fitting philosophical grounding for mounting that challenge.

In sum, the philosophical agility of interpretivism makes it an apt paradigm for having guided this study which was focused on exploring the social embeddedness of economic action.

4.4 Research approach

According to Gray (2014), the selection of a research approach is an important decision which should follow the determination of a research paradigm or theoretical perspective. However, the challenge of selecting a research approach is often compounded by the inconsistent use of the term by scholars (Creswell, 2014). According to Lee et al. (2011), the role of a research approach is to provide clarity on the theorisation process which undergirds a given study. It is about how research enquiry relates to and interfaces with existing and potential theories (Flach et al., 2006; Malhotra, 2017; Saunders et al., 2016). In this study, the term research approach is used to refer to an approach to theory development and its place within the research process as expounded by Saunders et al. (2016:164). This is demonstrated in Figure 4.1 below.

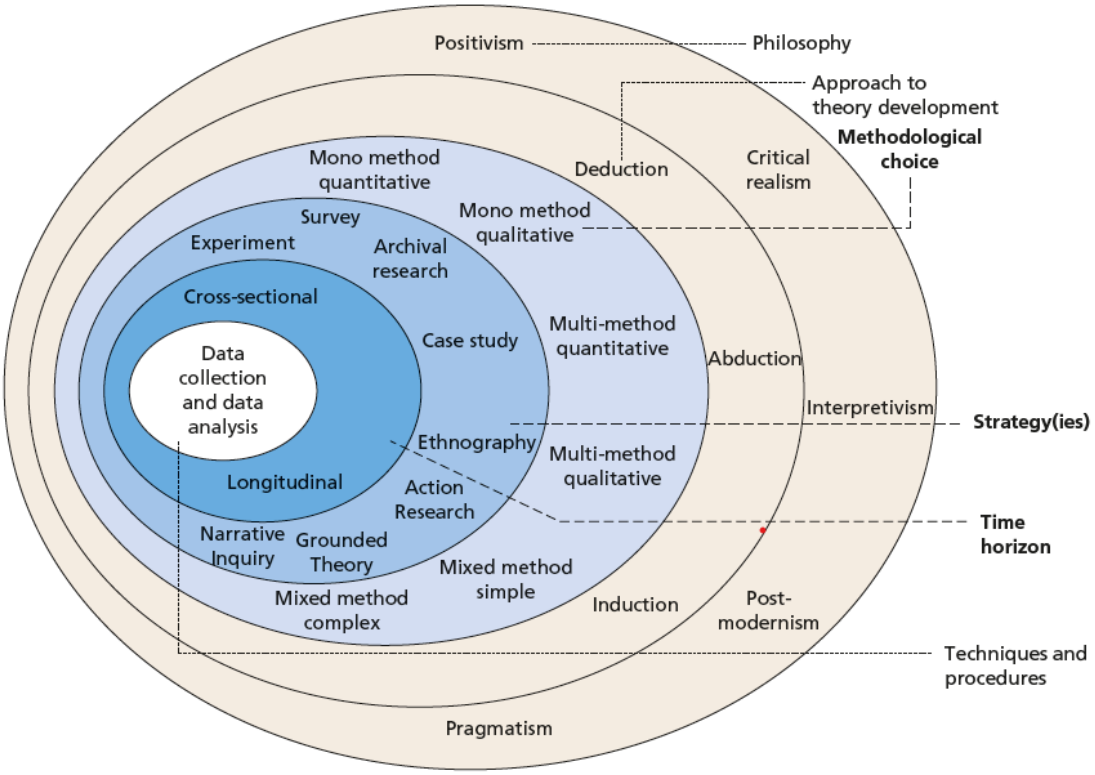


Figure 4.1**: Research Onion**.

Research approach relates to how the particular study relates to and interfaces with existing and potential theories. Inductive approaches are associated with theory development while deduction is associated with theory testing (Creswell and Plano-Clark, 2007; Soiferman, 2010). According to Soiferman (2010:2), the different research approaches can be analysed under each approach in terms of "intent of the research, how literature is used, how intent is focussed, how data are collected, how data are analyzed, the role of the researcher, and how data are validated".

Inductive approach

According to Edwards et al. (2021:1278), an inductive approach involves using data interpretations as "the basis for inferring theoretical statements about the nature of the social world and generalisation of substantive findings". In an inductive approach, no specific hypothesis exists and the research enquiry is guided by broad questions. The inductive approach is a bottom-up perspective which starts with gathering data and developing the basis for generating a theory. Thus, instead of starting with a coherent theory and hypothesis to be proven or disproven, inductive reasoning starts with a broad set of questions and concepts that guide the collection of data to inform theory

development. Inductive reasoning is lauded for its efficacy in investigating complex phenomena for which there is no generally agreed-upon theory (DeCarlo, 2019; Hoy, 2016; O'Reilly, 2009; Saunders et al., 2016).

From a paradigmatic point of view, inductive theory development is linked to interpretivism as the interpretation of research observations serves as a basis for theory development. Indeed, induction involves the generation of broad theoretical statements based on observations made in different situations (Hoy, 2016). An inductive approach to research is mostly associated with qualitative research techniques which can be deployed in highly unstructured situations where the researcher must play a key role in making sense of the researched phenomena (Lanka et al., 2021).

Deductive approach

In contrast to inductive approaches, deductive approaches are rooted in objectivist ontology and positivist epistemologies (Morgan, 2007; Nickerson, 2010). O'Reilly (2009:104) posits a deductive research proceeds by developing a hypothesis "from existing theory and the empirical world is then explored, and data are collected, in order to test the hypothesis". Unlike the case in inductive approaches, prior theory is used as a vanguard for conducting research, thereby enabling a connection between the study results and existing theories (Veen, 2021). While the existence of clearly established theories is not a requirement in inductive studies, clear existing theories are an imperative in a deductive approach. Since a deductive approach has a focus on proving or disproving certain aspects of theory, its studies largely adopt quantitative techniques that generate results that can be generalised on a broader scale (Janiszeweski and Osselaer, 2022; Nickerson, 2010). In sum, the application of deductive research approaches is typically appropriate in circumstances where there is a clear theoretical framework to guide the research effort.

Abductive approach

Whereas induction and deduction are often portrayed as two opposing approaches, abduction is generally pitched as an amalgam of two (Asvoll, 2013; Dubois and Gadde, 2002; Vila-Henninger et al., 2022). According to Morgan (2007:71), abductive reasoning "moves back and forth between induction and deduction—first converting observations into theories and then assessing those theories through action". This implies that both inductive and deductive logic are applied within the same study. Blaikie (2007), claims

that abductive logic explicitly admits that social science research starts with the social world of actors involved, and that their conceptualisation of meaning can only be captured through an iteration of inductive and deductive thinking. Echoing this view, Asvoll (2013:291) argues that abduction involves "looking for and exploring potential explanatory patterns within the facts of a phenomenon". Similarly, Lewis-Beck et al. (2004:1) describe abduction as a "process of moving from the way social actors describe their way of life to technical, social scientific descriptions of that social life". Dubois and Gadde (2002) claim that an abductive approach to conducting research is highly flexible, iterative and adaptive to new developments in the research process. Therefore, abduction remains open to adjustments in the theoretical framework at different stages within the research process.

Epistemologically, Janiszeweski and Osselaer (2022) associate abductive approaches with exploratory studies that draw on a variety of data collection procedures and analyses.

Regarding the approach's interaction with theory, Vila-Henninger et al. (2022) claim that abduction starts with an existing set of theories but with a focus on inconsistencies and gaps that already exist. According to Mitchell (2018) and Saunders et al. (2016), abduction is well-suited to addressing research in which there are theoretical gaps or inconsistent findings. Thus, through abduction, the gaps may end up being plugged and new theories may be developed in the process. Veen (2021) asserts that abduction acknowledges existing theory but remains pragmatically open to new insights and conclusions which may differ from the status quo. The flexibility that is inherent in the abductive approach has seen it associated with pragmatism, from a paradigmatic point of view (Mitchell, 2018; Saunders et al., 2016). In fact, other scholars have strongly claimed an association of abduction with social constructivism (Dubois and Gadde, 2002; Lewis-Beck et al., 2004). Lewis-Beck et al. (2004) argue that interpretivists widely employ abduction in their work but the logic for such is often left unexplained. This suggests that abductive thinking is commonly used in research but in a subtle way. DeCarlo (2019) insinuates that the subtle application of abduction in research often happens due to unforeseen developments which may see the emergence of new questions during the research process.

Ultimately, it is noteworthy that, despite borrowing from induction and deduction, abduction is a research approach that has assumed its own identity. Its ability to transcend different philosophical boundaries renders it amenable to studies where mixed method designs make the most sense. As a research approach, abduction offers more options to the researcher in terms of methods and techniques to be applied.

Research approach synthesis and rationale

This section provides a motivation of the research approach that was adopted in this study. The discussion of the different research approaches above highlights the distinctive features of each approach. Table 4.1 below summarises the key features of the research approach in terms of the underlying logic, pattern of results generalisation, use of data and nature of interface with theory. It has been adapted from Sanders et al. (2016:145).

Table 4.1: Summary of research approaches.

	Deduction	**Induction**	**Abduction**
Logic	In a deductive inference when the premises are true, the conclusion must also be true	In an inductive inference, known premises are used to generate untested conclusions	In an abductive inference, known premises are used to generate testable conclusions
Generalisability	Generalising from the general to the specific	Generalising from the specific to the general	Generalising from the interactions between the specific and the general
Use of data	Data collection is used to evaluate propositions or hypothesis related to an existing theory	Data collection is used to explore a phenomenon, identify themes and patterns, and create a conceptual framework	Data collection is used to explore a phenomenon, identify themes and patterns, locate these in a conceptual framework and test this through subsequent data collection and so forth
Theory	Theory falsification or verification	Theory generation and building	Theory generation or modification; incorporating existing theory where appropriate, to build new theory or modify existing theory

Based on the nature of the research problem at hand, this study adopted a mix of inductive and abductive approaches. It is noteworthy that, despite anchoring the economic sociology field for decades, the concept of social embeddedness remains an incomplete

puzzle (Portes, 1994). Thus, the lack of a coherent theory to anchor this concept implies that there are still theoretical gaps which can be effectively addressed through an abductive approach. This is in line with the observation made by Edwards et al. (2021, 1278) that abduction "involves an iterative filling of a theoretical gap in a particular substantive field". As illustrated in the literature review section, social embeddedness has several theoretical strands that are at different stages of maturity. Social capital as a theory has advanced ahead of other theories, but at the risk of over-extension. The social embeddedness of entrepreneurial actions still lacks a clear explanatory theory. Under these circumstances, an abductive approach capitalises on its inductive and deductive qualities to build on the existing theoretical base while pursuing new information to address existing knowledge gaps. Moreover, as a research approach, abduction is also consistent with the interpretivist theoretical perspective that undergirds this study (Lewis-Beck et al., 2004; Malhotra, 2017).

4.5 Research design

According to Creswell and Creswell (2018:352), "a research design is a set of formal procedures for collecting, analyzing, and interpreting data such as those found in a quantitative experiment or qualitative case study". Brown (2006) describes this as an overall approach that guides the selection of methods to be used for data collection and analysis. According to Kombo and Tromp (2006:70), "a research design can be regarded as an arrangement of conditions for collection and analysis of data in a manner that aims to combine relevance with the research purpose". Linking it to methods, Musial (2018:2232) describes a research design as "a process during which the research question and set of methods that enable to answer the stated question are described". Inherent in all these descriptions is the fact that research designs give a structure to a study by detailing how the different decisions and tasks of a research enquiry will be conducted. As noted by Saunders et al. (2016), a research design represents the operationalisation of a study's research question and objectives. The foregoing descriptions show that the term research design is used in a dual sense to refer to the process of crafting a design and also to describe the design as an outcome of the process. For this study, a research design was taken to mean a philosophically grounded framework that articulates logistical

arrangements for the study, the measurement procedures, the sampling strategy, the frame of analysis and reporting framework (Creswell, 2018; Kumar, 2019; Leedy et al., 2019).

The categorisation of research designs is fraught with inconsistencies that emanate from different interpretations of the term (Creswell, 2014; Kombo and Tromp, 2006; Kumar, 2019). This challenge is also linked to the fact that research designs come with several variants, strands, and sub-types. Furthermore, the classification of research designs has tended to focus on either the nature of methods employed or the purpose of the research investigation. Based on methods used, design forms haven been identified as qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods designs (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). Research designs can also be classified as exploratory, explanatory, descriptive and conclusive (Creswell et al., 2006; Kombo and Tromp, 2006). Notwithstanding the existence of various research designs, this study treats qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods as the three aggregate design forms. These three are the apex forms which tend to subsume all the other forms identified in scholarly literature. Consequently, the following sections shed more light on each one of these research design classifications.

Qualitative studies

Qualitative research is associated with social constructivism and interpretivism. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2017:43), "qualitative research consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them". Creswell and Creswell (2018) refer to qualitative research design as interpretative as the researcher has a much more pronounced role and there is a great deal of reflexivity involved in the process. Qualitative research designs guide the collection and analysis of data which are mainly narrative in form (Verhoef and Casebeer, 1997). Building on constructivist ontology and interpretivist epistemology, qualitative emphasises the experiences and views of those involved in the research process (Creswell, 2009). It captures information that cannot necessarily be readily captured in numerical form (Leedy et al., 2019). Thus, qualitative designs are adept at explaining the "whys" and "hows" that often fall beyond the capacity of quantitative designs. Consequently, qualitative designs are best for investigating phenomena that are complex or where there is inadequate theoretical guidance. While qualitative designs are primarily

associated with the inductive approach, Wright et al. (2016) argue that qualitative studies tend to use both inductive and deductive logic.

Maxwell (2012) emphasises that qualitative research designs are more flexible and do not come as "off-the-shelf" packages that researchers can generically apply across different research investigations. This implies that qualitative research designs can be customised to fit the requirements of each specific research context. The main qualitative research designs identified in literature are ethnography, case studies, phenomenological studies and grounded theory studies (Creswell, 2014; Gautam, 2016)

Quantitative studies

Quantitative research designs are generally treated as the other extreme of qualitative design (Crowe and Sheppard, 2010). While qualitative designs are associated with interpretivism, quantitative designs are the hallmark of studies that are rooted within positivism. Drawing from objectivist ontology, quantitative designs apply positivist epistemologies to seek data that are considered factual and quantifiable (Kothari, 2009). As a result, quantitative designs are heavy in the use of quantifiable data accompanied by sophisticated statistical analysis at varying levels (Della Porta and Keating, 2008; Hoy and Adams, 2016; Leung and Shek, 2018). As opposed to qualitative designs that use inductive research logic to deepen understanding of research phenomena, quantitative studies use deductive logic to test existing theories and generate generalisable findings (Creswell, 2014; Verhoef and Casebeer, 1997; Wright et al., 2016). Therefore, in quantitative designs, it is imperative to have a clear hypothesis that can either be rejected or accepted at the end of the research study.

As in qualitative research, quantitative research designs tend to be classified on the basis of the purpose of the research. Malhotra and Birks (2007) identify the main quantitative research designs as exploratory and conclusive. They further sub-categorise conclusive research on temporal dimensions into cross-sectional and longitudinal research (Malhotra and Birks, 2007). Cross-sectional research relates to collection of data from several sources at a single point in time, whereas longitudinal studies involve the collection of data from the same data sources at different points in time (Creswell and Creswell, 2018; Malhotra and Birks, 2007). Quantitative research designs are generally associated with survey research in which the structured questionnaire plays a pivotal role as the workhorse for data collection.

Mixed methods research

While qualitative and quantitative research studies are often portrayed as two design extremes, mixed method designs have emerged as a middle-of-the road solution (Dawadi et al., 2021). The ground-breaking definition of mixed methods research was provided by Johnson et al. (2007:123) who defined it as "the type of research in which a researcher or team of researchers combines elements of qualitative and quantitative research approaches (e. g., use of qualitative and quantitative viewpoints, data collection, analysis, inference techniques) for the broad purposes of breadth and depth of understanding and corroboration". Shannon-Baker (2016:321) views mixed methods as "a type of inquiry that is philosophically grounded where an intentional mixture of both qualitative and quantitative approaches is used in a single research study". It is important to note that Johnson et al. (2007) anchor their definition in terms of the combination of qualitative and quantitative research approaches. The vagueness of the term "approach" makes it difficult to discern if the issue of philosophical paradigms is part of the mixing or not. Shannon-Baker (2016) refers to philosophical grounding without identifying the actual philosophy. This highlights the difficulties encountered by scholars in finding and justifying a paradigm match for mixed methods research designs. According to Yousefi-Nooraie et al. (2020), pragmatism represents a form of mixed methods at a philosophical level. The challenge with this view it that it tends to relegate pragmatism to the level of methods and just falls short of admitting that pragmatism is a paradigm of convenience which owes its emergence to the rigidities and unsolved tensions between the main paradigms. According to Schooneboom and Johnson (2017), design decisions in mixed methods design concern the way quantitative and qualitative elements should be combined to attain desired results. Overall, one undisputed point of integration in mixed method design is at the level of research methods.

According to Creswell (2012), mixed method design has several sub-types or strands. These strands are mainly based on the order in which qualitative and quantitative methods are deployed within the research process. The broader categories are sequential, concurrent, and integrated (Bazeley, 2018; Castro et al., 2010; Meixner and Hathcoat, 2019). Sequential designs involve the use of qualitative and quantitative methods at different and successive stages of a study (Creswell, 2014; Molina-Azorin, 2016; Morgan, 2007). Concurrent designs entail the collection of both qualitative and quantitative data

within the same stage of the research process (Castro et al., 2010; Creswell and Creswell, 2018; Fetters et al., 2013). Bazeley (2018) notes that, in integrated methodology, both qualitative (text or visual) and quantitative approaches are inextricably intertwined in the production and analysis of data. In one sense, almost all integrative methods can be viewed as hybrid, as numbers always have qualitative features and words are readily (and regularly) counted, sorted, and connected. According to Teddlie and Tashakkori (2009:136), in an integrated mixed method "mixing occurs in an interactive manner at all stages of the study. At each stage, one approach affects the formulation of the other, and multiple types of implementation processes occur". Integrated mixed method designs have also been described as hybrid designs because they tend to incorporate more than a single design type which could be deployed on its own (Castro et al., 2010; Schooneboom and Johnson, 2017). One key feature of these hybrid designs is that qualitative and quantitative data collection is so integrated to the extent that one data source can provide both types of data simultaneously (Bazeley, 2012; Yousefi et al., 2020). Unlike in the other mixed methods design types, an integrated or hybrid design inherently provides weighting to both qualitative and quantitative components.

As in qualitative and quantitative research designs, more variants of mixed method designs emerge as finer descriptions of the main forms are provided. For instance, sequential designs can be split into exploratory and explanatory versions (Dominquez and Hollstein, 2014). In sum, the mixed methods design rests on the deliberate and purposeful integration of qualitative and quantitative methods in single research (Molina-Azorin, 2016; Toraman, 2021). The benefits anticipated in mixed methods include breadth, depth and triangulation (Burns, 2009; Dominguez and Hollstein, 2014; Player-Koro, 2019).

Research design synthesis and justification

As discussed above, the main research designs are the qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods designs. The designs provide philosophically grounded guidance on the choice of methods and techniques that a research study adopts. Table 4.2 below provides a summary of the main features of each design, based on a consideration of key research aspects, and as adapted from Creswell (2014:48).

Table 4.2: Summary of key features of research design.

	Qualitative design	**Quantitative design**	**Mixed methods design**
Ontology	Constructivist	Objectivist	Constructivist

Epistemology	Interpretivist	Positivist	Interpretivist
Research approach	Induction	Deduction	Abduction
Main research design forms	Ethnography, case study, narrative, phenomenology	Surveys and experiments	Sequential, concurrent and integrated/hybrid
Common methods	Open-ended questions, text data, emerging approaches	Closed-ended questions, numeric data collection	Both open- and closed-ended questions Analysis of both types of data
Common practices used by researchers	Values participant meanings Makes interpretations of the data Studies context of participants	Tests of verifies theories or explanations. Guided by a hypothesis employs statistical procedures	Collects both qualitative and quantitative data. Employs practices of both qualitative and quantitative research

Considering the nature of the issue under investigation in this research, and the philosophical choices elaborated above, this study adopted mixed method research design. The specific mixed method design strand applied to this study was the integrated or hybrid design. As articulated by Bazeley (2018), this design involves the concurrent and equally weighted application of qualitative and quantitative research techniques in data collection, analysis, and interpretation. Qualitative and quantitative approaches are used in an interdependent and mutually reinforcing fashion. The specific strand of hybrid design adopted is known as mixed methods social network analysis. An explanation of this method is provided in a later section.

A mixed methods research design is considered appropriate for this study for several reasons. Firstly, the concept of social embeddedness, which is core to this study, is complex and crosses disciplinary boundaries. This concept was investigated within the context of informal entrepreneurship and called for a great deal of flexibility in terms of the methods that could be applied to gather relevant data. The entrepreneurial dimension was explored using mostly quantitative approaches whereas the social embeddedness concept relied largely on qualitative approaches (Levasseur, 2020; Mason, 2006; Perry and Fayolle, 2020). Exploring the intersection of entrepreneurship and social embeddedness demands borrowing from both qualitative and qualitative approaches to

unravel the connections between the interconnectedness of economic and social phenomena (Yin, 2003). Within social embeddedness, Dudwick et al. (2006) argue that mixed methods are best suited for investigating complex issues such as social capital. As argued by most scholars, the triangulation of qualitative and quantitative approaches makes it possible to define relationships and study variables with more accuracy (Bazeley, 2018; Castro et al., 2010; Creswell, 2014). Within the context of social network analysis, Bolíbar (2016) argues that mixed methods provide an opportunity to broaden the scope of investigation and facilitate a more in-depth understanding of research issues.

The fact that social network analysis is the main methodological tool for exploring social embeddedness provides further justification for the adoption of a mixed methods design. According to Hollstein (2014), in the context of social network research, a mixed methods design implies the application of both structural and actor-oriented approaches within a single study. Echoing the same view, Edwards (2010) clarifies that structural approaches are quantitative in nature whereas actor-oriented approaches emphasise qualitative information relating to the content and dynamics of networks. Finally, by adopting a mixed methods design, this study partially responds to the call made by Marks and Stys (2019:375) to conduct "layering of disciplines and mixing methods to more fully understand how networks shape social life in Africa".

The adoption of a mixed method design in a study which is rooted in interpretivism is emboldened by McChesney and Aldridge (2019:234) who claim that "the interpretivist paradigm can underpin and inform the whole of a mixed methods research study". This claim is in accord with Shannon-Baker's (2016) call to strongly anchor mixed methods research in philosophically sound paradigms instead of rigidly forcing a marriage between pragmatism and mixed methods. In agreement with Slootman (2018), this study takes the position that quantitative methods can be used in an interpretivist perspective to complement and inform qualitative approaches.

4.6 Mixed methods social network analysis

In the section above, it was indicated that this study uses mixed methods social network analysis (MMSNA) which is a research design strand under the broader mixed methods design. This section provides an elaboration of this design strand and explains its application within this study. Froehlich et al. (2020:3) define MMSNA as "any social

network analysis (SNA) study that draws from both qualitative and quantitative data or uses qualitative and quantitative methods of analysis and thoughtfully integrates the different research strands with each other". The hybridity of this design originates in the fact that social network analysis, which can stand as an independent design, is overlayed on a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods. As illustrated in Figure 4.2 below, mixed methods social network analysis lies in the intersection of mixed methods and social network analysis Froelich et al., 2020:177).

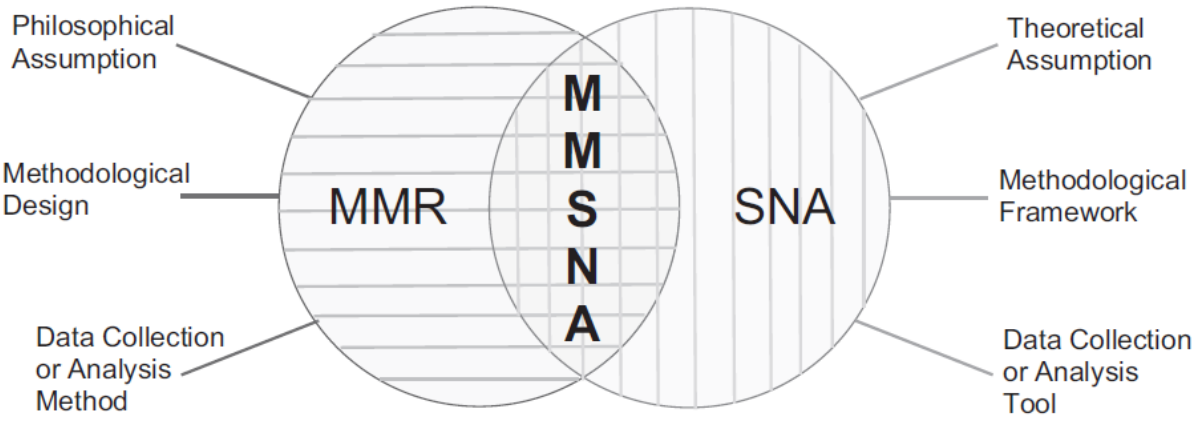


Figure 4.2: Mixed methods social network analysis.

What Figure 4.2 shows is that independent designs are combined into one integrated design. While social network analysis is a bit more specific, the element that falls under mixed methods needs better elaboration. In the design of this study, the two major designs that were integrated were ethnography and social network analysis. The specific design that emerged from that major design is known as network ethnography (Berthod et al., 2017; Froehlich et al., 2020). Network ethnography can be described as an emergent mixed methods social network analysis (MMSNA) research design that balances network analysis with ethnographic techniques so that qualitative and quantitative data are collected and analysed simultaneously (Ball, 2016; Berthod et al., 2017; Butcher et al., 2011; Froehlich et al., 2020; Sarazin, 2019). Consistent with the tenets of integrated mixed methods designs, network ethnography balances elements of ethnography and social network analysis so that they are applied concurrently and with equal weighting (Hogan, 2016; Mountford and Kessie, 2017). Most characterisations of network ethnography imply that data are collected and analysed in a parallel fashion with convergence taking place at data interpretation (Zimmerman, 2022:40). However, in this

study, integration and mixing of methods happened at all three key levels of data collection, analysis, and interpretation. Such an approach ensures maximum cross-leverage between the methods and allows for the collection of richer data and insights.

4.6.1 Network ethnography and the study of social embeddedness

While network ethnography is treated as an emergent research design, the use of ethnography and social network analysis to study social embeddedness is not a new development. This section sheds more light on both ethnography and social network analysis to demonstrate their pedigree and suitability to the study of entrepreneurship and social embeddedness.

Ethnography is a well-recognised approach for studying complex and hidden social and entrepreneurial dynamics (Jack and Anderson, 2000; Uzzi, 1996). According to Uzzi (1996:677), "ethnography is advantageous for studying embeddedness because it enables the researcher to understand the causes, consequences, and mechanisms by which social structure affects economic outcomes, and provides a rich source of data for generating specific, testable hypotheses". Indeed, Uzzi (1999) successfully applied a combination of ethnographic techniques and social network analysis to explore the social embeddedness of financial capital raising. This study demonstrated the efficacy of using ethnographic methods to extract rich network data which was then analysed using statistical methods. As a research strategy, ethnography has been extolled for its ability to explore market-related behaviour which includes the entrepreneurial actions of individuals (Price, 2010) Within the entrepreneurship context, ethnography is hailed as an approach "that produces descriptive and inductive analysis of historical biographical, and situationally-bound interpretations of entrepreneurs and their impact on society" (Perry et al, 2020:87). Ethnography has also been successfully deployed in studying formal and informal entrepreneurial activities in a variety of settings (Chan, 2009; Sasunkevich, 2018; Yusuf, 2012). Furthermore, ethnography is essential for providing context, interpretation and meaning to numbers which tend to dominate quantitative approaches to the study of entrepreneurship (Bierschenk and Muñoz, 2021; Perry and Fayolle, 2020). Thus, ethnography as a method is well suited to exploring the "how of entrepreneurship" which cannot be easily reduced to numbers (Bierschenk and Muñoz, 2021; Hlady-Rispal et al., 2021; Newth, 2018; Ram, 1999). Apart from its ability to uncover deep contextual

meanings, some scholars advocate that ethnography is an inherently hybrid mixed method that is already located in the intersection of qualitative and quantitative approaches (Bazeley, 2018; Dominquez and Hollstein, 2014). Ethnography is deemed appropriate to the study of social embeddedness because of its interpretive, reflexive and constructivist process (Whitehead, 2004).

While ethnography is well recognised as a research method, social network analysis often resides in a twilight zone where it is construed as both a theory and methodological tool (Anugerah et al., 2022; Butts, 2008; Caiani, 2014). The emergence of social network analysis as a theory and research tool is traced back to ethnography (Bazeley, 2018; Lubbers and Molina, 2021; Madden, 2017; Schweizer, 1997). Korsgaard (2011) argues that researching the entrepreneur involves exploring and investigating the social network in which the role is embedded.

Social network analysis can be classified based on the nature of data collection and analysis that it involves. In this case, we have a distinction between qualitative and quantitative social network analysis (Crossley, 2010; Edwards, 2010; Walther, 2015). That means social network analysis is a method which openly embraces both qualitative and quantitative data analysis. According to Yousefi-Nooraie et al. (2020:110), a quantitative approach to social analysis "involves the application of mathematical and statistical techniques and graphical presentation of results". Conversely, qualitative social network analysis involves the collection and analysis of data on the meanings that actors attach to their network ties which includes interpretive information that cannot be captured through formal methods (Ahrens, 2018; Crossley and Edwards, 2016). Overall, social network analysis as a methodology is characterised by the seamless fusion and integration of qualitative and quantitative elements in a manner that provides an insider and outsider view of networks studied (Edwards, 2010; Froehlich and Brouwer, 2021; Scott, 2005; Yousefi-Nooraie et al.; 2020). According to Lubbers and Miranda (2021), the mixing of qualitative and quantitative techniques in the study of personal networks is essential to a more rounded and in-depth understanding of network phenomena.

A second way of categorising social network analysis is by level of analysis. According to this criterion, social network analysis is split into the two categories of egocentric (personal/individual) network analysis and sociocentric (complete/whole) network analysis (Dominguez and Hollstein, 2014; McCarty et al., 2019; Perry et al.,

2018). On the one hand, egocentric social network analysis involves the exploration of connections and network exchanges that relate to a particular individual (Chua and Wellman, 2011; Pescosolido and Smith, 2021; Rice and Yoshioka-Maxwell, 2015). Accordingly, personal network analysis is based on collecting data on individual beliefs, attitudes and behaviour (Halgin and Borgatti, 2012; Trotter, 2000; Vacca, 2018). On the other hand, sociocentric network analysis "involves surveying a whole network and attempting to collect all of the connections between the individuals in that network" (Lightner et al., 2020:2). It "studies the pattern of relationships between actors in a defined, bounded group, or a community or a context" (McCarty et al., 2019:6). Unlike egocentric analysis, sociocentric analysis requires a prior and clear definition of the population to be studied.

The type of social network analysis chosen has implications for the design of a study. Critically, in egocentric network analysis, the ego or individual is the respondent, while in sociocentric designs all members of a network are eligible as respondents (Perry et al., 2018). Whether one adopts an egocentric or sociocentric approach, the choice will also have an impact on the nature of sampling and data analysis that can be employed (Haythornthwaite, 1996; Wasserman and Faust, 1994; Williams and Shepherd, 2017).

The type of social network analysis applied in this study is egocentric or personal social network analysis. In entrepreneurship research, egocentric networks are known as entrepreneur personal networks (Chiesi, 2018; Ripollés and Blesa, 2005; Strobl et al., 2014). This is derived from the fact that entrepreneurship centres on the individual as the entrepreneurial agent (McKeever et al., 2014; Packard, 2017; Pinzon et al., 2022). Due to the individual-centeredness of entrepreneurship, egocentric analysis has been the approach of choice deployed to study social embeddedness strands such as social capital (Greve and Salaff, 2003; Reinecke, 2018).

In sum, this study combines egocentric social network analysis tools and traditional ethnographic techniques to constitute network ethnography. This hybrid design blends the benefits from the palate of tools of social network analysis that "are very specific and thus ideally suited to the investigation of embeddedness in depth" with ethnography's ability to generate rich contextual data (Schweizer, 1997:739; Van Bursg et al., 2021).

4.7 Research design choices and procedures

This section describes the various research design choices and procedures that were followed in this study. While the above section presented the research design in terms of the philosophically guided overarching framework; this section looks at the key design decisions. This draws on Grover's (2015) characterisation of a research design as a blueprint for data collection, data measurement, data analysis and interpretation of research findings. Thus, this section explains the strategies and tactics used to undertake this study (Schooneboom and Johnson, 2017). As elaborated in the introduction to the research design section, the main design choices and decisions that are discussed include the selection of the research location (context), the elaboration of the population of interest in the study, the sampling strategy, data collection methods, data measurement procedures, data analysis procedures, and findings, interpretation and reporting framework (Creswell, 2018; Kumar, 2019; Leedy et al., 2019).

Research context and location

According to Kombo and Tromp (2006), the location where study data are collected is also known as a research site. The choice of a research location is dependent on the research questions and the practical constraints facing the researcher, According to (Sheppard, 2021). Key among the factors that influence the selection of the data are the availability of the data that can help answer research questions and accessibility of the data sources to the researcher. Against this background, this study was conducted in Kasulu District of Kigoma region in Tanzania. Kigoma region is nestled in the north-western corner of Tanzania, bordering Burundi and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Due to its remote location within Tanzania, Kigoma is virtually an agricultural economic enclave in the country's hinterland. According to Waters (2000), the economic life in Kigoma reflects a semi-subsistence mode in which market and non-market forces play a complementary role. This study focused on Kasulu District, which is one of the six rural districts that constitute Kigoma region. Kasulu is located in the central part of the region and about 100 kilometres from Kigoma town which is the administrative capital of the region.

Geographically, Kasulu is strategically located on the main highway that links Kigoma region with the main cities of Dodoma and Dar es Salaam. The district serves as an economic hub that connects the region with nearby Burundi and the rest of the country. Kasulu town lies in the middle of the rural district and therefore the area of study covered

both Kasulu Rural District Council area and Kasulu Town. Apart from being a trading hub of Kigoma region, Kasulu is a leading beans production and trading area. The urban part of the area has about 100 000 inhabitants and the rural part has a population of nearly 210 000. Due to the predominance of agricultural activities, the district also serves as the main centre for crop trading, which involves both local and foreign agricultural marketing agents. Kasulu town is in the middle of the district and acts as the apex convergence point for crop traders who operate at the lower levels of ward and district.

Figure 4.3 below illustrates the administrative organisation of Kasulu District. The structure consists of a sub-village (hamlet), a village (encompassing two or three sub-villages), ward (comprising two or three villages) and, lastly, a district council which is the governing authority with representatives from all wards. Within the context of Kigoma region, crop trading by middlemen happens at different administrative levels, starting from the sub-village and moving to the village, ward, district and regional (provincial) levels.

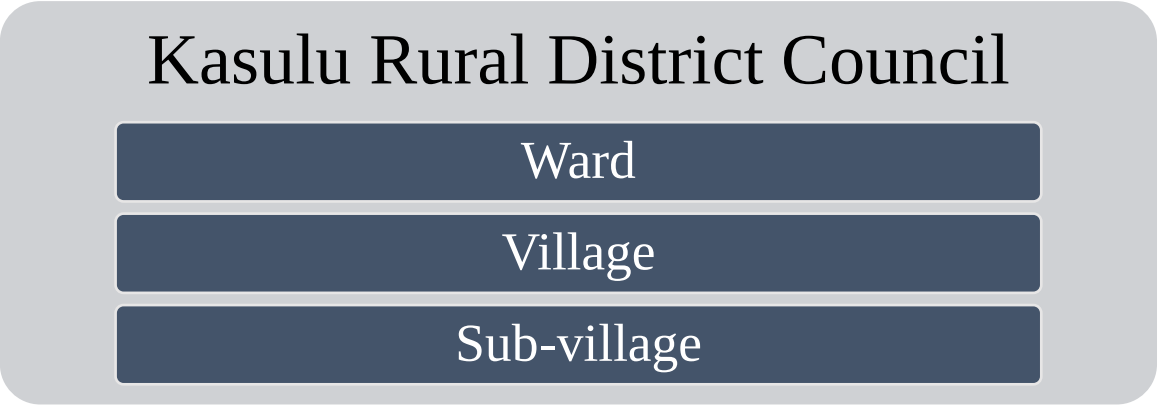


Figure 4.3: Administrative organisation of Kasulu District.

Both crop production and trading in Kasulu District are predominantly informal economic activities operating on the fringes of the formal regulatory frameworks (WFP, 2016). The social and economic life is heavily intertwined and interdependent, thereby making this an ideal location for exploring social embeddedness of economic activity. This follows the observation made by Portes and Haller (2010) that economic activities in the informal realm are far more socially embedded than those that are formally regulated. The high prevalence of informal bean trading in Kasulu twinned with the district's peripheral location render it an ideal location for understanding the intermix of

informal and social relationships in mediating entrepreneurial activities. The preponderance of peasant-style production coupled with the emergence of an entrepreneurial class presents a unique opportunity of how the social relationships create a foundation for economic transition towards a more dynamic entrepreneurial society.

Study population

Kombo and Tromp (2006:76) define a population as "a group of individuals, objects, or items from which samples are taken for measurement". It "consists of all the objects or events of a certain type about which researchers seek knowledge or information" (Chadwick, 2017:1284). Hu (2014) distinguishes between the general population and a study population. A study population is smaller than the whole population and it consists of the subset of the target population from which the study sample is drawn. Thus, a study population constitutes a sampling frame for the researcher, (Hu, 2014). Importantly, a population is made up of individuals or items that conform to a clear defining characteristic. In this study, the population of study consisted of agricultural bean crop traders who are commonly known as middlemen. In this study, the key defining characteristic of individuals that formed the population of interest was that they were involved in the buying and selling of beans.

Consistent with observations made in extant literature, the population of bean-trading middlemen in the study area was not easy to define (Hayami and Kawagoe, 2001; WFP, 2016). As in the rest of the country, there is lingering stigma associated with middlemen as a socio-economic group which dates to the socialist epoch when private trading was associated with economic sabotage and deviant market conduct (Clark, 2020). Although the number of individuals who are involved in middlemen activities within the bean marketing chain is reportedly large, this remains unquantified (WFP, 2016). The unavailability of data on the number of middlemen engaged in buying and selling beans from farmers is due to the informal and hidden nature of such activities. The lack of clear data on crop traders puts them in the category of hidden populations. According to Heckathorn (1997), hidden populations are characterised by the lack of clear boundaries, which makes it difficult to develop a sampling frame. Such populations are also known to stick to high private codes which limit their cooperation with outsiders, including researchers. Although Tanzania has long abandoned socialist policies and has openly embraced the market economy, the general attitude towards traders has remained

negative and traders receive occasional scorn and reprisals from public officials. This hypes anxiety among members of the trading community which motivates them to keep their operations covert and low in profile.

Unit of observation

The unit of observation used in this study was the individual bean crop trader or middleman. A unit of observation is described as the item that is observed, measured and on which data is collected to inform analysis for the study (DeCarlo, 2019; Perry et al., 2018). In egocentric network studies, the units of observation can include both the ego and the alter (Vacca, 2018). However, in this study the ego was the only unit of observation and served as the key informant on alters. According to Shell-Duncan et al. (2019), egocentric studies typically involve the reporting and collection of all information from the vantage point of the ego. Thus, in this case, the ego-traders were used as main sources of information for their business and non-business contacts (alters). The choice to use the ego as the solitary unit of observation was mainly based on the desire to have an entrepreneur-centric perspective. Reliance on the ego as the main unit of observation and source of data also saved time involved in conducting the study.

Level of analysis

In this study, analysis was mainly done at the levels of the individual entrepreneur and the entrepreneur's network. By nature, egocentric analysis revolves around the ego (entrepreneur/middleman). However, it is important to note that the unit of observation and unit of analysis are often used interchangeably in literature (De Carlo, 2019, Kumar, 2019; McCarty et al., 2019; Zikmund et al., 2009). For instance, according to McCarty et al. (2019:177), a level of analysis refers to "the level of the units on which a variable is observed and measured". In this case, the unit of observation was subsumed within the level of analysis. Within social network analysis, three levels of analysis are the individual, subgroup, and whole network (Bhattacherjee, 2012; Trochim et al., 2015; Trotter, 2000). Clarifying the difference between the two, Kumar (2019:77) asserts that the "unit of observation refers to the entity at which measurements are done and unit of analysis refers to the entity based on which analysis is done. Primary data is collected on the basis of observation unit and research conclusions are determined on the basis of unit of analysis". This distinction makes a lot of sense within the field of social network

analysis where both egocentric and sociocentric analysis use individuals as the unit of observation but pivot their analysis at individual and social network levels respectively.

In entrepreneurship studies, the level of the entrepreneur network is put at the individual level (Elfring et al. 2021). This implies that individual level and personal entrepreneur network level refer to the same thing. The focus of this study is on the individual level with a focus on how the middleman trader, as an entrepreneur, connects and engages in exchange with other actors within his personal network. The exploration in this study of social embeddedness of the middlemen's entrepreneurial network was conducted within the context of the set of social and economic relations that they hold with individuals and groups to whom they are variously connected. While the central focus of the analysis is the individual, it is important to note that sub-levels of analysis are possible at the level of alters, the level of ego-alter ties and the level of alter-alter ties. However, these sub-analyses do not constitute independent analyses on their own as they only help to deepen the understanding of the individual trader's network.

The choice of individual level locates the whole analysis within the micro domain of socio-economic behaviour. The main preoccupation of this study was to understand how individual entrepreneur (micro) behaviour is influenced by social relations. According to Della Porta and Keating (2008:2), the choice of level of analysis is influenced by "whether we are interested only in micro-level behaviour and infer broader social processes and change (the macro level) from that, or whether we can reason at the level of social aggregates". In this study, micro-level behaviour was the main concern.

Sampling procedure

Kombo and Tromp (2006) describe sampling as a procedure that a researcher uses to select people, places or things to study. A key consideration in sampling is the representativity of the sample in relation to the population that is under study. The sampled elements must be drawn from the population under study and need to have the same characteristics as the population itself. Sampling methods are generally divided between probability and non-probability sampling (Vehovar et al., 2016). In probability sampling, all population elements have a predetermined and known chance of being included in the study sample (Vehovar et al., 2016). With non-probability sampling, the selection of sampling units is mostly dependent on the researcher's judgement, and the probability of inclusion of population units in the study sample is not known beforehand,

(Given, 2008). Probability sampling methods are associated with quantitative research designs while non-probability is prevalent in qualitative studies.

In this study, a multi-stage sampling approach to both study locations and the actual study units (respondents) was adopted. In the first stage, a purposive sampling approach was used to select 5 of 19 administrative wards that make up Kasulu District. Wards selected were Nyakitonto, Nyachenda, Kitagata, Nyamidaho and Kasulu town. The choice of wards was mainly based on the concentration of bean-trading activity and accessibility from the main trunk road. Bean trading is most intense along the main highway which connects Kigoma region and Dar es Salaam, and all the selected wards are located along the highway. Within each ward, the main point of focus was the local informal crop-trading market centre which is the locale in which most traders carry out their buying and selling activities. After selecting the wards of interest, the second stage in the sampling process involved identifying the actual traders who could be interviewed and observed to obtain data required. Due to the lack of a formal database of crop traders and the attendant challenges of identifying the population of interest, the research resorted to snowball sampling techniques. According to Frey (2018), snowball sampling involves the generation of a pool of research study participants through referrals who share a particular characteristic of research interest with the target population. In this case, the researcher used ward agricultural extension officers as key informants to identify the most prominent traders. Once the initial trader was identified, a relationship of trust was established so that these traders felt free to speak about their own trading activities and relations. Once a relationship was established, these initial trader contacts served as entry points into the network of informal traders within each ward and beyond. In the true sense of snowball or network sampling, the researcher managed to identify more sample units by starting with a single respondent who served as a lead for more respondents who shared the common feature of being involved in the buying and selling of food beans (Atkinson and Flint, 2001; Rothenberg 1995). Referrals were generated from initial respondents, and these were interviewed in their own capacity and not as alters of respondents who had referred them. The researcher specifically requested the referring respondent to share names of individuals who were in the same business buying and selling beans. In some cases, traders mentioned people who would have initially featured in the interview but in most cases distinctly new names were shared.

According to Parker et al. (2020), the sample size in snowball sampling is accomplished when a target sample is attained or when saturation point is reached. In this study the target sample was set at those respondents with an average of six per ward. This number was judged to be adequate given that the data collection process was time consuming and involved a mix of qualitative and quantitative techniques in a concurrent manner. In the end, a sample size was reached of 40 respondents. While more sample units could have been reached, the nature of responses obtained after covering 40 respondents suggested that the saturation point had been reached. According to Malterud et al. (2015), saturation is reached when the information collected from respondents echoes what the researcher has already gathered. Meanwhile, it is noteworthy that the snowball sampling procedure that was used in identifying respondents inherently carries the bias that potentially respondents that fundamentally differ from the initially identified participants may be excluded. This might also have contributed to underrepresentation of female respondents in the study sample.

4.8 Data collection methods

This section provides a detailed description of the data collection methods that were employed in this study. According to Kabir (2016:202), "data collection is the process of gathering and measuring information on variables of interest, in an established systematic fashion that enables one to answer stated research questions, test hypotheses, and evaluate outcomes". Data collection is a methodological process of gathering information about a specific subject (Chilisa and Kawulich, 2018; Cote, 2021). Data collection methods have been categorised into qualitative and quantitative categories (McGregor and Murnane, 2010; Olsen, 2012). According to Guest et al. (2013) qualitative methods capture textual and non-numerical data while quantitative methods are used to capture numerical data that can be subjected to statistical analysis. The choice of data collection techniques for this study recognised both qualitative and quantitative dimensions of the trader's ego-centric (personal) network. Accordingly, data collection methods drew on social network and ethnographic practices. Within the social network tradition, Ready et al. (2020:2) describes ethnographic techniques as those that rely on "ethnographers' deeper knowledge of a subset of network members". In this study, ethnographic techniques used

included participant observation, in-depth interviews and field notes kept by the researcher.

Given that the specific research design strand chosen was network ethnography, the researcher was deeply immersed and closely observed the experiences of the crop traders who were included in the study. Moreover, while the first point of contact with each trader was through the personal administration of a survey questionnaire, the process of data collection was highly iterative with either return visits or phone calls to clarify issues that emerged during the data collection process. The adoption of ethnographic techniques included mastering the Swahili language which is the linqua franca in the study area. Consequently, all interactions with beneficiaries in the field were done in Swahili and transcribed into English as part of the analysis process. The subsections below provide a detailed explanation of the tools and techniques that were used in the data collection process.

Key informant interviews

The study of middlemen traders, as typical of the study of covert populations, often turns to key informants to enter the network and establish the initial contacts (Heckathorn, 1997; Parsons, 2008). According to Hayami and Kikuchi, (2000:185), the investigation of informal marketing agents, such as crop-trading middlemen, "must rely on informal contacts and discussions with traders, possibly through an introduction by someone they trust, and checking their data and explanations with several informed people in the same community". In this study, the researcher had to rely on agricultural extension officers who were also involved in providing marketing extension to farmers in their assigned wards. Agricultural extension officers are generally trusted by middlemen because they act as sources of information on crop supplies, and they are not involved in collection of government taxes. Interviews with agricultural extension officers were helpful in getting an initial understanding of the socio-economic dynamics in each ward and generating potential names of middlemen traders who could be enrolled into the study to get the snowballing process into motion. The same officers were also used to validate some of the information obtained from trader respondents in cases where third party verification was necessary.

The egocentric survey instrument

Scholars identify surveys and questionnaires as one of the most valuable techniques and tools for collecting reliable egocentred network data (Green et al., 2015; Hanneman and Riddle, 2005; Marsden, 2014; Trotter, 2000; Wasserman and Faust, 1994). A typical egocentric network survey instrument (questionnaire) "consists of items (question types) seeking information on ego characteristics, alter characteristics, ego-alter relationships, and the relationship between each pair of alters" (O'Malley et al., 2012:2). These question types are generally classified into name generators, name interpreters and name inter-relators. A name generator "is a question that aims to elicit a list of names of alters with whom the respondent has a certain type of relationship" (McCarty et al., 2019:77). Name interpreter questions elicit information about the attributes of each alter that an ego would have mentioned (Bidart and Charbonneau 2011; Halgin and Borgatti, 2012). A name inter-relater asks the respondent about the ties that exist between each of the cited alters (Lenhardt, 2016). An additional question type is the resource generator which is used is to investigate and track the nature of resource exchanges between the ego and the alter connections (Wellman, 2007). In this study, the personal network survey instrument consisted of open and close-ended questions that fell under the themes of ego demographics, name generators, name interpreters, name inter-relaters and resource generators. As noted by Mathers et al. (2007), a semi-structured questionnaire gave the researcher the flexibility to collect both qualitative and quantitative data on social embeddedness of entrepreneurial phenomena. An explanation of these questions and how they were used is provided below.

Ego demographic questions

The questionnaire started with a basic set of demographic questions about the ego respondent (trader) and the type as well as scale of trading activities undertaken. These questions mainly served to qualify the trader for eligibility to be included in the study as it established whether they were involved in bean trading. Important demographic characteristics tracked in entrepreneurial studies include age, religion, gender, education level, marital status and experience (Nilsen and Brannen, 2010; Nguyen, 2018; Sajilan et al., 2015). In this study, demographic attributes that were solicited include gender, age, religion, and scale of trading which provided a basis for more in-depth analysis as similar demographic variables were also explored about the alter connections that the respondents mentioned as part of their network. Tactically, these questions also acted as

a kind of ice-breaker to ease the respondents into the survey interview as they did not involve much cognitive effort in terms of factual recall.

Name generator questions

Name generator questions constituted the main backbone of the questionnaire. Designed in an open-ended manner, these questions probed respondents to recall important connections in relation to a particular aspect of their trading business and entrepreneurial journey. With the underlying motive of exploring middlemen activities as socially embedded entrepreneurial actions, name generator questions were modelled to elicit names of people who were associated with specific entrepreneurial actions. The main entrepreneurial actions identified included business opportunity identification, resource mobilisation (financing) and opportunity exploitation (operating the business). As a result, multiple name generator questions were used instead of a single name as is the practice in some studies (Friemel, 2017). Within the context of each entrepreneurial action, the respondents were asked to identify and enumerate alters with whom they engaged in specific exchanges or to whom they turned for some kind of support. This is what McCarty et al. (2019) refer to as an exchange approach to generating names of alters. According to Cornwell and Hoagland (2014:286): "Exchange-focused name generators assume that the most important ties are those with whom one can potentially trade potentially valuable resources". Essentially, engagement in defined exchanges is the basis for identifying relevant actors. Alternatives to the exchange approach to name generation are the role relation and affective approaches. The role entails the elicitation of alter names based on the ego's emotional proximity to them while a role-relation approach generates names based on alters' culturally ascribed role relationships to the ego (McCarty et al., 2019). An exchange approach to name generation is the most appropriate as it assigns a central agency role to the middleman trader who, in his entrepreneurial capacity, engages in economic and resource exchanges with his alters (Elfring et al., 2021; Vissa, 2012).

One key consideration that the researcher made in structuring name generating questions is the number of names to elicit per question. As noted by Merluzzi and Burt (2013), there is no clear guide on the number of alter names that should be requested in one name generator. The key issues to keep in mind when determining the appropriate number include the respondent burden that is placed on the respondent, the number of

questions involved and the length of the survey interview. While the typical number of names elicited in most studies is three, Merluzzi and Burt (2013) conclude that the cost-effective number is five. In this study, the maximum number of names elicited through each name generator was capped at five names. This was based on the recognition that most of the trader respondents were time constrained and increasing the number of names could lengthen the survey interview time. Increasing the number of names could also result in recall errors.

Name interpreter questions

As highlighted above, name interpreter questions are follow-up questions asked of each of the alters to characterise them better and understand the nature of relationship with the ego respondent. In this study, questions of the alters sought to gauge the strength of relationships, the duration of connections and assess demographic commonalities between the ego and each one of the alters. For the purpose of maintaining confidentiality of alters, nicknames were used instead of real names.

Name inter-relator questions

Name inter-relator questions involve asking the ego-respondent to indicate which of the enumerated alters are connected to each other. In this study, interrelation questions were used to gauge the level of closeness and density within a middleman's trading network. The respondent was asked to name pairs of alters known to each other but not to go into measuring the strength of the connection.

Resource generator questions

Resource generator questions were asked to determine the type of resources that were shared between the ego and alter connections. According to Wellman (2007), resource generating questions help to investigate and track the nature of resource exchanges between the respondent and his social connections. Resource generator questions are crucial in investigating the social capital elements of social embeddedness (Van Der Gaag and Snijders, 2005). In this study, this type of question was used to explore the nature of entrepreneurial and trading resources that middlemen traders accessed through their socio-economic connections.

In summary, Table 4.4 below provides a brief overview of the type of questions included in the survey questionnaire and the variables captured by each category of questions.

Table 4.4: Question types and data variables collected.

Question type	Objective	Data explored
Ego demographics	Profile the ego and their economic activities	• Personal and demographic details of ego • Ego's business profile – age, volume of trade, turnover, employees, suppliers, markets, registration status • Sources of business resources (start-up capital, working capital, labour and information) • Scope the key economic roles of the ego • The ego's affiliations to groups • Ego's risk coping mechanisms
Name generator questions	Identify the middlemen's main socio-economic contacts	• Significant/valuable contacts (alters) • Scope the ego's personal contacts
Name interpreter questions	Gather information on the alters	• Nature of relationship • Age/duration of relationships • Strength of relationships – ego point of view • Identify key roles of alters • Identify spatial location of alters • Establish relationship between alters • Identify relations between alters
Name inter-relater questions	Explore the level of interconnectedness between alters	• Which pairs of alters are connected to each other?
Resource generator questions	Explore the patterns and nature of resource exchanges within the network	• Nature of resources exchanged between the ego and each alter • The actions involved in consummating the resource exchanges • Arrangements for resource exchange – credit, free assistance, paid labour, asset sharing, etc. • The role played by the resources in supporting

Question type	Objective	Data explored
		• Nature of information shared and its perceived value • Influence of social relations on resource exchange

Questionnaire administration

The personal survey questionnaire was administered by the researcher in person. Administering the questionnaire in person was especially important as it provided an opportunity to probe the respondents and obtain more than just structured and quantifiable responses. Moreover, the use of personal interviews was helpful in managing respondent burden that is typically involved in egocentric network interviews (Perry et al., 2018). The questionnaire included open-ended questions which created room for follow-up questionnaires. Responses were captured in the researcher's field notebook. The completion of the questionnaire was not a linear process as the researcher gave room to respondents to provide responses at length. In cases where respondents wanted to go into a detailed explanation of some action or event, the researcher allowed that flexibility for the purpose of extracting detailed narratives, which also helped to validate some of the more structured responses. As shall be explained below, the survey questionnaire was combined with elements of in-depth personal network interviewing.

The questionnaire survey was administered using the KoboCollect mobile data collection system. KoboCollect is a mobile application for data collection and analysis and it is supported by the Kobo Toolbox which is a free open-source software tool (Poloju et al., 2022). Being a collection of web and mobile applications, Kobo Toolbox offers several advantages, including the capability to operate offline and saving, archiving and editing forms (Lakshminarasimhappa, 2021; Olajide, 2019). To operationalise the mobile data collection, the questionnaire was created which was then uploaded to the KoboCollect platform. After the questions were entered on the Kobo platform, the researcher downloaded the mobile version of KoboCollect on a tablet, which was the device used to collect data. During the questionnaire completion interviews, a notebook was kept for capturing responses that could not be readily captured in the pre-determined questions. Thus, the administration of the questionnaire occurred alongside the collection of rich qualitative information that emerged from the whole conversation.

Personal interviews: Biographical network approach

The use of the semi-structured questionnaire which was described above went together with the employment of complementary interviewing approaches that were used concurrently for the purpose of depth and triangulation. One approach that was embedded within the survey questionnaire was the in-depth interview approach. The specific approach used is known as biographical network interview. This approach fuses life story interviews with regular social network analysis techniques (Armitage, 2016; Dimov, 2020; Kevill et al., 2015; Vogt and Bulgacov, 2019). A life story approach is touted as a novel approach that facilitates the exploration of interdependencies between entrepreneurial action and social practices (Perry et al., 2020; Rae and Carswell, 2000; Xu, 2021). Entrepreneur biographical life stories facilitate the elicitation of highly contextualised information from the entrepreneurial process (McKenzie, 2005; Pelly and Fayolle, 2020; Smith, 2006). In this study, the biographical network question was placed at the beginning of the survey as part of the ice-breaking question. The question invited respondents to recall their entrepreneurial life story and individuals who had been instrumental (significant) at each level. As advocated by Pelly and Fayolle (2020), the middleman's entrepreneurial life story was construed as a chronological chain of events from entrepreneurial opportunity identification through to exploitation and value capture. Responses to this biographical network question were captured in the researcher's notebook and provided vital information for framing the rest of the interview. The question served as a memory prompt which prepared the respondent for specific name generator questions in the survey questionnaire. By recalling main entrepreneurial steps and relationships early on in the interview, this prompting and ice-breaking question primed respondents for both structured and semi-structured questions. Names that were mentioned in response to this question helped identify alters related to specific name generating questions. Furthermore, the open-ended biographical network question was helpful in building rapport and putting respondents at ease by allowing ownership of the story that they wanted to tell.

Overall, the use of life stories in entrepreneurship compensated for the lack of distinctive theories (Perry et al., 2020). The stories that middlemen shared served to illustrate how these informal entrepreneurs tapped into the maze of their personal contacts to acquire entrepreneurial resources and facilitate their trading activities.

Direct participant observations

Alongside the direct interviewing methods used to collected data from the respondents, the researcher used observational methods to collect additional insights, based on observing respondent traders' behaviour during their activities. The observation approach used was a mix of direct and participant observation. According to Zikmund et al. (2009:138), participant observation is an "ethnographic research approach where the researcher becomes immersed within the culture that he or she is studying and draws data from his or her observations". Such an approach enables the researcher to capture behavioural elements from an insider perspective (Hlady-Rispal, 2021). Holmes (2013:980) defines direct observation as "a method of collecting evaluative information in which the evaluator watches the subject in his or her usual environment without altering that environment". The overarching emphasis is on observing behaviour in its natural setting and without interference from the researcher. Observation approaches complement conventional social network data collection and are more effective at capturing entrepreneurial practices in action (Lubbers and Molina, 2021; Tillmar, 2020; Trotter, 2000).

In this study, the subject of observation was the selected trader respondent. The fact that interviews were made at informal market points provided the researcher with an opportunity to observe the traders in their natural operating settings. The key focus of observation was on how they conducted their transactions and interacted with their suppliers and clients in the process. Particularly, the researcher observed how traders engaged in the bargaining process and leveraged resources from their contacts to facilitate their trading activities. The researcher also remained open to observing new and unanticipated behaviours as they unfolded. All observations were noted in researcher's notebook and analysed on a day-to-day basis to complement information obtained through interviews. Often, return visits were made to the same informal market points to engage in informal chats with traders in an unobtrusive way to validate certain points. These informal market visits are like what Hayami and Kawagoe (2003:130) referred to as a "pedestrian approach" useful for exploring "the elusive behaviours and organizations of informal marketing agents in developing economies".

Researcher positionality in the research process

In conducting this researcher occupied the unique dual character of an insider and outsider at the same time. Benefitting from the experience of working in Kasulu for a period of four years prior to the study, the researcher already had an in-depth understanding of local trade dynamics and administrative structures. Familiarity with local leaders made it easier to access research sites and participants. The prolonged presence in the research area and the ensuing interactions fostered a deeper understanding of the dynamics underlying social and commercial exchanges. Thus, it was to collect far much richer data and understand the hidden rationales that are not available to a pure outsider. The researcher's command of the local Swahili language was instrumental in picking and interpreting meaning-laden phrases that concealed rich clues to social and business practices employed in everyday trading.

4.9 Data analysis and interpretation techniques

The preceding section noted techniques and actions undertaken in collecting both quantitative and qualitative data for this study. This section proceeds by presenting the processes that were followed to analyse the data collected. According to Coghlan and Brydon-Miller (2014), data analysis consists of processes that are undertaken with the purpose of deriving meaning and understanding from the various data sets to generate answers to research questions of the study. Sabah et al. (2022:3) describe data analysis as "a process of checking, examining, renovating, modernizing and displaying the data with the aim of exploring useful and valuable information to make a decision regarding any problem". Data analysis generally encompasses the interpretation of research data through the application of analytical and logical procedures so as to discern any patterns and relationships within the context of the overarching research problem (Bazeley, 2018; UP, 2022). Data analysis in this study was undertaken within the framework of the mixed methods research design, which underpins the entire investigation. According to Creswell and Plano Clark (2018), data analysis in mixed methods research involves the application of quantitative and qualitative techniques to analyse quantitative and qualitative datasets in a manner that mixes or integrates the quantitative and qualitative data and results. Such an approach is called mixed data analysis as both qualitative and quantitative data analysis strategies are applied concurrently (Bazeley, 2018; Hollstein, 2014; Onwuegbuzie and

Combs, 2011). It "consists of analyzing the quantitative data using quantitative methods and the qualitative data using qualitative methods" (Creswell and Plano Clark:128). Mixed data analysis ensures that both analysis and interpretation processes are well-integrated (Skamagki et al., 2022). Frequently, the rationale for conducting mixed data analysis is to allow triangulation and complementarity between qualitative and quantitative approaches (Bazeley, 2018; Onwuegbuzie and Combs, 2011).

Overall approach to data analysis

Given that the data collection yielded both qualitative and quantitative data, the challenge of the data analysis stage was to identify a fitting analytical scheme that could effectively accommodate both types of data. To the extent that the researcher wanted to conduct data analysis and interpretation in an integrated way, this implied finding a data analysis package with capabilities to seamlessly handle both qualitative and quantitative data. Thus, one of the critical decisions taken earlier on in the study was regarding the type of data analysis software packages to be used. According to Jackson and Bazeley (2019), several software packages exist for conducting both qualitative and quantitative data analysis. These packages tend to vary in terms of their capabilities to handle different types of data, which in turn impacts on their ability to support data analysis linked to different research designs (Jackson and Bazeley, 2019).

In deciding on the type of data analysis package for this study, the researcher was guided by the criteria suggested by Sotiriadou et al. (2014:218) which includes "aspects such as the type and size of data set, their competence and skills in data interpretation and the level of engagement with data analysis they plan on undertaking". Critically, the researcher sought to have a data analysis package that could match with a mixed methods research design. Equally important was to have a data analysis package that has the functionality for conducting egocentric network analysis. Based on the above set of criteria and practical requirements, the researcher identified two data analysis packages that are commonly deployed in mixed methods data analysis. The identified packages were MAXQDA and NVIVO. According to Marjaei et al. (2019), MAXQDA is a data analysis software package that is used to analyse mixed methods data. It has capabilities to handle qualitative data and numerical survey data. Thus, the package has modules that support quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods data analysis (Kuckartz and Rädiker, 2021). The other data analysis software package considered was NVIVO. Initially

launched as a qualitative data analysis package, NVIVO has risen in prominence as a tool for conducting integrative mixed methods analyses (Bazeley, 2010, Jackson and Bazeley, 2019; Lysaght and Cherry, 2022). Produced by QSR International, NVIVO has the capacity to analyse unstructured text, audio, video and image data. The quantitative module of NVIVO enables the importation and analysis of numerical survey data with the possibility of linking qualitative and quantitative elements of the research data (McNiff, 2016). Apart from the generic qualitative and quantitative data analysis functionalities, NVIVO 12 Plus software includes a dedicated module for conducting social network analysis (KSU, 2022). In fact, when survey data is imported into NVIVO 12 Plus, survey respondents are uploaded as cases, which makes it easier to explore any networked relationships between survey respondents recorded as cases.

Having considered the capabilities of both MAXQDA and NVIVO, the researcher decided to adopt NVIVO (12 Plus version) as the data analysis package for this study. The fact that NVIVO offers strong qualitative analytical capabilities and a dynamic social network analysis functionality it was the best fit for this study whose design combined ethnography and social network analysis. As noted by Bazeley (2021:), NVIVO's strength in the context of such an integrated design is its ability to flexibly manage diverse data types using codes, cases, sets, and matrix coding queries. These analytic functions in the software make it easier to manipulate and cross-interrogate quantitative and qualitative data on a single platform. Moreover, the fact that NVIVO covers the broad research spectrum from literature review through to data analysis and interpretation makes it an apt package for handling the iterative nature of data collection and analysis associated with studies with an ethnographic inclination.

Organisation of the data analysis process

Consequent to the decision to use NVIVO 12 Plus as the data analysis package, the following sections describe how the data analysis process was conducted in alignment with provisions of this data analysis package. According to Creswell and Plano Clark (2018), the data analysis process is comprised of six distinct stages, namely data preparation, data exploration, data analysis, data representation, results interpretation, and data and results validation. Within the context of NVIVO data analysis, O'Neill (2013) identifies four data analysis stages: data description, topic/theme development, data analysis

and results conclusion. Table 4.5 below summarises the main data analysis actions and operations according to Creswell and Plano Clark (2018) and O'Neill (2013).

Table 4.5: Data analysis actions and operations.

Stage according to Creswell and Plano Clark (2018)	**Stage according to O'Neill (2013)**	**Mixed methods data analysis actions using NVIVO**
Prepare the data for analysis	Descriptive	Data transcription Data input and classification Data formatting Assigning attributes
Explore the data	Topic/theme development	Reading through the data to observe patterns Developing initial codes Creating classifications
Analyse the data	Data analysis	Coding the data Grouping codes to develop themes Interrelate themes
Represent the data analysis	Data analysis	Merging nodes into hierarchies Running queries Models and relationships Matrix coding queries Running intra-case analysis Running cross-case query analysis Presenting visual models – figures, tables about themes
Interpret the results	Draw conclusions	Summarising quantitative and qualitative results Relating findings to literature review Personal assessment of findings Identifying study limitations Identifying implications for future research

Validate the data and results	Draw conclusions	Verifying sources through member checking Triangulating results with other sources

It is important to note that while O'Neill's (2013) classification of stages differs from that of Creswell and Plano Clark (2018), there is general concurrence on the type of data actions and operations that are conducted in the process of data analysis. From Table 4.5 above it is evident that Creswell and Plano Clark's (2018) description of data analysis stages and processes is much more comprehensive and not as vague as O'Neill's (2013) approach. The NVIVO approach which is used in this study draws on the strengths of both approaches.

Data preparation

The first step in the data analysis process is to get the data ready for analysis (Bazeley, 2018). This process involves converting raw data into a format that is fit for analysis. This includes cleaning the data to remove recording and entry errors (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2018). On the qualitative data component, preparation also entails transcription of interview and observational data into analysable formats (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2018). In this study, data preparation was done in tandem with the data collection process. Firstly, data that was obtained from in-depth interviews with trader respondents and key informants was transcribed from short-hand notes into more detailed word transcripts which could be imported onto the NVIVO data analysis platform. The transcription process involved creating interview notes for each case (respondent). Interview notes were often taken using both English and Swahili and, so, transcription involved translating everything into English. A special file was opened for recording quotes that recurred in most interviews and such quotes were recorded verbatim. As advised by Qureshi (2016), interview transcription notes were kept specific to each case respondent and a direct association was created in the NVIVO data analysis package. This was essential for ensuring seamless integration of qualitative and quantitative data relating to each respondent case.

Another key element of the data preparation process was the preparation of analytic memos which the researcher compiled at the end of each day spent in the field. According to Miles, et al. (2019:88), an analytic memo is "a brief or extended narrative that

documents the researcher's reflections and thinking processes about the data". In this study, analytical memos were created as a reflection tool that served to crystallise the researcher's interpretations of conversations with traders in the data collection process. The contents of the memos were mainly informed by observations of trader behaviour, anecdotes from informal conversations and detailed descriptions of traders' entrepreneurial journeys. Keeping memos of the experiences of each day was helpful in getting the researcher to identify response patterns, interesting points, catchy phrases and recurrent themes; this provided guidance for the coding of the study's qualitative data.

For the data obtained through the semi-structured trader respondent interviews, data preparation focused more on data cleaning. According to Rowley (2014:324), "data cleaning means going through the data looking for omissions or mistakes in the data, either as a result of your data entry, or arising from the questionnaire completion". Given that survey data was collected using the KoboCollect data mobile data collection system, the first procedure in data cleaning was the downloading of the data from the KoboCollect platform into an excel format. The preliminary cleaning actions included removing unnecessary data columns, checking the data for typos and completion. Since the questionnaire included several optional and skipped instructions, data cleaning also involved removing answer fields that were blank for most of the respondents. In line with the observation made by De Massis and Kotlar (2014), this action of data reduction helped identify and retain key variables for which sufficient data was available for meaningful analysis. In the end, the number of variables was reduced from 230 to 200 thereby making them fit within the NVIVO survey data handling capabilities. Alongside quantitative data reduction, the researcher also engaged in data consolidation, which involved creating aggregate variables based on the actual data. For instance, the number of business agents and buyers for each respondent trader could not be automatically generated a priori and such summations were created in excel before the data could be exported to NVIVO. Such action was necessary because no modifications of survey data are possible in NVIVO once the data is uploaded.

Once the survey data were cleaned and streamlined in the excel worksheet, the next and final step in the data preparation process was the importation and set up of the data on the NVIVO data analysis platform. The data was uploaded using the NVIVO survey data import function which supports the importation of data that is in excel and other

formats. When the data were imported, it automatically created survey respondents as cases. In NVIVO, cases serve as units of analysis (Bazeley and Jackson, 2019). Once each survey respondent was created as a case, the researcher manually created links between the case entry and qualitative data sources relating to each case. This included interview transcriptions and case specific field notes compiled during the data collection process. While survey respondents were captured as cases in NVIVO, it is important to note that answers provided by each respondent to survey questions were automatically uploaded as variable in the NVIVO survey data set. An attribute is a record of information that pertains to each case or survey respondent, and, in research terms, it means the same thing as a variable (Jackson and Bazeley, 2019). Thus, an attribute can refer to information about a respondent's demographic details, perceptions or rating of certain issues depending on the focus of the survey questions. Put differently, attribute information is an archive of each respondent's responses to the various survey questions. Having that information was important for conducting both in-case and cross-case analysis, as is explained below.

Alongside the survey data importation process came the data coding process which is automatically prompted by NVIVO when open-ended question data is loaded on the data analysis platform. Allsop et al. (2022:143) define a code as "a meaningful word or phrase which represents and conveys the messages and meanings of participant words". In the case of this study, the NVIVO software proposed codes to open-ended questions and the researcher validated them by cross-checking them against coding themes that were in the analytic memos mentioned in the section above.

The last step made in the data preparation process was the establishment of relationships between the various trader respondents. The establishment of relationships between the various cases drew on heavily detailed interactions that the researcher had with respondents at different stages of the data collection process. The researcher's field notes were the first handy tool because they detailed the snowball sampling process, thereby making it easy to know who had referred whom into the study. However, a complete picture of "who knows who" was only possible through a follow-on aided recall telephone interview administered to all sampled respondents. Based on the combined information, the researcher manually created relationships between respondents using the NVIVO relationship creation functionality. This action entailed converting qualitative

data into quantitative data which made it possible to conduct structural social network analysis (Hollstein, 2014).

Data exploration

After the entry and preparation of research data, the process which followed was data exploration. According to Creswell and Plano Clark (2018:206), data exploration refers to the act of "examining the data with an eye to identifying broad trends and preliminary understandings of the database". For the survey data, this process comprised the generation of descriptive summary statistics such as response frequencies across cases. For qualitative data, in the form of interview transcriptions and analytic memos, word frequency queries were run to identify key themes and guide further coding of the data. For instance, Figure 4.4 below shows a word cloud that was generated based on in-depth interview transcriptions.



Figure 4.4: A word cloud of common responses.

As advocated by Bazeley (2018), the data exploration processes assisted to pick the main themes and codes that warranted closer attention in the analysis. Marginal themes were also identified and reasons for their marginality were explored. In the end, the researcher identified the main themes that needed further analytic attention at case total sample levels.

Another key action which accompanied the data exploration process was data categorisation according to the main themes discernible through the data. According to

De Massis and Kotlar (2014:22), data categorisation involves distinguishing and grouping different categories of information to break down the information and create sub-categories that enable comparative analysis. For example, in this study, sub-nodes were created for different categories of traders, namely self-funded, agents and hybrid traders. As part of the data contextualisation process, trader cases (traders) were also grouped according to their administrative wards of origin to allow for contextualised analysis.

In the end, the exploration of the data helped enrich the dataset by ensuring that appropriate theme nodes were created in line with the main trends revealed by the quick summarisation of the dataset. To enable integrated analysis of qualitative and quantitative data analysis, links were created between the various data sources in a way that made cross validation easier. For example, the links created between a case respondent and in-depth interview transcriptions made it possible to be easily checked to qualify the structure of relations between case alters. Overall, this helped to enrich the dataset and made it ready for meaningful analysis.

Data analysis

In accordance with the guidance provided by Creswell and Plano Clark (2018), this stage of the data analysis process consisted of running both quantitative and qualitative analysis with a focus on answering the study's key research questions. In conducting the analysis, the researcher made use of the NVIVO package to do in-case and cross-case analyses. An in-case analysis focuses on the pattern of attributes relating to a single case or individual respondent (De Massis and Kotlar, 2014). A cross-case analysis approach examines themes, similarities and differences across cases in situations where a case is used as a unit of analysis (Mathison, 2005).

As posited by Yousefi et al. (2020), the data analysis process followed did not follow a linear pattern but consisted of iterative actions aimed at interrogating both the quantitative and qualitative datasets to converge and triangulate the results to obtain the best explanation for emerging data patterns. In fact, data analysis commenced during the data collection when the researcher used participatory network mapping techniques to guide respondents through a process of determining the structure and composition of their personal networks. With social network analysis serving as the main analytical framework for the study, the researcher drew heavily on the NVIVO social network analytical module to highlight the main quantitative social network metrics. The NVIVO

software has inherently built capabilities that enable a researcher to link the qualitative and quantitative analysis components of social network analysis. While quantitative network analysis reveals the overall structural view of the network, qualitative social network analysis seeks to provide in-depth understanding of the observed network structure (Froelich et al., 2020).

At an aggregate level, queries were run to create sociograms which painted a quick picture of the interconnectedness of all respondent cases within the survey data set. The NVIVO social network analysis was also used to create descriptive cross-case network measures. These measures focus on closeness (strength of ties), betweenness (brokerage role) and degree (the number of connections). Table 4.6 below provides an example of the results of a query aimed at generating social network measures across cases.

Table 4.6: Example of quantitative social network generated results.

Case	Degree	Betweenness	Closeness
Abeli	8	3.694	0.009
Baraka	7	134.698	0.012
Mugombe	7	21.167	0.008
Totobaya	6	114.223	0.011
Charukula	5	39.618	0.010

These cross-case measures served as pointers for the individual in-case analysis. In-case social network analysis mainly focused on the interrelations existing between specific sets of alter actors. Focus was paid to alters involved in the key trading functions of buying and selling. Apart from the social network-centric measures, the existence of a quantifiable survey data collected from the 40 respondents made it possible to compute various statistical measures, which included descriptive statistics, measures of central tendency and measures of association and statistical measures on variable data. Quantitative analysis of survey data variable was helpful in quantifying the nature of resource exchanges that took place between case respondents and their connections. The fact that the data could be standardised and analysed as a single dataset (cross-case analysis) made it possible to draw on and observe cross-cutting patterns using statistical measures.

The main method used to analysis qualitative data in the NVIVO database is thematic analysis. Braun and Clarke (2012:58) define thematic analysis as “a method for

systematically identifying, organising, and offering insight into, patterns of meaning (themes) across a dataset". According to Vaughn and Turner (2015), thematic analysis enables researchers to synthesise and distil the thick descriptions of participants into precise themes that can be linked to research questions. Word clouds, word clusters and word frequencies were the main tools used to analyse qualitative data contained in interview transcriptions and analytic memos. Since most of the key themes highlighted were already included in the quantitative survey data, identified themes were used in selecting variables for further analyses. By so doing, thematic analysis served to inform quantitative analysis and vice-versa. Eventually statistical measures were read in conjunction with the results of thematic analysis to get a broader understanding of the analysis results (Braun and Clarke, 2012; Kiger and Varpio, 2020).

Results representation

Creswell and Plano Clark (2018) argue that, after analysing the data, the researcher must think of the methods that can be used to present and communicate results to targeted audiences. Indeed, Evers et al. (2018) describe results presentation as a communication process whose aim is to make the main points clear and should, therefore, be attuned to information processing characteristics and limitations of the audience. The form of data presentation techniques is heavily influenced by the research design and the nature of data analysis conducted (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2018; De Massis and Kotlar, 2014). Key to data presentation are results display and visualisation methods. As posited by De Massis and Kotlar (2014), qualitative data analysis results in this study were mainly presented in the form of matrices, word clouds and word cluster diagrams. The purpose of this was to facilitate easy navigation of themes and highlight the main trends in the data.

Presentation of results from the quantitative survey took the form of frequency tables, cross tabulations, graphs, and charts which visually displayed outcomes of queries run on the data. The social network analysis queries yielded network diagrams which were classified into complete network sociograms and egocentric sociograms. Statistical network measures were also computed and displayed in tabular format to show the main parameters for each case respondent.

Results interpretation

The ultimate stage in the data analysis process is the interpretation of research results within the context of the main research questions. According to Egger and Carpi (2008), results interpretation involves the advancement of explanations for patterns and trends emerging from data analysis. It entails "stepping back from the detailed results and advancing their larger meaning in view of the research problems, the questions or hypotheses in a study, the existing literature, and perhaps author-related experiences" (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2018:209). broadly, interpretation involves the summarising of research results and accompanying explanations which assess the extent to which results provide answers to the underlying research questions (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2018).

Recognising that social network analysis is the foremost technique for exploring and illuminating social embeddedness, the researcher used this as the key departure point for interpreting study results. To correctly interpret and contextualise the data analysis results, the researcher iteratively locked quantitative and qualitative approaches in a constant dialogue. This primarily involved drawing on qualitative data to explain findings of structural features of respondent trader networks. For instance, when egocentric sociograms displayed certain characteristics, the researcher sought in-depth explanations from linked qualitative data sources in the form of interview transcriptions and analytic notes. By so doing, the researcher was able to explain observed trends from both an insider and outsider perspective, as suggested by Edwards (2010). Results interpretation also took the form of descriptive commentary on statistical data summaries that were generated from survey data. In this case, it is important to note that the variety of statistical measures generated were based on questions (variables) that deliberately sought to understand the behaviour of traders (middlemen) within a networked socio-economic structure. Accordingly, statistical measures provided additional insights that helped explain observed network patterns. In sum, the hoard of qualitative data stored on the NVIVO was used to explain data results that emerged from quantitative data analysis queries.

The final phase of data interpretation consisted of comparing the results of this study against themes identified as part of the literature review exercise. The main focus of such comparison was to identify areas of convergence and divergence which could have implications for theory development in the study of social embeddedness as a

concept of economic sociology. An important element of results interpretation involved testing the study against the conceptual framework to unravel ways in which they related to specific theoretical arguments around the social embeddedness concept. Particularly, results were interpreted within the context of theories made in relation to the role that weak ties, strong ties and social capital play in the entrepreneurial actions of middlemen (informal traders). As indicated in the conceptual framework section of this thesis, the last interpretive action was the application of study results to reflect on the business model of agricultural commodity trading middlemen. This interpretive analysis explores the extent to which business model aspects of informally trading middlemen are influenced and patterned by their social relations.

4.10 Research validity and reliability

Having described all the methodological actions taken in undertaking this study, this section shares the measures that were taken to ensure that the results were reliable and valid. Within the context of mixed methods research, Creswell and Plano Clark (2018:239) define validity "as employing strategies that address potential threats to drawing correct inferences and accurate assessments from the integrated data". Anderson (2010:2) describes validity as "the extent to which the findings are an accurate representation of the phenomena they are intended to represent". In this study, several actions were taken to ensure the validity and integrity of the investigation and its results. As advised by Birt et al. (2016), the researcher ensured that respondents who were interviewed conformed to the criteria defined. The validation of respondents was attained through community-based key informants. Occasionally, buyers who were identified in the data collection process were contacted by telephone to confirm if they knew certain traders who had been sampled in the study. To ensure the integrity of data, the researcher took direct responsibility for conducting both in-depth interviews and direct observations and administering the questionnaire. This eliminated the possibility of inaccuracies which could have resulted from reliance on third parties for data collection. Moreover, the researcher had the permission from respondents to call back and obtain additional clarifications.

As suggested by, Creswell and Plano Clark (2018), one of the strategies employed to increase the validity of study findings is the mixing of quantitative and qualitative

techniques in such a way that they corroborate and complement each other. Underlying this cross-cutting combination of tools and techniques was the intention to triangulate data sources and confirm observations from different angles. For example, the combination of survey questionnaires and in-depth biographical interviews in this study served to improve recall and, as a result, the accuracy of data collected.

De Massis and Kotlar (2014:27) define reliability as "the extent to which subsequent researchers arrive at the same results if they conduct the study again with the same steps". In this study reliability has been ensured by adequately detailing the research protocol followed together with an adequate description of tools used to collect and analyse data. While Hollstein (2014) cautions that representativity is not often the goal of egocentric network studies, the cross-case analysis techniques applied to the aggregated survey data from 40 respondents mitigates this inherent shortcoming. The extended and iterative nature of the data collection and analysis process was vital in helping the researcher to understand the research context better and become more acquainted with the day-to-day operations of the study population. In the end, the researcher was able to interrogate data from an informed standpoint.

4.11 Challenges and limitations of the study

According to Theofanidis and Fountouki (2019:156), research limitations can be described as weaknesses that are usually out of the researcher's control, and are closely associated with the chosen research design, data analysis and any other factors that adversely impact on the conduct of the study. One challenge faced in this study related to the informal nature of agricultural middlemen's entrepreneurial activities. The fact that middlemen do not keep proper records meant that their accounts could not be verified against written records as could be the case had they been operating formally and maintaining records. Given that respondents had to largely rely on extemporaneous recall, interviews took longer than planned and some vital information could not be recalled. The general scepticism and stigmatisation that is associated with agricultural trading middlemen as a profession saw some potential respondents being reluctant to open until sufficient levels of trust had been created. Due to the highly involving nature of ethnographic methods used in this study, data collection concentrated on one district and thereby limited the geographical representativity of the results.

Another limitation that was inherent to the personal social network analysis design was the reliance on the ego (respondent trader) for information regarding the attributes of alters. Due to time constraints, the questionnaire survey could not be extended to respondents' connections. As a result, the accuracy of respondents' accounts of the reported alter network could not be verified. The snowballing approach used to identify survey respondents carried the inherent bias only members of the network would be selected. Given that members of a network tend to resemble each other, there was always the risk that potential respondents with different characteristics would be included. For instance, male-dominated networks are gender-biased towards men thereby underrepresenting women. Finally, another limitation of this study is that it is more of a case study of a specific place (Kasulu District) and the findings cannot readily be generalised to other areas beyond this geography. Any application of the results beyond the context of Kasulu and Kigoma will have to take into account the contextual differences that may exist.

4.12 Conclusion

This chapter provided a detailed description of the methodology used in conducting this study. The philosophical and paradigmatic choices were elaborated on together with their accompanying justifications. The study followed a mixed methods research design which took the form of the emergent design strand called mixed methods social network analysis (MMSNA). Within the MMSNA design strand, the study used the novel approach known as network ethnography. The practical steps followed in implementing the research design choices were presented with emphasis on concrete actions undertaken to operationalise the various methodological procedures. Finally, the chapter drew attention to limitations that must be borne in mind when applying the findings of this study.

Chapter 5: Presentation of study findings

5.0 Introduction

This study explored how entrepreneurial actions of bean-trading middlemen are shaped and influenced by ongoing patterns of personal and social relations. The previous chapter provided an elaborate explanation of the methodological steps followed in planning and executing data collection and analysis processes. Building on the previous sections of this thesis, this chapter presents the main findings of the data collection and analysis process. Consistent with the mixed methods design adopted for this study, the findings presented in this chapter are a synthesis of results drawn from an integrated analysis of both qualitative and quantitative data. The chapter is organised into three main sections. The first section is a synthesis of the market context as gleaned from the ethnographic interactions with actors involved in bean-trading activities in Kasulu District. This section provides adequate context for the reading and understanding of the rest of the results. The section includes a description of the bean market structure from the perspective of bean trading middlemen. The second section is a presentation of the results from the analysis of both qualitative and quantitative data. The core data analysis was obtained through semi-structured tools and ancillary sources which included in-depth biographical interviews with middlemen and the researcher's ethnographic observations and field reflections. Both quantitative and qualitative data were obtained from the core sample of forty (40) middlemen traders who were interviewed and observed by the researcher as part of the data collection process. The chapter concludes with a synthesis and presentation of the main themes that emerged from the data analysis.

5.1 Recap of the data analysis process

Before presenting the findings of the data analysis process, it is helpful to recap the data analysis approach adopted and demonstrate its appropriateness to investigating social embeddedness of informal entrepreneurial activities of middleman traders. It is important to recall that, consistent with the position advanced by Portes and Sensenbrenner (1993), this study treated social embeddedness as a theoretical umbrella for several sociological concepts and theories that seek to explain the influence of social relations and structures

on economic actions. To the extent that the social embeddedness phenomenon manifests itself in the context of social network relations and structures, its exploration was best explored through the process of social network analysis. According to Bogenhold (2013:294), "social network analysis is a valid way to illuminate the idea of social embeddedness". The utility of social network analysis as an analytic tool for investigating social embeddedness lies in its ability to measure both structure and content of informal relationships, which are often elusive to neoclassical economic models (Marks and Stys, 2019; Sozen et al., 2009).

Chapter three of this thesis presented a theoretical and analytical framework for the study. This is illustrated in Figure 5.1 below.

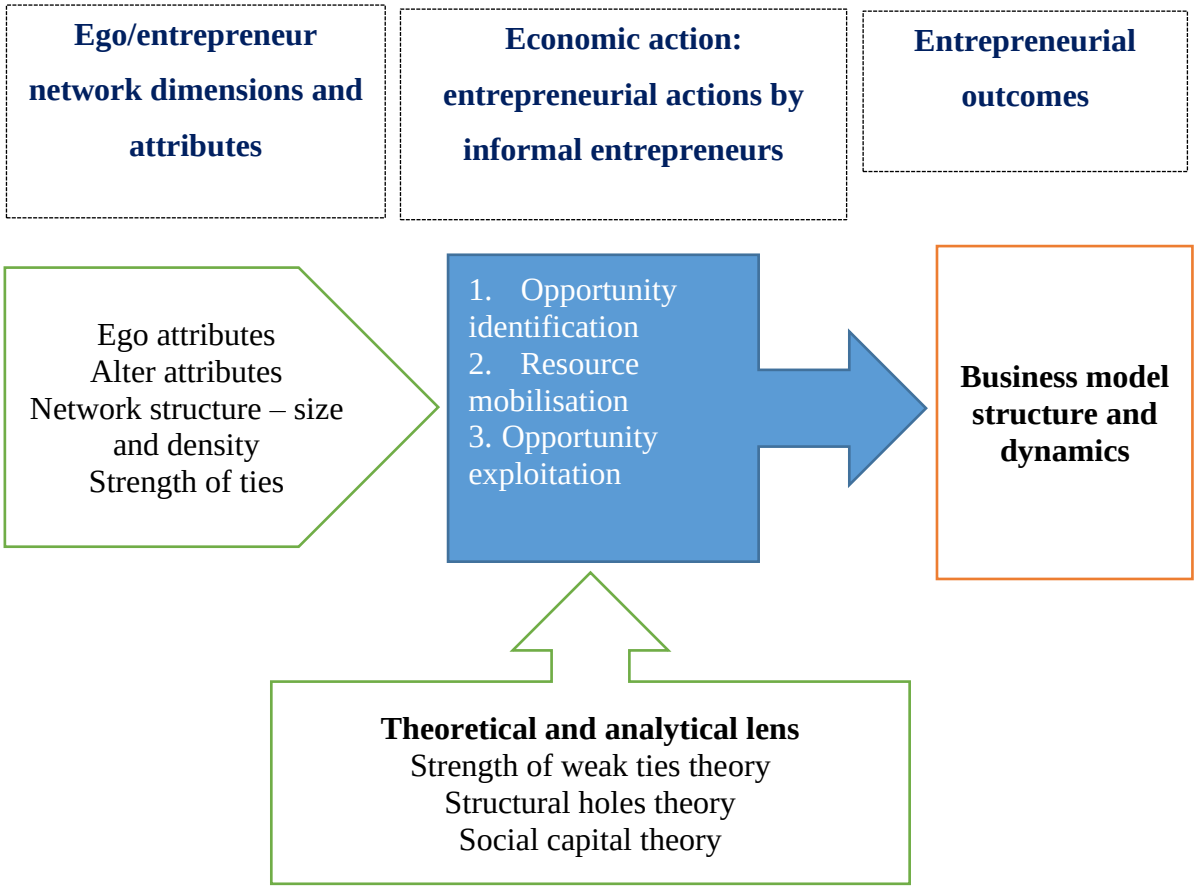


Figure 5.2: Theoretical and analytical framework of this study.

This study was designed as a personal social network study for bean-trading middleman traders. With middleman traders cast as the focal (ego) actors, the study collected information on attributes of middlemen, their alter, entrepreneurial actions, and entrepreneurial outcomes. An understanding of the dynamics and exchanges within such

middlemen trader networks called for personal network analysis (a strand of social network analysis) as a tool for data analysis. As suggested by Edwards (2010), this captures the multidimensional nature of social embeddedness or captures both the insider and outsider perspectives of social networks. To achieve this, the study adopted a relatively novel data analysis approach known as mixed methods social network analysis. As explained in the methodology chapter, this approach involved simultaneous application of qualitative and statistical methods in the data analysis process. Social network analysis was done using the NVIVO software which helped to visualise social network structures relating to individual egos (middleman traders) and their various connections identified through name generator questions. Data collected through the questionnaire administered to middleman traders (egos) were subjected to statistical analysis resulting in the computation of statistical measurements that are presented in this chapter alongside the descriptive findings that emerged from qualitative analysis.

Overall, the results presented below represent the outcome of a mixed methods (personal) social network analysis based on a sample of bean-trading middlemen in Kasulu District of Kigoma region in Tanzania. The results shed light on the structure of the informal bean-trading market, nature of exchanges and socio-economic dynamics involved.

5.2 Presentation of study findings

5.2.1 The bean market structure in Kasulu

This section provides an understanding of the market structure in which middlemen traders are involved in buying and selling. The section introduces the key actors and elaborates on the relationships they have with middlemen traders who are the foci of the study. The depiction of the market relationships is inspired by Fligstein and Calder's (2015:1) definition of markets as "socially constructed arenas where repeated exchanges occur between buyers and sellers under a set of formal and informal rules governing relations among competitors, suppliers, and customers". As illustrated in Figure 5.2 below, the middleman trader is a focal actor in the buying and selling of beans between the supply and demand ends of the bean market.

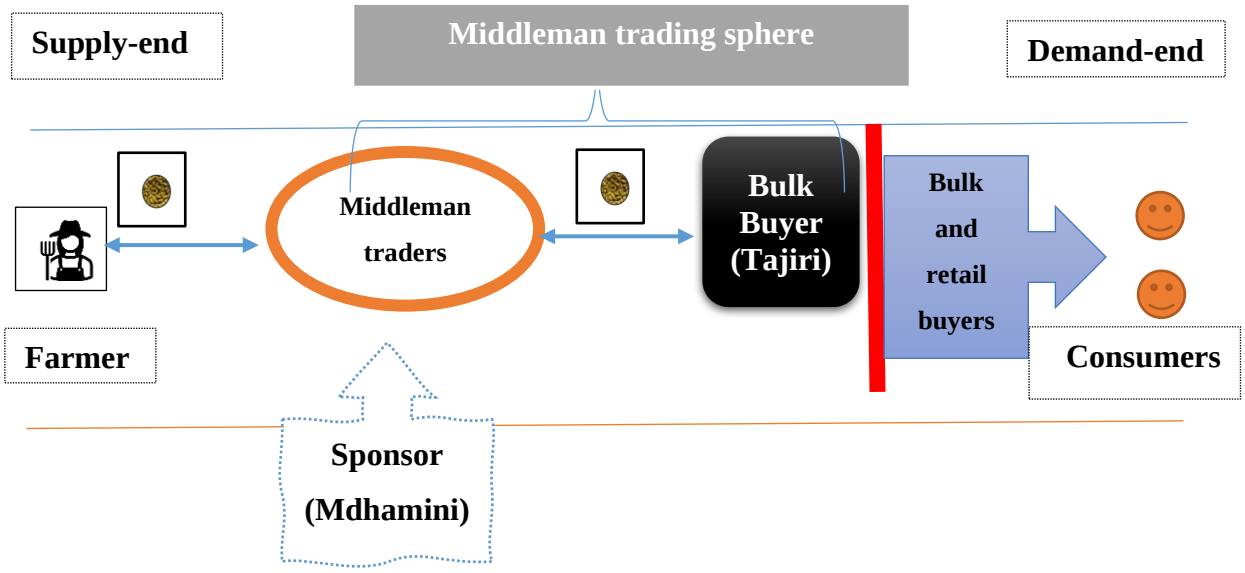


Figure 5.2: Organisation of the bean trading business in Kasulu District.

As illustrated in Figure 5.2 above, the structure of the market for beans traded by middlemen in Kasulu District can be divided into supply and demand (end-market) components. The supply end consists of production and intermediate trading activities. The supply elements of the market start from the village and can expand to regional (provincial) level. While buying and selling happens at all levels, the purpose of buying at the intermediate levels is to aggregate commodities and generate enough bulk that can be efficiently marketed to end markets where final processing and consumption take place. Thus, this component of the marketing system is concerned with the aggregation of small quantities from a diverse mass of individual farmers to generate economically viable quantities that can be traded on a wholesale scale. In the Figure 5.2 above, the bold red line shows the delineation between the supply and demand ends of the market. This distinction is important to note as actor behaviour, roles and market dynamics vary between the two ends. The green arrow shows that, apart from selling to bulk buyers who are part of the supply end realm, middlemen can also sell directly to buyers who are in the demand end of the market.

One key feature of the market space in which bean-trading middlemen operate is that it is a business-to-business setup in which buying is done for the purpose of reselling at a profit. In Swahili, this is known as *biashara ya kusafirisha mazao* meaning that the business involves buying crops and transporting them outside to markets beyond the local community. End markets to which most middlemen traders sell their beans are in the Lake

Zone urban centres of Kahama, Shinyanga and Mwanza. Some smaller quantities are channeled towards the metropolitan markets of Dar es Salaam and Dodoma. The business-to-business nature of the market stands in contrast to the business-to-consumer business where buying is done for final use or consumption. Since buying is done for the purpose of reselling, players involved often end up assuming the dual role of buyer and seller depending on the transaction in question.

Overview of actors within the Kasulu edible bean market

The setting for this study was the Kasulu edible beans trading market. As a net producing area, Kasulu represents the supply-facing side of the market where the production and primary trading take place before beans are sold to consumer-facing wholesale and retail markets at both national and international levels. Given that this study was premised on the study of middlemen's trading networks, an understanding of the various actors that are involved in the trading space is indispensable and instrumental to the interpretation of actor behaviour. The main actors involved in the supply end of the bean trading market include farmers (who act as producers and primary sellers), and middlemen traders (first mile and intermediate buyers) who intermediate between primary markets and buyers operating beyond the scope of Kasulu market. The section below provides an overview of the main actors and their functions within the Kasulu bean market structure.

Farmers (Wakulima)

Farmers are engaged in the production and post-harvest management of beans which they offer for sale to various locally based buyers who include middlemen traders and their agents. Farmers are free to sell to any buyer who offers them the best price on the market. In the market set-up in Kasulu District, smallholder bean farmers mostly sell small quantities to middlemen who buy from many farmers and, in the end, accumulate enough to sell in bulk to high-level wholesale buyers. Since farmers mainly sell as individuals with limited price negotiation leverage, the prices they get are based on the dynamics of supply and demand.

Business agents (buying agents)

Agents are local people who live and trade within their local communities. Resemblant of what Gabre-Madhin (1999) calls "the middlemen of the middlemen", the word agent has a very fluid meaning in the Kasulu bean- trading market. This is because anyone who is perceived to buy beans on behalf of a principal trader is loosely referred to as an agent or "dalal". Thus, even though a local person is using their own money to purchase beans, they are still labelled an agent if they are associated with the practice of buying from farmers and reselling the same produce to other buyers who are perceived to be more affluent.

Middlemen traders (Wafanyabiashara and madalali)

Middlemen traders are mostly known as such because their trading activities involve intermediating between the producing farmer and other buyers further down the marketing chain. Middlemen purchase beans for the purpose of offering them to other buyers who normally would want to buy quantities that are larger than that of lower-level middlemen buyers. Middlemen tend to vary in scale and scope of operation. The variation is mostly based on the capital outlay available to the trader for the purpose of buying beans for reselling. Primarily, the role of middlemen is to aggregate beans to create sufficient bulk that is attractive to large-scale buyers.

Buyers (Matajiri)

In the context of the Kasulu bean market, the term buyer is used to describe someone who purchases beans from local middlemen and sells them outside the district to national and international markets. While these buyers want to buy in large volumes, they tend to break the bulk and sell in smaller wholesale quantities to buyers who are in end (demand side) markets. Buyers (customers) are commonly referred to as 'tajiri" which in Swahili loosely translates to rich man. The term tajiri has multiple meanings within the rural socio-economic context. In the context of crop trading, it is mostly used to refer to someone who owns the capital that finances crop buying and selling activities. In the everyday business sense, the term tajiri is used to refer to someone who buys from middlemen or who commissions buying agents to buy beans on their behalf. Thus, the defining characteristic for a trader to be classified as a tajiri is the possession of adequate trading capital that can support the buying and selling transactions. Therefore, buyers who are referred to as tajiri are those who have the financial clout to purchase large volumes at

once. In essence, the size of financial capital endowment that a trader possesses determines the status level that they occupy within the hierarchical trading network. For the middlemen, getting a tajiri or customer is vital as it enables them to sell the volumes that they would have aggregated, thereby enabling them to re-invest the capital into another bean purchasing cycle. In other terms, a tajiri serves as a patron whose patronage emanates from possession of cash resources (working/trading capital) for buying and selling beans.

Sponsors (Wadhamini)

One key actor who is not involved in the bean buying and selling chain but is held in high regard is a sponsor, often referred to as "mdhamini" (guarantor). Sponsors are normally well-to-do persons who are not necessarily involved in crop-trading activities. Referred to as "mdhamini" in Swahili, this is someone who provides financial or other support that enables a middleman to become established in business. The fact that sponsors are well-to-do persons with considerable wealth often obscures the difference between such persons and buyers; both buyers and sponsors are often referred to as "matajiri" (rich persons). Sponsors are credited with assisting middlemen to get started or scale up activities related to buying and selling while buyers constitute the market (customers) for local middleman traders. While sponsors are not directly involved in the middleman's business activities, they tend to come from the same community and have a strong social bond with middlemen for whom they play the role of benefactor. Most middlemen respondents in this study described sponsors as guarantors, connectors and bridges who helped them gain access to resources and business networks that required someone to have a good reputation. In-depth discussions revealed that some sponsors were adopted/inherited from family relations (rafiki ya baba/family friends). In some cases, sponsors resembled a local well-known man who acted as a benevolent benefactor to upcoming businesspeople. The remuneration or incentives of a sponsor were not clear as there was no direct flow of business benefits.

5.2.2 Typology & characterisation of middlemen traders

This study covered a total of forty (40) traders who are involved in the buying and selling of food beans and other food grain crops. While all the respondents fitted the broad definition of a middleman trader, this study further classified them into three categories

(rungs) based on the modality that they used to finance their trading activities. The first category was made up of middlemen traders who are known as “madalali” in Swahili. This term derives from the Hindi word “dalal” which is used to denote someone who is a go-between or middleman to a business transaction (Bussel, 2017; Segri, 2018). Within this study, a “dalali” or agent was a trader who largely relied on a principal trader for obtaining funds required to purchase beans from farmers and other sources. This category of trader was therefore principally involved in buying on behalf of principal buyers (traders) and was not so much involved in the selling function. The second category of middlemen was the hybrid trader. The hybrid trader combined the function of an agent and buying and selling on their own account. The distinction between an agent and a hybrid trader is that the latter owns part of the capital which he or she can use to buy and sell independently. Thus, a hybrid trader can operate as a principal when they are using their own money but as an agent when the money used to buy belongs to a third party who is a principal trader. The roles of agent and principal are often executed simultaneously, hence the title of hybrid trader. The final category of trader identified in this study was the self-funded trader. This type of trader only uses their own financial resources (money) to buy commodity crops (beans and others) and sell them on their own account. Ultimately, what sets the three types of traders apart is the ownership of the funds that are used to engage in the buying and selling process. However, all the trader types fall under the umbrella of middlemen because they buy from farmers to on-sell to other buyers; they are not considered the final buyer of the commodities that they handle. The fact that these traders do not sell to final consumers puts them in the domain of business-to-business marketing, which often involves selling to geographically distant markets (outside the region). To the extent that all these traders played a middlemen role, this study refers to them as middleman types. The following table (Table 5.1) shows the breakdown of the different middleman types that were covered in this study.

Table 5.1: Middleman types covered by the study.

Middleman Type	Frequency	Percent (%)
Agent (dalal)	9	23%
Hybrid trader	16	40%
Self-funded trader	15	38%
Total of surveyed middlemen	**40**	**100%**

Source: Study survey data

Demographic profile of study sample respondents

As shown in Table 5.2 below, most of the middlemen traders in this study (72.5%) fell within the age range of 31–50 years. The highest concentration of traders was in the 31-to-40-year age range. The prevalence of middle-aged people in the middlemen population likely reflects the high intensity nature of trading activities with a great deal of travelling in sourcing and aggregating bean commodities. The under-representation of the youthful participants below the age of 31 could be due to the capital hurdles that need to be crossed before one can effectively assume the role of middleman trader. The initial capital requirements inhibit people from assuming the role of middleman at a younger age.

Table 5.3: Age distribution of surveyed middlemen.

Age group	Frequency count	Percent (%)
30 years and below	4	10%
Between 31 and 40 years	18	45%
Between 41 and 50 years	11	28%
Between 51 and 60 years	7	18%
Total	**40**	**100%**

Source: Study survey data, N=40

All the survey respondents were married and resident in the greater Kasulu area (covering both the urban and rural council areas), which was the focal area for the study. This suggests that local embeddedness is a strong factor in the role played by crop-trading middlemen. Participation in middlemen trading of beans seemed to be heavily tilted in favour of men. Of the forty respondents selected through the network sampling approach, only 2 (5%) were women. The predominance of men in the sample could also be a consequence of the snowball referral approach that the researcher used to identify respondents. Since the initial respondents selected were males, there is a likelihood that their personal trading networks comprised more men than women, thereby introducing some sampling bias. However, interviews conducted with key informants to understand the involvement of women showed that women were mostly active in local retail markets which involve selling smaller quantities to retail consumers. Thus, while men dominated the high-volume business-to-business transactions, women tended to be largely confined to local retail markets where capital requirements were minimal.

Educational level and socio-economic profile of respondents

The highest education level attained by most of the surveyed middlemen traders was seventh grade education; 85% of all respondents interviewed reported to have Grade 7 as their highest educational attainment. Table 5.3 below shows that traders with education levels below and above grade seven were in the minority.

Table 5.3: Educational level of middlemen survey respondents.

Education Level/ Middleman type	Agent (dalal)	Hybrid trader	Self-funded trader	Frequency count	Percent (%)
Below Grade 7	3	0	0	3	7.5%
Grade 7	6	16	12	34	85%
Secondary school	0	0	2	2	5%
Tertiary	0	0	1	1	2.5%
Total	**9**	**16**	**15**	**40**	**100%**

Source: Study survey data, N=40

An interesting observation was that all the traders who had education levels below Grade 7 were confined to the lowest rung of agent (dalali) while all of those who had education attainments above Grade 7 were in the highest category of a fully autonomous and self-funded trader. The observed prevalence of low educational attainments for these largely informal trading operators was consistent with the general association between low education attainment and participation in informal business activities (Gërxhani and van de Werfhorst, 2013; Pallangyo, 2021).

From a socio-economic perspective, 100% of survey respondents combined middlemen trading with on-farm (crop production) activities. Middlemen traders indicated that farming was a core component of their business activities and crop trading emerged as part of an income diversification and economic activity upgrading strategy. The engagement in farming by all the surveyed traders lends credence to the scholarly claim that middlemen roles emerge from peasant farming activity with a resultant overlap in functions (Bryceson, 1982; Fuentes, 1998; Hayami and Kawagoe, 1993; Mangnus and Vellema, 2019; Nee and Young, 1991). This is contrary to the view that middlemen are a separate class from peasants/small-scale farmers (Bernstein, 2017; Dow, 1973).

Religious affiliation

Most traders covered by the study belonged to the Christian religious sub-group. As shown in Table 5.4 below, 85% of respondents reported that they belonged to the Christian faith while 7.5% were of the Islamic faith.

Table 5.4: Religious affiliation of surveyed middleman traders.

Respondent's religion	Count	% Frequency
Islam	3	7.5%
Christianity	34	85%
Other	3	7.5%
Total	**40**	**100%**

Source: Study survey data, N=40

As shown in Table 5.5 below, business relationships did not seem to depend so much on religion. Middlemen's choice of bean-buying (business) agents did not show any clear link to religious affiliations. This suggests that religion did not play a major role in the choice of trading partners.

Table 5.5: Religious association between middlemen traders and their agents (dalals).

	Does the respondent share same religion with business agent?		
Middleman Type	**No**	**Yes**	**Total**
Agent (dalal)	3	6	9
Hybrid trader	6	10	16
Self-funded trader	9	3	15
Grand total	**18**	**22**	**40**

Source: Study survey data, N=40

5.2.3 Middleman trading enterprise characteristics

Alongside personal profiles of individuals interviewed as respondents, the study also considered the basic characteristics of trading enterprises that are operated by middlemen. The defining characteristics considered included size of start-up capital, size of working capital and annual trading income (turnover).

Start-up/Initial trading capital

The average size of startup capital across all types of middlemen stood at just under a million Tanzanian shillings (TZS 927 100). As shown in Table 5.6 below, the lowest initial capital outlay was recorded for agents who needed an average of just over TZS 660 000 shillings to start trading. Based on bean prices that were prevailing at the time of the survey (TZS 1300/kg), that amount was equivalent to about half a ton of dried food beans.

Table 5.6: Middleman type and size of start-up capital.

Middleman type	Average size of start-up capital in TZS
Agent (dalali)	660 933.31
Hybrid trader	1 072 222.20
Self-funded trader	1 095 000.00

Source: Study survey data, N=40

The Table 5.7 below shows that start-up capital for most traders comes from personal savings and the sale of their own crops. This reinforces the earlier observation that middlemen trading activities are heavily intertwined with farming activities.

Table 5.7: Source of capital for middleman trading activities.

Source of start-up capital	Count	Percent (%)
Personal savings	**40**	100%
Sale of crops	**23**	58%
Sale of livestock	**1**	3%
Bank loan	**3**	8%
Friends	**12**	30%
Loan from buyer	**3**	8%

Source: Survey data; N = 40

The link between trading start-up capital and savings from agricultural activities is suggestive of some form of household income diversification strategy, as reported in extant literature (Dimova and Sen, 2010; Kweka and Fox, 2013; Seppala, 1998). This is likely the case if one considers that the personal savings of most middlemen emanated from surplus income earned from crop production and marketing activities. In Kasulu District, crop farming wa the most dominant economic and livelihood activity for most

households at the time of this study and, therefore, the most common step towards economic diversification.

Enterprise age

The average age of enterprises corresponds to the time that each middleman had been in business at the time of the study. On average, a middleman had been in business for a period of 12 years. The average duration ranged between 9 and 15 years for pure agents (dalals) and self-funded traders, respectively. This suggests that the growth path for a typical middleman involves starting off as a pure agent dependent on principal trader resources and ending off as a self-funded trader when sufficient capital has been accumulated to fund own trading operations. Table 5.8 below shows the distribution of the various respondent groups by their number of years in operation.

Table 5.8: Average years of operation by type of surveyed middleman trader.

Middleman type	**Average years of operation**
Agent (dalal)	9
Hybrid trader (self-funded and agent)	11
Self-funded trader	15
Aggregate Average	**12**

Source: Survey Data; N = 40

Breadth and scale of operations

The breadth and scale of operations of middlemen operations in this study was determined based on the range of commodities traded, size of working capital circulated and the annual turnover.

Overall, an average middleman was involved in the buying and selling of four crops. Crops cited fell within the category of pulses, food grains, oilseeds and tubers. More precisely, this included beans, maize, sorghum, groundnuts, and cassava. A hybrid trader handled the highest number of crops, and this was most likely because of the wide variety of buyers since this type of middleman bought on own account and on behalf of principal traders. Principally, it is important to note that middlemen included in the study sample were not exclusive bean traders; their business models involved buying and selling a wider range of commodities. Table 5.9 below shows the average number of crop commodities handled by each middleman type.

Table 5.8: Average number of crops traded by middleman type.

Middleman type	Average crop commodities traded
Agent (dalal)	3
Hybrid trader	4
Self-funded trader	4
Aggregate average	4

Source: Study survey data

Working capital or trading capital size was an important indicator of a middleman's scale of operations. In the case of middlemen in thids study, working capital took the form of cash resources required to fund the buying and selling activities. This was because the amount of working capital at a middleman's disposal determined the quantity of beans that could be purchased within a single cycle of buying and selling. In common parlance, middleman traders refer to their working capital as *"mtaji wa kuzungusha"* which means circulating capital. Table 5.9 below shows that half of the surveyed middlemen had working capital amounts between five and ten million Tanzanian shillings. Based on bean prices prevailing at the time of the study, such a trader had the capacity to buy between four and eight tons of beans within a single cycle.

Table 5.9: Working capital size.

Size of working capital	Count	Percent %
Under 5 million shillings	8	20%
Between 5 and 10 million	20	50%
Over 10 million	12	30%
Total	**40**	100%

Source: Study survey data; N = 40

It is important to note that the size of working capital was different from the initial or start-up capital. While the main purpose of start-up capital is to fund working capital requirements for buying and selling, the working capital measured in this study reflects the level of capitalisation that middlemen traders had at the time of the study. Therefore, the level of working capital captured reflects the accumulation made over the several years of operation.

The breakdown of working capital sizes by type of middleman is shown in the Table 5.10 below:

Table 5.10: Working capital size by middleman type.

	Middleman type			
Size of working capital	**Agent**	**Hybrid trader**	**Self-funded trader**	**Total**
Under 5 million Shillings	0	8	0	8
Between 5 and 10 million	9	8	3	20
Over 10 million	0	0	12	12
Grand Total	**9**	**16**	**15**	**40**

Source: Survey Data; N = 40

A striking observation is that pure agents (dalals) all fell in the mid-category while 50% of hybrid traders fell within the lower tier of under five million shillings. This finding could be because pure agents received cash advances to purchase beans on behalf of different principal traders at any point in time while some hybrid traders tried to maximise from buying on their own account. A bean consignment bought on a middleman's own account can yield more profit than a similar consignment purchased under a pure agency arrangement where the profit potential is capped by the principal trader who determines the final price. In cases where the middleman buys beans as an agent, he cannot control the timing of the sale as such prerogative belongs to the principal trader.

Level of formality

Given the close links drawn between social embeddedness and informal entrepreneurship in literature, this study sought to gauge the level of formality of the surveyed enterprises using proxy indicators. All the middlemen traders surveyed were operating as sole proprietors and none of the businesses was registered with Business Registration and Licensing (BRELA). Instead, all the traders had a business operating license that had been issued by the local government authority. In this case, all middlemen traders had a business license issued by Kasulu District Council. A business license issued by the district council is a simplified procedure which gives a business operator some legitimacy to operate without formal business requirements conferred by BRELA registration. Thus, middlemen operators occupied the twilight zone between formality and informality.

Another indicator measured by this study was the possession of a tax identification number (TIN) issued by the Tanzania Revenue Authority. The study survey results show

that only 43% of middlemen traders were in possession of a TIN number. The low prevalence of traders could be because crop taxes are mostly collected on the spot by tax collectors from the local district councils and such collection does not require that a payer possesses a TIN number registered with the Tanzania Revenue Authority.

The informality of the enterprises operated by surveyed middlemen is further demonstrated by the lack of proper business records. Records kept by middlemen were very rudimentary in nature and, often, took the form of a notebook or diary where details of transactions were kept and acted as a memory aid. All the surveyed businesses mainly assumed the form of sole proprietorships. In cases where business capital was contributed by more than one member, the day-to-day operating decisions were based on a kind of gentlemen's agreement with no documented procedures. In sum, the middlemen enterprises surveyed are best described as informal entrepreneurial ventures that operate on the borderline between formal and informal systems of business governance.

5.2.4 Middleman business model activities

This section presents the main business activities undertaken by middlemen traders while fulfilling core functions as informal trading entrepreneurs. Underpinning the presentation of these functions is the business model question of what the interdependent activities are that middleman traders undertake as part of the value creation, delivery and appropriation process (Atkova, 2018; Casadesus-Masanell and Heilbron, 2015; Zott, 2010). The key activities were identified through survey questions and their content and structure were further unpacked through in-depth interviews and on-site observations.

Main business functions

As indicated in the Table 5.11 below, the main activities that are undertaken by middlemen traders were the buying, sorting, aggregation, storage and on-selling of various crop commodities. Each of the major activities subsumed sub-activities that were critical to effective overall performance. For instance, most traders mentioned that the buying function involved searching for information about potential supply sources of beans and organising local agents to assess quality and effect the actual purchases. Similarly, the on-selling action involved prospecting for markets, negotiating with buyers and making arrangements for commodity deliveries to end customers. In the study, 78%

of respondents indicated that they were involved in the transportation of commodities. In-depth discussions and field observations showed that the middlemen traders' role was mostly concentrated on transporting produce to aggregation facilities and the responsibility for transporting beans to end markets was largely the responsibility of the large-scale buyer (tajiri). While sorting was indicated as a key activity by 98% of the respondents, its intensity varied widely. Field observations showed that the scale of sorting varied from merely distinguishing between the various bean grades to intensive hand picking (by hired casual labourers) to ensure that the quality standards of the buyer were met. The level of sorting was also directly linked to the price incentives that the buyer provided for attaining higher levels of quality. Local people were employed to do the sorting which was done manually by handpicking beans to separate the clean beans from defective ones. The least common function reported by respondents was the provision of credit to farmers. Only 50% of respondents indicated that they provided some kind of credit to farmers who supplied them with beans. Closer investigations showed that the scale of credit provision was highly limited and mostly confined to loan advances made against commitments to deliver agreed quantities upon harvest. More often the credit was provided to highly trusted farmers who were also willing to pledge their crops as collateral.

Table 5.11: Type of business functions by performed by various middleman types.

Business function/activity	Agent (dalal)	Hybrid trader	Self-funded trader	Count	% Count
Buying of crops	9	16	15	**40**	**100**
Selling (marketing)	9	16	15	**40**	**100**
Aggregating crops	9	16	15	**40**	**100**
Transportation	3	16	12	**31**	**78**
Warehousing and storage	9	16	15	**40**	**100**
Sorting	9	15	15	**39**	**98**
Lending money to farmers	0	5	15	**20**	**50**

Source: Survey data, N = 40

The study survey results also show that a significant chunk of middlemen trader activities was conducted through long chains of local agents and sub-agents. The Table 5.12 below shows that agents engaged by middlemen traders were primarily involved in crop aggregation, price negotiation, purchasing and information sourcing. Essentially,

these activities are sub-elements of the broad purchasing function. Local agents constituted the purchasing face of middlemen trader activities. The overconcentration of agent functions on purchasing and sourcing reflects the supply-side nature of the market under investigation. The flip side of this market was the demand-side where agents played a more prominent role in selling produce to end customers.

Table 5.12: Activities undertaken by agents on behalf of middleman traders.

Activity delegated to agent	Agent (dalal)	Hybrid trader	Self-funded trader	Total count	% Count
Aggregate produce in a central place	0	3	8	11	40%
Conduct purchases on behalf of the trader	6	1	0	7	24%
Negotiate prices of beans with farmers	0	3	2	5	17%
Provide information on sources of beans	0	4	2	6	21%
Grand total	**6**	**11**	**12**	**29**	**100%**

Source: Study survey data, N = 29

Trading-related expenses for middleman traders

Apart from directly asking survey respondents to identify activities that they undertook, one indirect way posed to cross-check their value creation and delivery actions was the identification of main business expenses. This was based on the premise that business expenses were derived from the execution of underlying business/entrepreneurial actions (Zott, 2010). The main business expenses reported by middlemen traders are as presented in Table 5.13 below.

Table 5.13: Business expenses of middlemen surveyed.

Cost driver	Frequency count	Percent (%)
Bean purchases	40	100%
Transport of beans	34	85%
Sorting beans	38	95%
Commission payments to buying agents	33	83%
Renting warehouses	37	93%

Cost driver	Frequency count	Percent (%)
Chemicals to preserve crops	30	75%
Buying empty bags	30	75%
Marketing related	33	83%

Source: Study survey data, N = 40

The findings on the major business expenses incurred by middleman traders sync well with the major activities identified. Purchasing, aggregation, storage, quality improvement and selling costs dominated the list of main expenses reported. Results above collectively underscore the fact that middleman trading is a business activity that is centred on buying and selling.

Revenue model and profit model

Related to the investigation of expenses associated with middleman trading activities, the study zoomed in on the mechanism used by traders to appropriate value (make profit) from their business actions. The main models used to ensure that profit was realised in the business were the commission and mark-up approaches. In a commission approach, the middleman trader was paid a fixed amount per kilogram of beans purchased and delivered to the buyer (*tajiri*). In the mark-up approach, the middleman trader computed the cost of acquisition (all sourcing and ancillary costs) and then added a profit margin to arrive at the final price that was offered to the buyer. The difference between the two approaches is that in a commission approach, the buyer determines the remuneration for the middleman for the trader and in the mark-up model the middleman has more freedom to bargain a price. However, discussions with middlemen traders revealed that both commission and mark-up were referred to as *"cha juu"* which literally means what is added on top. Commission payments were reported to fall between 10 and 20 shillings per kilogram whereas mark-up margins were reported to vary from 20 to 100 shillings per kilogram. The huge variances reflect the tendency to build in flexibility in price negotiations to preserve lasting trading relationships between middlemen traders and their buyers *(matajiri).*

Table 5.14: Profit model employed by middleman traders.

Middleman type	Commission (Count)	Mark-up (count)
Agent (dalal)	9	4
Hybrid trader	12	16
Self-funded trader	5	15
Grand total	**26**	**35**

Source: Study survey data, N = 35

While the above remuneration/profit models related to middlemen interviewed for the study, the situation was less clear for the agents that were involved in the purchasing and aggregation process. Although 83% of the middlemen indicated that they incurred expenses related to paying commissions to agents, there was also wide acknowledgement that these informal purchasing agents built in their remuneration in the price that they paid to the farmer. The common phrase used was "*wanajilipa wenyewe*" which translates to "they pay themselves". This practice involves the middleman announcing the price that they would pay to the purchasing agent which implies that the agent had to use that price guide as a basis for negotiating with the farmers and any other players in between.

Business capital mobilisation

A key entrepreneurial activity that is not directly mentioned by middlemen is the act of mobilising financial resources to facilitate the crop buying and selling process. In this study, the financial resources that a middleman needs to start and operate a trading business are referred to as start-up and working capital, respectively.

The data in Table 5.15 below show that all surveyed middlemen drew from their personal savings to raise capital to invest in their trading middleman enterprises. The second source of initial capital was the sale of crops. Given that all the respondents doubled up as farmers, it is highly likely that the sale of crops was a subset of personal savings. This observation tends to confirm Hayami and Kowagoe's (2001) characterisation of middlemen traders as peasant entrepreneurs who used their foundation in farming to diversify into trading activities. While loans from friends contributed to the initial capital of 30% of survey respondents, the results generally depict a marginal role for loans to initial capital raising efforts.

Table 5.15: Source of initial trading capital for surveyed middleman traders.

Source of initial capital	Frequency	Percent (%)
Personal savings	40	100%
Sale of crops	23	58%
Sale of livestock	1	3%
Bank loan	3	8%
Loans from friends	12	30%
Loan from buyer	3	8%

Source: Study survey data, N = 40

Contrary to the situation for initial capital raising shown above, the data on working capital sources show that advances from buyers/customers (matajiri) constitute a source of capital for 88% of survey respondents (see Table 5.16 below). A new source of income was that retained from trading activities, which ranks second and was cited as a source of capital by 80% of respondents. An interesting contributor to working capital sources was the income from sales of crops produced from the trader's own farms (33%). This highlights the importance of own production to the middleman trader's business model.

Table 5.16: Sources of working capital for middleman traders.

Source of working capital	Frequency count	Percent (%)
Advances from crop buyers	35	88%
Retained trading income	32	80%
Income from sales of own crops	13	33%
Personal savings	1	3%
Loans from friends	4	10%

Source: Survey data; N = 40

5.2.5 Middlemen's personal (egocentric) network characteristics

The data collected and analysed in this study centered on personal networks and network features of each individual middleman trader surveyed. This section presents a summary of the findings of the study from a personal social network perspective. The network analysis results presented here are based on a statistical and qualitative analysis of the core ego sample of 40 middlemen traders surveyed and several sub-samples of alter contacts identified through the survey instrument. Network characteristics explored

through the analysis include size, composition (content), structure and interrelationships. To the extent that multiple name generators were used in the study, different personal network variables and variables under the relevant alter sub-samples constitute sub-personal networks of middlemen traders. According to the name generator questions applied in the survey, there were four sub-personal networks for each middleman. The alter categories that form the basis of these sub-personal networks are significant persons, buying agents, buyers, and family members.

Network of significant persons

The study survey prompted respondents to identify a maximum of three significant persons in relation to their middlemen trading activities. These were construed as individuals who played a crucial role in aiding the middleman's entrepreneurial efforts at any stage of the middleman's trading business. As shown in the Table 5.17 below, the average network size of a middleman's significant person's network stood at 2.2 people. Self-funded traders had the highest number of significant persons at an average of 2.5. When this is read in light of the number of years in operation there seems to be a positive relationship between the number of years in business and the size of the network. Between the three types of middlemen self-funded traders had an average of 15 years in business compared to an average of 9 years for pure agent (dalal) type middlemen. Overall, this suggests that a middleman trader's contacts grow on an incremental basis.

Table 5.17: Size of significant person networks of middleman traders.

Middlemen type	Average number of significant people
Agent (dalal)	2
Hybrid trader	2.1
Self-funded trader	2.5
Aggregate average	2.2

Source: Study survey data

The study survey findings point to great diversity in the relationships between significant persons and the ego middleman traders. As shown in Table 5.18 below, the greatest proportion (40%) of significant persons were classified as friends. Business acquaintances ranked second with 27% of the total significant person connections. Family and kinship (extended family contacts), with a combined 33% of contacts, surprisingly

ranked lower than the category of friends. The significance of friends could emanate from their direct contribution to capital raising efforts (30% for initial capital and 10% for working capital).

Table 5.18: Distribution of significant persons by relationship type.

Tie/relation description	Frequency count	Percent (%)
Business acquaintances	23	27%
Family member	20	24%
Friend	34	40%
Kin/ Relative	8	9%
Grand total	85	100%

Source: Study Survey Data, N = 85

One key dimension worth noting is the strength of the relationship reported between middlemen traders and their significant people/contacts. According to the data presented in Table 5.19 below, longevity seemed to be an important factor in the significance of relationships between middlemen traders and their contacts.

Table 5.19: Strength of relationship between middlemen traders and their significant people.

Duration of relation	Frequency count	Percent (%)
Below 3 **years**	1	1%
Between 3 and 5 years	9	11%
Over 5 years	75	88%
Total	**85**	**100%**

Source: Survey data; N = 85

It is noteworthy that 99% of relationships have been in existence for more than three years and 88% have been in existence for over five years. With the relationship age serving as a proxy for the strength of bond between the ego and alter, it can be inferred that relationships between middlemen traders and their significant persons generally constituted strong ties. This supposition is supported by the rating of relationships with significant persons which showed that 17% of relationships were rated as close whereas 83% were rated as very close.

Table 5.20: Strength of relationship.

Strength of relationship/ Middleman type	Agent (dalal)	Hybrid trader	Self-funded trader	Total
Close	7%	0%	10%	17%
Very close	11%	36%	36%	83%
Total	18%	36%	46%	100%

Source: Study survey data, N=83

Business support derived from significant persons by middlemen traders seemed to be centered on resources needed to operate the trading business. As shown in Table 5.21 below, 41% of respondents indicated that they received working capital support from their significant persons. In this case, working capital support came in varied forms which included trading cash advances from buyers and soft loans from friends and family contacts. It is important that the type of assistance associated with significant persons was concentrated on tangible resources which required the existence of a strong relationship between the parties. It is, therefore, telling to see that these significant relationships were low in terms of providing both supply and demand-related information, which is associated with weak tie networks.

Table 5.21: Type of business assistance received from significant persons.

Type of business assistance	Agent (dalal)	Hybrid trader	Self-funded trader	Total
Advice on business matters	4%	5%	13%	**22%**
Beans supply information	0%	4%	4%	**7%**
Labour	4%	7%	13%	**24%**
Working capital	7%	22%	12%	**41%**
Market information	0%	1%	4%	**5%**
Total	**15%**	**39%**	**46%**	**100%**

An analysis of significant persons mentioned by survey respondents showed a strong tendency towards geographical co-location. 67% of respondents reported that their significant persons were located within the same ward and 87% were located within Kigoma region where Kasulu is located. This suggests that, in this study, local

embeddedness was a strong factor in shaping personal and business relations within the Kasulu bean-trading market.

Table 5.23: Location of significant persons by type of middleman

	Agent (dalal)	Hybrid trader	Self-funded trader	Grand total	% count
Kasulu town	0	3	3	6	15%
Outside Kasulu but within Kigoma	0	1	0	1	3%
Outside Kigoma region but within Tanzania	0	0	5	5	13%
Same ward	9	12	7	27	70%
Grand total	**9**	**16**	**15**	**40**	**100%**

Source: Study survey data, N=40

Business agent network

A common feature of the bean-trading market in Kasulu is the existence of multiple layers of buying agents who were involved in the actual sourcing and purchasing of beans. A name generator question identified a maximum of three agents that the middlemen traders used in order of importance. In total, the 40 respondents identified and named 80 agents. This gave an average agent network size of two agents per middleman trader. Table 5.24 below shows that self-funded traders had the highest average number of purchasing agents at 2.3. The highest number of agents reported for a single middleman trader was 36 which consisted of agents distributed across different districts within Kigoma region. Interestingly, even middlemen traders who described themselves as agents also had at least one agent to assist them with crop-purchasing responsibilities. This tendency to have multi-tiered agency relationships reflects the importance of involving people from a particular sourcing area while buying. The reason mostly cited for having buying agents from each specific area was to maximise informational advantages and capitalise on trustful relationships that were already established.

Table 5.24: Average number of purchasing agents per middleman type.

Middleman Type	Business agent count	Average number of agents
Agent (dalal)	13	1.4
Hybrid trader	33	2.1
Self-funded trader	34	2.3
Overall	80	2.0

Source: Study survey data

Primary relationship between middleman traders and their buying agents

Middlemen traders' assessment of the relationship between them and their buying agents revealed that the majority were perceived as purely business relationships. This means the relationship between the parties was held together by mutual business interests. Of the buying agents 20% were considered friends. In such cases, there was a socio-economic aspect to the relationship between the parties. Another category in which business collaboration was combined with social relations was the extended family group, which accounted for 12% of buying agents in the sub-sample. Close family members only constituted 7% of the total agent sub-sample. In-depth discussions with middlemen respondents revealed that assigning agent responsibilities to family members was risky as it was difficult to take sanctions against them when they engaged in defective behaviour. One respondent remarked that *"ndugu wanakosa uaminifu"* which translates to "relatives are not trustworthy". This was often associated with an entitlement mentality.

Table 5.25: Nature of relationship between middlemen traders and their buying agents.

Nature of relationship	Frequency (%)
Business acquaintance	61%
Family member	7%
Friend	20%
Kin/ Relative (extended family)	12%
Total	100%

Source: Study survey data, N= 80

Strength of relationship between middleman traders and their agents

Middlemen traders' rating of the strength of relationship that existed between them, and their buying agents showed that 100% of them rated the relationship as either close or very close. This mirrored the level of trust that was deemed necessary for someone to be designated as a buying agent. In-depth interviews revealed that middlemen traders invested time and effort in selecting buying agents. This included conducting reference checks with village leadership and other traders to establish if prospective agents had a good reputation and moral standing within their communities. Since all transactions were

done with no formal agreements, the reported closeness was one of the mechanisms to ensure that no performance failures would be experienced.

Table 5.26: Strength of relationship between middlemen traders and their agents.

Middleman type	Close	Very close	Total
Agent (dalal)	1%	15%	16%
Hybrid trader	8%	34%	41%
Self-funded trader	8%	35%	43%
Grand total	**16%**	**84%**	**100%**

Source: Study survey data, N= 80

An analysis of the length of relationship between middlemen traders and their buying agents showed that the majority (84%) had a relationship lasting beyond five years. This suggests that agency relationships involved loyalty between the parties. This loyalty could be a factor in generating the closeness that was reported above. From a social network perspective, long-lasting relationships are an indicator of strong ties that foster the development and maintenance of trust-based exchanges.

Table 5.27: Duration of relationships between middlemen traders and their buying agents.

Length of relationship	Agent (dalal)	Hybrid trader	Self-funded trader	Total
Between 1 and 3 **years**	1%	1%	0%	3%
Between 3 and 5 years	0%	6%	7%	13%
Over 5 years	21%	16%	47%	84%
Total	**23%**	**23%**	**54%**	**100%**

Source: Study survey data, N= 80

Trust in business agents

Given the importance of trust to economic exchanges, middlemen traders were asked to rate the level of trust in each of the buying agents that were named through the relevant name generator questions. Table 5.28 below shows that the level of trust invested in buying agents was consistently high; 86% of respondents expressed the highest possible trust in their agents.

Table 5.28: Extent of middlemen traders' trust in the buying agents.

Middleman Type	Much	Very much	Total
Agent (dalal)	0%	15%	15%
Hybrid trader	4%	35%	38%
Self-funded trader	10%	36%	46%
Total	14%	86%	100%

Source: Study survey data, N=78

The results above point to the centrality of trust in the performance of middlemen activities. According to most traders, trust was the foundation of the agency relationships. The importance of trust was underscored by such phrases *as "uaminifu ni kila kitu"* (trust is everything) and *"uaminifu ni mtaji"* (trustworthiness is capital). In-depth discussions revealed that high trust levels were necessary because buying agents received significant amounts to buy beans and other commodities on behalf of their principal traders. In the absence of formal contracts, traders resorted to cooperating with people that they had high trust in. However, despite precautions taken to avoid malfeasance, some trader respondents still reported cases where they had lost significant amounts to dishonest agents. One trader reported losing 50 million Tanzanian shillings to a rogue agent who had received an advance to buy beans but cut off communication without delivering the agreed consignment.

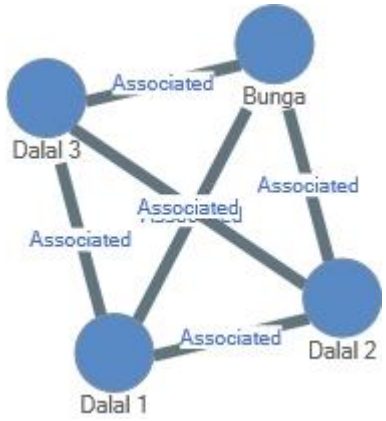
Buying agent interrelatedness

To assess the degree to which middlemen's buying agent networks were open or closed, the associational relationship was established by asking each respondent to name which of their agents knew one another.

Generally, the resultant graphs showed that middlemen agent networks were fairly closed with most agents known to one another. The high density and closure observed in these relationships could be explained by the geographical proximity and the smallness of middlemen's sphere of operation.

Figure 5.1 below shows that all of middleman Bunga's (pseudonym for a middleman) agents knew each other and were associated in some way.

Figure 5.1: Mapping of middleman's buying agent network.



Buyer (selling/marketing) networks

Apart from buying agents used by middlemen to identify and purchase beans, another key category of actors were the buyers or customers (also known as *matajiri* in Swahili). In total the 40 survey respondents identified a combined 87 buyers. On average, each middleman was connected to two buyers. Self-funded middlemen had the highest average number of buyers at 2.4 each. This high number of buyers reflects their flexibility in looking for markets for their produce since they were not tied to a single buyer. Hybrid had nearly the same number of average buyers (2.2) because part of the stocks that they bought with their own capital was openly sold on a competitive basis to buyers who offered the highest price. Pure agents (dalals) had an average of 1.3 buyers. This most likely reflects their over-dependence on a few principal buyers who gave them the trading capital for buying beans. In-depth interviews showed that most pure agents committed to sourcing beans for a few main buyers who provided cash advances for paying farmers. Despite not having formal agreements, such agents maintained loyalty and only sourced for other buyers on a rare basis.

Table 5.29: Average number of buyers per middleman trader category.

Middleman type	Average number of buyers
Agent (dalal)	1.3
Hybrid trader	2.2
Self-funded trader	2.4
Total	**2.1**

Source: Study survey data

Duration of relationships between middlemen and their buyers

Survey data analysis revealed a tendency towards long-lasting relationships between middlemen traders and their buyers. Of identified buyers, 81% had a relationship with middlemen traders that was at least three years old. However, the duration of relationships with buyers was considerably lower than the relationship observed with crop-buying agents. This suggests that middlemen experienced a higher turnover for buyers than for buying agents. This could be due to efforts to find more remunerative markets. Largely, the data trend pointed towards more buyer retention than reliance on spot market transactions.

Table 5.30: Duration of relationship between middlemen traders and their buyers (customers).

Duration of relationship	Count	% Count
Less than 1 year	2	2%
Between 1 and 3 **years**	14	17%
Between 3 and 5 years	34	41%
Over 5 years	33	40%
Total	**83**	100%

Source: Study survey data, N=83

Extent of middleman traders' trust in buyers

Table 5.31 below shows that middlemen traders trusted their buying customers to a significant degree. Of survey respondents, 76% indicated that they had absolute trust in buyers with whom they did business. However, the concentration of trust was slightly lower than the trust expressed for buying agents (dalals). This variation could be because buying agents came from the same communities as middlemen traders and their interaction levels were much higher than was the case with buyers.

Table 5.31: Extent of middlemen traders' trust in buyers.

Middleman type	Much	Very much	Total
Agent (dalal)	0%	16%	16%
Hybrid trader	8%	39%	47%
Self-funded trader	16%	21%	37%
Total	24%	76%	100%

Source: Study survey data, N=75

5.2.6 Family embeddedness and middlemen trading activities

This section presents the study findings relating to the role of the family in middlemen trading activities. Firstly, the total sub-sample of family members identified as having an active role in the business was 67 out of a potential maximum of 120 (based on a maximum of three members per respondent). Two distinct categories were identifiable. The first category was the nucleus family members (*wanafamilia*) who consisted of the middleman trader's immediate family members, i.e., spouse and children. The second category was made of the extended family (*wanandugu*) such as cousins, nieces, uncles and aunts. According to this observation, it can be insinuated that the family participation rate in middlemen trading activities was 56%. Table 5.32 below shows that family involvement in middlemen trading activities was more biased towards extended family members (often referred as *wanandugu*) who constituted 70% of the total sub-sample. The least participation was from spouses who constituted only 10% of the total. However, the low reported participation of nucleus family members ("*wanafamilia*") needs to be treated with caution as the contribution of those members in the core own-farm production was often concealed. However, the general sentiment is that family members are often not entrusted with commercial roles such as buying commodities or collecting cash. The delineation between production and trading activities was not always clear. The inclusion of own-farm production as the core of a middleman trader's trading stock obfuscates the role of the family in business undertakings. To the extent that family labour was used in the production process, its value becomes an inherent component of the associated stocks.

Table 5.32: Participation of family members in middlemen activities by relationship type.

Nature of family relation	Frequency count	Percent (%)
Child	13	19%
Extended family member	45	70%
Spouse	7	10%
Total	**67**	**100%**

Source: Survey data; N = 67

Nature of family involvement

The nature and level of family relations varied a great deal. The highest proportion of family members worked in the middlemen trading business on a part-time basis. Discussions showed that most members were involved in managerial type responsibilities

such as quality control, supervising casual labourers and storage management. Extended family contributed the highest proportion involved in the business on a full-time basis. The investment role of family members in the middlemen trader's business was very limited with only 7% of the total allocation. The small involvement was mostly concentrated on capital pooling arrangements between siblings involved in the same trade. This study survey data suggests that family members were involved in the middleman's business mostly through labour provision. However, middlemen's descriptions of the entrepreneurial journeys suggested that family played important roles in the business start-up processes. although their evolvement and importance reduced as the business enterprises grew. The fact that 28% of significant persons identified consisted of family members lends some credence to this viewpoint.

Table 5.33: Nature of family members' involvement in middlemen traders' businesses

	Nature of involvement in business			
Nature of family relationship	Investor by way of equity (co-owner)	Works full-time in the business	Works part-time in the business	Total
Child	0%	3%	16%	**19%**
Extended family member	5%	22%	43%	**70%**
Spouse	1%	0%	9%	**10%**
Total	**7%**	**25%**	**68%**	**100%**

Source: Survey data; N = 67

While spouses and children were not overtly involved in the enterprise of buying and selling, the fact that buying and selling was built on a foundation of the middlemen entrepreneur's household farm production implies that household members of the nucleus family were inherently a part of the enterprising process. In this sense, middlemen's trading activities appeared to be an extension of the household enterprise whose initial core was farming. The foundational core activity of farming was mostly dependent on family labour and financial savings. The lack of a clear accounting system that separated household activities from business activities meant that, in some cases, family (household) savings were silently transformed into business capital. The porosity of the boundaries between the household and the commercial enterprise made it possible for transfers to happen across the two.

Remuneration of family members

Remuneration of family members participating in the trading business was reported to be a combination of a direct cash component and disguised payments which were termed non-financial support or incentives. This implied that there were informal and unquantified benefits that accrued to family members who had a link with the business enterprise. Such benefits were often advanced as favours which partially rewarded the concerned member's contribution in the business but was also construed as part of familial responsibility by the trader. Such kinds of benefit included the financial and in-kind contributions towards emergency expenses (such as payment of medical bills), payment of children's school fees and assistance with food and agricultural inputs. Generally, the approach to family member remuneration seemed to have a maintenance and retention objective as opposed to rewarding business-related performance per se.

Table 5.34 below shows that, aside from cash payments, 100% of family members involved in the middlemen's business received non-financial support from the middleman trader. This was the case notwithstanding that 96% of all family members involved in the business reportedly got some cash payment for their contribution. This suggests that there were both economic and social motives behind the engagement of family members in the business venture.

Table 5.34: Breakdown of family relations who receive non-financial support from middlemen traders.

	Receives non-financial support	
Family relation type	**Frequency count**	**Percent (%)**
Child	13	19%
Extended family member	29	43%
Sibling	18	27%
Spouse	7	10%
Total	**67**	**100%**

Source: Study survey results, N=67

Influence of family on venturing into middleman trading business

The influence of previous family involvement on the middlemen's decision to enter this type of business was not clear. The survey results show that 33% of respondents had at

least one member who had been involved in this type of business before. In-depth discussions revealed that some respondents had benefited from relationships, references and reputation established by their parents and grandparents. Two respondents indicated that they had assisted their children to set up middlemen trading businesses on their own.

Table 5.35: Previous family involvement in trading.

	Previous family involvement in trading		
Middleman type	No	Yes	Total
Agent (dalal)	3	6	9
Hybrid trader	12	4	16
Self-funded trader	12	3	15
Total count	27	13	40
Percentage (%) count	**67%**	**33%**	**100%**

Source: Study survey data, N=40

5.2.7 Associational life of middleman traders

Of the survey respondents, 82.5% were members of informal social and economic solidarity groups. The highest number of respondents was affiliated to informal business associations with nearly 50% of the respondent sample. Affiliation to business associations gave middlemen traders a collective voice and helped in setting group ethical codes of conduct which were vital to resolving conflicts when they arose. Surprisingly, informal financial savings and credit groups (SACCOS and VICOBA) had the lowest affiliation level with only 21% of the total number of respondents.

Table 5.36: Middlemen trader membership in community-based organisations.

Type of membership group	**Total**	**% Count**
AMCOS	10	30%
Business association	16	48%
SACCOS	3	9%
VICOBA	4	12%
Total	**33**	**100%**

Source: Study survey data, N=33

Generally, respondents described their affiliation to community-based groups as strong to very strong. All respondents who were affiliated to community-based groups and financial service groups rated their affiliation as very strong. Further probing revealed

that the financial commitment associated with such organisations was a strong incentive for frequent interaction and bonding between such groups and their individual members.

Table 5.37: Strength of middleman traders' membership in community-based groups

	Membership strength		
Type of membership group	**Strong**	**Very strong**	**Total**
AMCOS	6	4	10
Business association	6	10	16
SACCOS	0	3	3
VICOBA	0	4	4
Total	**12**	**21**	**33**

Source: Study survey data, N=33

Benefits derived from community-based membership organisations

In this study, 82% of the respondents reported that they derived some business benefit from community-based membership organisations. Membership in informal business associations was associated with group solidarity services which included lobbying for better conditions with local government authorities and setting bylaws to provide guidelines for the conduct of business. One frequently cited benefit from informal business associations was revolving credit which is called "upatu" in Swahili. This type of credit comes at no or very minimal interest and is considered key to overcoming the lack of formal credit services by members. Most middlemen traders who had membership in informal associations described them as platforms for continual learning, knowledge sharing and exchanging practical information about trading activities. In general, informal business associations served as platforms (*vijiwe*) for exchanging business experience and ideas *("kupeana uzoefu na kupanuana mawazo").* Within the framework of informal business associations, middlemen traders who were new to trade had the opportunity to learn from their more experienced and seasoned counterparts. In the end, the association functioned as an informal apprenticeship and mentorship network which resembled a trade guild. Although not widespread, membership of agricultural cooperative societies (AMCOS) was often explained as a strategy to strengthen the bond between middlemen traders and the community of farmers. Such membership should also consider the dual character of middlemen traders as farmers and trading entrepreneurs. One of the

commonly mentioned benefits from membership of AMCOS was the access to agricultural input loans. Although such loans did not go directly to the trading account, they helped to bolster the own-production component which often served as the core trading stock for middlemen traders.

Table 5.38: Perception of benefits derived from group membership.

Community-based membership organisation	Does the respondent derive any benefit?		
	No	**Yes**	**Total**
AMCOS	0%	30%	30%
Business association	0%	48%	48%
SACCOS	0%	9%	9%
VICOBA	0%	12%	12%
Total	0%	100%	100%

Source: Study survey data, N=33

5.2.8 Local embeddedness and trading activities

Survey results show that the perceived contribution of local leaders to middlemen's trading activities was highly negative. Only 14% indicated that local leaders had a positive influence on their operations. The positive contribution acknowledged was mostly centred on the resolution of misunderstandings between farmers and buying agents. Local leaders were also useful in providing references in the selection of potential buying agents.

Table 5.39: Perception of helpfulness of local leaders to middlemen trading activities.

	Frequency Count	**Percent (%)**
Not useful	32	86%
Useful	5	14%
Total	**37**	**100%**

Source: Survey data, N = 37

However, most middlemen traders were dismissive of the role of local political authorities in their business activities. One trader commented that locally elected political leaders, such as councilors and village chairpersons, did not understand business

dynamics (*"hawaelewi biashara*"). The negative sentiments were linked to the perception that local leaders create restrictive conditions which limit trading activities. One point cited was high local taxes which took the form of forced contribution to various political and community development activities. In a way, making contributions to community and other public causes was considered both an obligation and part of good citizenship for local entrepreneurs and business operators. Table 5.40 below shows that 87% of respondents had made donations/contributions to their communities on at least one occasion.

Table 5.40: Middlemen trader contributions to the community.

Middleman type	No	Yes	Total
Agent (dalal)	8%	16%	24%
Hybrid trader	5%	37%	42%
Self-funded trader	0%	34%	34%
Total	13%	87%	100%

Source: Study survey data, N=38

5.2.9 Middlemen trader sociocentric network

This section presents the extent of interrelations between the various middlemen traders who were included in this survey. While the dominant orientation adopted in investigating trader network was a personal network approach, the availability of information on the relationship between the surveyed traders made it possible to create a sociogram based on the "who-knows-who" type of relationships. The resultant sociogram generated from the relationship information is depicted in Figure 5.3 below.

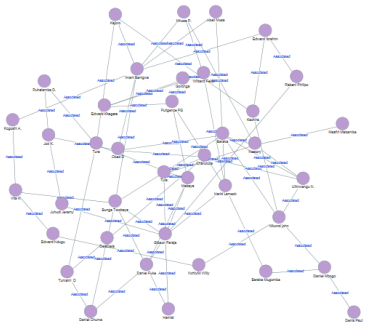


Figure 5.3: Socio-metric map of middlemen traders covered by the survey.
Source: Study survey data

Consistent with the observations made by Abebe et al. (2016), the connections between middlemen traders in Kasulu resemble a giant social network with various levels of connectedness. Most of the traders are largely known to each other. In-depth interviews revealed that most middlemen traders relied on each other to gather supply and market information. High levels of collaboration were also reported in meeting orders from large buyers whose commodity quantity requirement often went beyond the capacity of a single middleman. Table 5.41 below shows quantitative measures of the network relationships between middlemen traders as generated through the NVIVO social network analysis function.

Table 5.41: Sociocentric network measures for surveyed middleman traders.

Case	Degree	Betweenness
Abeli	8	3.694
Baraka	7	134.698
Mugombe	7	21.167
Bunga	6	114.223
Charukula	5	39.618
Daniel	5	19.197
Daniel F	5	24.320
Momo	5	43.500
DelaDela	5	7.500
Denis	4	0.000
Edward I	4	19.038
Kangeme	4	1.524
Ngonyani	4	7.314
Fullgence	4	45.310
Gibson	4	125.882
Goronga	4	1.524
Hamisi	3	0.000
Harid	3	105.649
Imani	3	107.265
Joti	3	21.453
Juhudi	3	11.520
Kachira	3	28.575
Kajoro	3	33.214
Kogoshi	3	7.630
Mabaya	3	66.572
Mhoza	3	37.702
Mkunzi	3	104.229
Msafiri	2	0.000
Nchiyiki	2	14.277
Nestory	2	57.449
Obed D	2	54.025
Rabani	2	11.400
Ruhalamba	2	5.577

Case	Degree	Betweenness
Tula	2	42.684
Tumaini	2	16.252
Tura	2	51.410
Ulimwengu	2	30.383
Vita	1	33.985
Wilbard	1	37.239

Source: Study survey data

The degree measure captures the number of direct other middlemen traders who are known to the respondent. The data in the above table show that middleman trader Baraka had the highest number of direct ties within the middlemen trader sample. A closer analysis shows that Baraka was a hybrid trader who, apart from buying on his own account, also bought on behalf of other traders in the sample and collaborated a lot with other middlemen to fulfil customer orders. Overall, the degree measure shows that each middleman trader had at least one direct tie and, among all the traders who were connected, their level of closeness tended to vary. The use of a snowball sampling approach accounts for this as survey respondents were identified by their peers who were surveyed before them.

The betweenness measure in the table above depicts the extent to which a middleman trader plays a brokering role within the depicted social network structure. According to the Table 5.41 above, trader Baraka enjoyed the highest potential for brokerage within the sample population. Although this trader had a lower degree of number of direct contacts, the position that he occupied within the network configuration conferred the best potential for acting as a broker. Trader **Hamisi** had a betweenness score of 0.0 indicating that he was a peripheral actor who did not act as a connector for any of the other actors. Overall, the betweenness scores shown in the table underscore the importance of brokerage positions in middlemen trading operations.

While the measures presented above emerge from the connection between middlemen traders, the Table 5.42 below demonstrates a case of one trader and the interrelationships between the main commodity buyers that they, as a middleman, traded with. The degree of 9 for the middleman respondent shows that he was connected to all of them. Conversely, a degree of 1 for all the buyers indicates that, from the buyer's perception, all the buyers were disconnected and did not know each other. In such a situation, the middleman is an absolute broker with a betweenness score of 36. The

middleman is equidistant from each of the buyers and any exchange that they may want to do will have to pass through this Trader B.

Table 5.42: Central network measures for a sample.

Case	Degree	Degree In	Degree Out	Betweenness	Closenes
Trader B	9			36.000	0.111
Buyer Burundi	1			0.000	0.059
Buyer Dar	1			0.000	0.059
Buyer DRC	1			0.000	0.059
Buyer Kahama	1			0.000	0.059
Buyer Mtukula	1			0.000	0.059
Buyer Mwanza	1			0.000	0.059
Buyer Rusumo	1			0.000	0.059
Buyer Shinyanga	1			0.000	0.059
Buyer Uganda	1			0.000	0.059

Source: In-depth discussion with a middleman trader

5.2.10 Middlemen transactional behaviour

This section presents findings about the behavioural practices of middlemen traders as explored and revealed through survey questions, direct field observations and in-depth interview discussions. Thematically, findings were organised according to the main forms of exchange that were undertaken by middlemen traders. These findings include raising trading capital, identifying business opportunities and the actual conduct of trading activities.

Contracting behaviour

All middlemen traders surveyed indicated that they ran their business activities based on unwritten verbal agreements with their business partners. None of the surveyed middlemen had formal agreements with their buying agents. The commissioning of work to agents was not supported by any written agreements. The most common form of documentary evidence available was in the form of the middlemen's trading diary/notebook and mobile phone messages. To minimise the risk of non-compliance and dishonesty by buying agents, middlemen resorted to close monitoring which included limiting the size of cash advances for purchasing purposes. Retirement of any cash

advances was done daily. When asked about the importance of formal contracts to their activities, most traders emphasised that business was based on mutual understanding *("biashara ni maelewano").*

As was the case with buying agents, all the middlemen traders interviewed did not have any formal sales agreement or business contracts with their buying customers. Trading deals were based on verbal agreements which were often concluded in person. Transactions with buyers that were located outside Kasulu District were mostly negotiated and concluded over the phone. It was established that, once initial trust had been established between a buyer and their middlemen suppliers, buyers only visited Kasulu on an occasional basis and relied on remote correspondence for conducting most of their business. This practice helped buyers located in distant regional and national markets to minimise commodity search costs by cutting travel costs and time. In most cases, informal business arrangements were made over the phone, including the transfer of trading capital advances provided for the purchase of bean stocks.

Both survey data findings and in-depth interviews confirm that sourcing (buying) and selling transactions of middlemen traders were highly informal and depended on social mechanisms for their enforcement. Transactional behaviour was founded on social trust and unwritten group codes of conduct which guided the actions of middlemen and their business counterparts. Instead of investing in formalised contracts, both middlemen traders and buyers reportedly devoted more effort to adding a social dimension to newly formed business relationships. This included knowing each other's families and visiting each other to establish a bond. One middleman remarked that, in the crop-trading business, business partners almost ended up like relatives *("wanaishia kua kama ndugu"*). This emphasises the strength of the relationship bond that grows out business-cum-social relationships.

Supply information

Information is a highly valued asset in the crop-trading business. In most interviews, traders claimed that information was everything (*"taarifa ni kila kitu").* This was in apparent reference to how buying and selling activities were dependent on access to the right information. Therefore, information appeared to be the most exchanged resource between middlemen traders, their crop buying agents and the large-scale buyers of beans.

From a commodity supply-side perspective, middlemen traders relied heavily on existing trading networks to access information on potential sources of beans. As shown in Table 5.43 below, this network of trading partners included fellow traders, buying agents (dalals) and existing farmer suppliers. Buying agents (dalals) were often described as the ears and eyes of middlemen traders at the local village level where they could keep track of potential supplies while the crop was still in the field. Alongside fellow traders and agents, 35% of traders reported using their neighbours to get information on bean supply sources. These results suggest that being embedded in social and business networks was key to the buying function of middleman traders.

Table 5.43: Sources of commodity supply for middleman traders.

Source of information	Frequency count	Percent (%)
Fellow traders	28	70%
Agents (dalals)	25	63%
Existing farmer suppliers	19	48%
Neighbours	14	35%
Farmer group leaders	1	3%

Source: Study survey data, N=40

Demand/end market information

While information about the supply of beans was critical to the performance of the buying function, information about potential buyers and markets was essential for the selling function of middlemen traders. Survey data revealed that the most common way through which middlemen traders met their current buyers was through referrals. Of the 83 buyers that were named in the survey, 55% had been secured as result of a referral from someone who already knew the middleman trader. Underpinning the referral culture was what most of the traders referred to as *"sifa ya mtu"* (personal reputation). They claimed that a good reputation was important to securing customers (buyers).

Table 5.44: Middlemen traders' mode of meeting buyers.

Middleman Type	Agent	Hybrid trader	Self-funded	Total
Referred by someone	4%	19%	33%	55%
Chance meeting on the market	0%	22%	11%	33%
We knew each other before doing business	11%	1%	0%	12%
Total	**15%**	**42%**	**44%**	**100%**

Source: Study survey data, N=83

The data in Table 5.44 above shows that 33% of buyers identified buyers independent of any previous social or business connections. Middlemen traders described such encounters as chance market meetings which happened during market interactions. Social connections which morphed into business relations account for 12% of the total buyers identified in the study survey.

In terms of obtaining essential information about market conditions, the Table 5.45 below shows that traders mainly relied on their buyers (customers) as their major source of information. This suggests that buyers were a key link between middlemen traders and the end markets where they sold their aggregated beans. Also, significant sources of market information were middlemen's fellow traders and friends who were cited as major information sources by 73% and 50% of respondents respectively.

Table 5.45: Middlemen traders' major sources of demand information.

Source of information	Total count	% Count
Buyers	40	**100%**
Fellow traders	29	**73%**
Friends	20	**50%**

Source: Study survey data, N=40

Like the observation made with regards to sourcing information, business and social connections of middlemen traders played a vital role in accessing key trading information.

Price determination and purchasing behaviour

The study explored the various mechanisms used to set prices to understand the most common practices and explore how social relations and influences played into the process. This considered the prices that the middlemen traders paid when they bought beans (buy side transaction) and the prices that they obtained on selling (the sell side transaction). Survey results showed that all middlemen traders interviewed did not engage in any price differentiation based on prior relationships between middlemen traders and sellers of beans. The most common phrase used was "*bei haina upendeleo*" implying that there was no favoritism in pricing. On the buy-side, all survey respondents indicated that prices offered to large-scale buyers were mostly based on supply and demand dynamics with no consideration for social relations between the trading parties. Further probing conducted to understand the underlying drivers of pricing decisions showed that middlemen traders were mostly price takers who traded on very thin margins set by large-

scale buyers *(matajiri)* who provided the cash advances to prefinance bean purchases. The price offers that they extended to bean suppliers were conditioned by the prices offered by buyers who served as the market for the middlemen. The pricing power of middlemen traders was rated better in situations where middlemen purchased beans with their own capital and retained the freedom to determine the asking price and timing of the selling process. In cases where the middleman used a buyer's cash advance to buy beans, the final price was fixed a priori.

The purchasing of beans by middleman traders from farmers seemed to be mainly a spot market affair with limited prevalence of repeated sourcing relationships. Where repeated sourcing was reported, it was often linked to provision of pre-production contracts where farmers had established relations with middlemen who provided them with financial credit before their crops were ready for harvesting and marketing. Provision of credit to farmers afforded middlemen traders the right to fix prices in advance. Beans that fell outside such arrangements were purchased to the ruling open market price.
Overall, pricing behaviour reported and observed in the field seemed to follow on a pure market rationale. Beans were a commodity that has limited differentiation opportunities and the dynamics of demand and supply had a great influence on determining price levels.

Remuneration and value appropriation practices in the bean-trading network

Linked to bean market pricing structure, the study explored mechanisms through which end-buyers *(matajiri)* and middlemen traders rewarded or incentivised their trading partners. The investigation established a consensus that middlemen traders and their buying agents were rewarded through a profit margin which was commonly referred to as *"cha juu"* referring to the profit element that was added on top of the total cost of bean acquisition (what was paid to the primary supplier and ancillary costs of aggregating the commodity and making it ready for sale). Both ultimate buyers and middlemen traders set the ceiling of what they would pay and thereby provided a framework within which their trading partners had to negotiate with their suppliers downstream. Apart from the profit incentive that was built into trading transactions, the study established the existence of other incentive practices at different levels of the trading chain. In one case, a middleman trader reported that one large buyer *(tajiri)* had paid the rent for his bean storage warehouse for a period of twelve months. This action was perceived as a favour

extended by the buyer to the middleman trader, although the underlying logic for extension of favours to trading partners could also be easily discerned. There were also reports of urban-based buyers providing lodgings to the middlemen trader partners when they visited urban markets. While the money value of some of the favours exchanged by trading partners was not quantified, the sentimental value and effect on consolidating business relations were quite evident. Invariably, favours tended to flow from partners who occupied a superior financial position to those who occupied a subservient position within the trading hierarchy. In this regard, the incentive and motivation structure resembled client-patron relationships.

Cooperation and exchanges among traders

Conceiving middlemen traders as a network of informal entrepreneurs, the study explored the various ways in which these actors cooperated and collaborated in conducting their business activities. Survey results showed that cooperative efforts were mostly focused at finding and satisfying the needs of large-scale buyers *(matajiri)*. Of the traders, 73% reported that they cooperated in gathering market intelligence which helped them to identify buyers. Interviews with middlemen revealed that the size of bean orders received from large buyers was often many times larger than the capacity of a single middleman trader. In such cases, the common practice was for middlemen traders to contribute various smaller quantities to ensure that customer orders were timeously delivered. This kind of cooperation in order fulfilment helped middlemen to overcome their working capital constraints by combining forces to aggregate economically viable order sizes. An interesting feature of the order fulfilment cooperation was that the middleman trader who was directly linked to the large buyer did not charge any commission to his fellow middlemen. The cooperation was yet another example of generalised reciprocity as an expectation existed that the same favour would be extended when it was someone else's turn to find a buyer who served as a market to cooperating networks of middlemen.

Apart from order fulfilment, cooperation among middlemen was also observed to take the form of resource pooling and sharing. Observations made during field visits showed that most middlemen traders shared trading and storage to cut operating costs. Middlemen frequently shared bean handling and quality management equipment such as weighing scales, moisture meters, tarpaulins, and sieving tables. Resource-sharing

arrangements were mostly informal and were regularly negotiated based on the fortunes of each member. Although resource sharing was common, one area that emerged as particularly sensitive was capital pooling involving cash. In cases where traders reported to pool together their capital *(mtaji)* resources, this did not necessarily mean putting cash resources in one account. Instead, each collaborating middleman retained control of their cash contribution and the pooling was done in the form of bean stocks purchased and aggregated for collective selling.

Credit (borrowing and lending) practices

This section reports on the findings on middlemen traders' borrowing and lending practices while conducting their buying and selling activities. The focus was on credit relationships between traders and their trading partners as well as credit exchange relationships among traders as a socio-economic category.

Credit provided by buyers (matajiri) to middlemen traders

The most prevalent of credit in the bean-trading market was observed to take the form of cash advances that middlemen traders received from their buyer clients for the purpose of prefinancing bean stock purchases. All the surveyed traders indicated that they depended on cash advances from their buyers *(matajiri*) to fund their working capital requirements for buying bean stocks. Cash advances were, therefore, an important source of liquidity that fuelled buying and selling transactions. Although this constituted a form of trade credit, market participants viewed it as a capital advance which locked the middleman trader to a particular buyer until the order, so financed, was fulfilled, and closed. Cash advances were different from formal credit (e.g., bank loans) because they were highly informal and were issued based on trust. The size of the loans varied according to the aggregating capacity of each middleman trader. To minimise the risk of overfinancing, buyers started by issuing small amounts and increasing disbursements based on the reputation and proven capacity of the recipient middlemen traders.

Credit provided by middlemen traders to their buying agents

Based on the same logic of trust, middlemen traders provided cash advances to their bean-buying agents that were located at village level. The survey results showed that 83% of

middlemen traders provided advances to their bean-buying agents to enable them to buy beans from farmers and open markets on a cash basis. Table 5.46 below shows that all types of middlemen traders provided cash advances, and no significant difference existed between them.

Table 5.46: Provision of trade cash advances to buying agents by middleman traders.

Provides advance to buying agents	Agent (dalal)	Hybrid trader	Self-funded trader	Total
Yes	6	14	13	33
No	3	2	2	7
Total	**9**	**16**	**15**	**40**

Source: Study survey data, N=40

Credit relationships between middlemen traders and farmers

Out of the 40 traders, 24 (60%) reported having provided credit to farmers on the promise that the farmer would pay back in-kind using crops after harvest. According to Ruete (2016), such arrangements constitute what is known as trade credit and involves a buyer paying for goods ahead of the delivery by the seller. This type of credit, however, was met with a lot of consternation by both farmers and government authorities as they believed it to be detrimental to the farmer interests. This study established that the scale at which each middleman trader provided credit to farmers was limited but common. Table 5.47 below shows that 60% of surveyed middlemen had provided credit to farmers at least once. However, traders indicated that they only provided loans to farmers with whom they enjoyed a very close personal and business relationship.

Table 5.47: Middleman trader provision of credit to farmers.

Provides credit to farmers	Agent (dalal)	Hybrid trader	Self-funded trader	Total
No	3	7	6	16
Yes	6	9	9	24
Total	**9**	**16**	**15**	**40**

Source: Study survey data, N=40

While this study did not delve deep into the study of these loans, it established that the in-kind repayment tended to discount the commodity to be delivered by almost 25% of the expected price. Ironically, most middlemen complained that providing credit to farmers was hurtful to their business activities as farmers were seen as dishonest and

prone to default on their promises. In the end, the provision of credit to farmers was on a very limited scale and only to farmers who were judged to be trustworthy enough to honour their commitments to deliver commodities to the trader after harvesting.

Loans to farmers were based on verbal agreements and repayment was set in kind with commodity prices fixed in advance. This system was generally viewed negatively in government and development circles because repayments were usually set at a low level compared to what prevailed on the open market. Credit provision was made selectively and as a function of the trust that existed between the middleman and the farmer. Crops that were in the field often constituted collateral for the loan and traders sometimes even took over the responsibility of harvesting the crop to pre-empt any loan defection that might happen.

Credit provision amongst middlemen traders

While the forms of credit discussed above fall under the broad category of trade credit (they are embedded in trading practices), financial exchanges among traders were different in that they constituted solidarity mechanisms which assisted middlemen to manage their cashflows and deal with financial shocks that they encountered while trading. Informal credit mainly took the form of short-term cash loans that traders advanced to each other at no interest cost. In Swahili, traders referred to such loans as "mikopo ya kirafiki" which loosely translates to "friendly loans". These soft loans served as a short-term liquidity gap support system and the practice was known as "kubebana", which translates into carrying each other. The system was so called because it assisted traders to overcome short-term deficits in their working capital stock. The underlying logic behind the structure of such informal loans was generalised reciprocity under which the lender lends with the general expectation that they would be able to borrow on the same soft terms when their time of need arrived. Soft loans were quite common among middlemen traders. Middlemen traders differentiated between borrowing from friends and borrowing from banks. The practice of lending money among friends was referred to as "*kuazima*" (short-term interest-free borrowing) which stood in contrast to "*kukopa*" which refers to borrowing for a longer period and which often attracts interest charge. The non-interest-bearing loans among friendly middlemen traders served as a kind of safety net and bridge which was offered based on the principle of generalised reciprocity.

Risk management practices

The study explored the risks that were faced by middlemen traders and investigated common approaches used to address and manage such risks. The most common risk identified was loss of capital due to market price fluctuations, bean quality deterioration and incidences of dishonesty by both buying agents and final buyers. The shrinkage or total loss of trading capital was described as "*kuanguka*" which means falling. Minor risks with minimal adverse effects were referred to as *"kuteleza"* which translates to slipping. The worst effect of working capital loss was referred to as "*kufilisika*" which means bankruptcy.

To deal with the adverse effects mentioned above, traders mostly resorted to seeking support from the network of peer traders at various points. To avoid chances of recruiting dishonest agents or dealing with rogue buyers, middlemen conducted extensive reputational checks to ascertain the trustworthiness of their business partners. The existing network of fellow traders was a highly trusted information source. The traders' network *("mtandao wa wafanyabiashara")* was seen as a deciding factor and a great source of support to traders in difficult times. The study came across reports of middlemen who became buying agents for their peers after losing their own working capital while engaging in trading. This demonstrates that embeddedness within a trading network increases middlemen's chances of bouncing back after facing business setbacks.

5.3 Conclusion

This chapter presented the main findings of this study, including socio-demographic characteristics of middlemen traders together with a characterisation of their business enterprises. The key business activities were presented to provide a foundation of the business model employed by middlemen traders as entrepreneurial agents embedded within webs of social and economic networks. Based on the mixed methods social network analysis, the chapter gave an overview of the main social network dimensions of middlemen trader entrepreneurs. This included presenting the key features of middlemen's ego network (personal network) which include network size, density, tie strength characterisations and embedded resource exchanges. The availability of questionnaire-generated data on middlemen traders' alter connections (in the form of significant persons, buying agents, buyers and family members) facilitated the creation

of sizeable sub-samples that were analysed to obtain deeper insights into the nature of resources exchanges and traders' transactional behaviour.

The findings presented in this chapter highlighted both quantitative and qualitative dimensions of bean-trading middlemen in terms of both structure, content (resource exchanges) and behavioural dynamics within an informal trading context of rural Tanzania. Behavioural patterns and common themes were identified. The next chapter of this thesis is dedicated to the discussion and interpretation of these findings within the context of the five research questions explored in this study. Recalling that social embeddedness is a composite concept and theoretical umbrella, the discussion is anchored in the three social network theories namely, the social capital, strengths of weak ties and structural holes theories.

Chapter 6: Discussion and interpretation of findings

6.0 Introduction

This study explored how economic (entrepreneurial) actions of bean-trading middlemen were influenced and shaped by the personal relations that existed between the middlemen traders and other actors with whom they interacted while conducting their trading (entrepreneurial) activities. In that quest to explore the social embeddedness of entrepreneurial actions of bean-trading middlemen, the previous chapter presented the findings of this study. The findings presented were based on a mixed methods social network analysis of data collected on a sample of 40 bean-trading middlemen in Kasulu District of Tanzania. This analytic process conceived bean-trading middlemen as central actors (ego actors) around whom network connections and interactions revolved. Consistent with personal social network analysis outcomes, the findings highlighted individual and aggregate middlemen attributes, characteristics of their alter connections, the nature of their network-based exchanges and their behavioural (entrepreneurial action) patterns within the context of social and business relationships. To assess the extent of social embeddedness of middlemen's entrepreneurial actions, this chapter discusses the study results based on the theoretical and analytical framework which was presented in Chapter 3 of this thesis. The theoretical and analytical framework is buttressed on three social network theories, namely strengths of weak ties, structural holes and social capital theories.

As noted by Vonneilich, (2022), the above-cited triad of social network theories provides a basis for understanding and explaining how economic phenomena are embedded in social relations and structures. Recognising that social embeddedness of economic phenomena manifests in several ways and several disparate approaches have been used to explore it, this chapter links and locates the findings of this study to extant literature which was reviewed and presented in Chapter 2 of this thesis.

The first section is a recap of the study's main findings which were detailed in the preceding chapter. The recap provides a reminder of the key themes and trends that emerged from the data analysis process. This section is followed by a discussion and interpretation of the findings. In line with the structure of this framework, the findings fall into three subcomponents. The first component focuses on bean-trading middlemen

as socio-economic actors who exercise entrepreneurial functions within the informal market arena. The second component is a dissection of middlemen traders' entrepreneurial actions that they undertake within their web of personal networks. The third component consists of behavioural tendencies and patterns that emerge from the interplay of economic and social interactions.

The discussion and interpretation of study findings are concurrently done considering the extant literature presented in Chapter 2 and in relation to the study research questions that were elaborated in the first chapter.

6.1 Recap of the main findings

Before delving into a detailed discussion, this section restates the major findings and highlights the key themes that emerged from this study. Firstly, the study found that the bean-trading middlemen in Kasulu District were organised like a strongly knit network of traders that were hierarchically organised based on their trading capital endowments. The organisation of traders assumed a patron-client pattern in which status was determined based on an actor's trading capital endowment. Traders that possessed more trading capital that could be advanced to lower-level traders as working capital were accorded a higher status. The network of middlemen traders and their sourcing (buying) agents was founded on informal trading relations. This study explored and revealed the network consisting of individual middlemen traders and their agent connections. Taken together, the various individual middlemen networks constituted the supply-side network of bean trading within the research area of Kasulu District. While this study revealed the supply side of the bean trading market, it did not explore the demand side of the market in which the large-scale buyers (patrons/customers) were embedded. Although the study collected information on the large-scale buyers, the structure of the networks in which those buyers operated remained invisible and unexplored. The relationships between the surveyed middlemen traders and their buyers constituted a kind of bridge between the supply and demand-side networks that would otherwise remain disconnected. Thus, consistent with the structural holes' theory, middlemen traders occupied brokerage positions which made it possible for them to mediate between the demand and supply ends of the bean-trading market.

The study also found that the middlemen trader networks were mainly composed of locally domiciled actors who also doubled up as bean producers. This finding contradicts the theoretical portrayal of middlemen as a minority group of aliens that differ significantly from the rest of the population (Bonacich, 1973; Landa, 2008; Simmel, 1950).

The study further found that personal trust was a transcendent factor that pervaded all entrepreneurial actions of bean middlemen traders. Transaction behaviour of middlemen was highly influenced by network characteristics. Firstly, actions were mostly conducted based on personal trust. Business agreements were entered into on an oral basis and there were no legally enforceable contracts. Furthermore, trust was revealed to mediate access to both entrepreneurial resources and trading opportunities. Trading capital, which was the most important resource, flowed within networks of trust as informal credit and trade cash advances.

In addition, the study revealed a tendency for relationships that started on a purely market basis to morph into personal and trusting relationships that became the basis upon which business transactions were conducted. This relationship metamorphosis involved the addition of a social dimension to relationships that had a genesis in opportunistic open market encounters. In the end, friendships developed between trading partners who did not previously know each other. Such developments are consistent with the concept of reverse embeddedness which involves converting business relationships into a hybrid of both business and social relationships (Uzzi, 1996).

Unusually, the behaviour of middlemen traders in relation to price determination showed that the profit motive ruled supreme over social motives. The market price was used as a reference for trading, regardless of any social relations prevailing between the parties.

The role of family ties in middlemen trading activities was revealed to be marginal. Friendship relationships that were formed while engaging in trading played a more prominent role in facilitating access to resources and support for entrepreneurial activities than familial relationships. Middlemen traders in this study displayed a keen awareness of the adverse effects of familial obligations and strove to steer themselves away from convolution of family and business matters. Redistribution did not directly feature as a motivational factor for middlemen traders' behaviour.

Identity and functions of middlemen

The study findings presented in the previous chapter showed that bean-trading middlemen were commonly defined by their intermediation role in the buying and selling of dry food beans. Operating on the first rung of the agricultural marketing chain, these middlemen are mostly involved in buying and aggregating beans from small-scale producers (farmers) and on-selling them to large-scale buyers who sell to markets that are further afield. Thus, middlemen are business-to-business marketing actors located on the supply-side of the market. The study showed that, contrary to the common depiction of middlemen as a class of non-productive actors that are distinct from farmers, this study highlights a form of duality in which middlemen double up as farmers and informal traders of crop produce at the same time. This finding is consistent with what other scholars found out regarding the tendency of middleman to endogenously emerge from the peasantry and diversify their activities into crop trading, (Kjaerby, 1980; Hyden, 2007; Damayanti et al., 2019). All the middleman traders covered by this study combine farming and trading in a hybrid business model in which own-production serves as a source of the core stock for expanded trading activity. Within the context of Tanzania, Kweka and Fox (2011) describe such a practice as income diversification that is typical of agro-based household enterprises. Overall, the results of this study lend credence to Hayami and Kawagoe's (1993) view that crop trading by middleman is a manifestation of entrepreneurial behaviour by members of the peasantry. The socio-demographic characteristics of middlemen surveyed by this study largely mirrors those of the general population and this finding challenges Bonacich's (1973) theory of middleman minorities which ascribes "middlemanship" roles to people that are considered aliens within the socio-economic structure. Far from being a group of "minority strangers", the clique of middlemen in this study seems to organically emerge from the mass of small-scale producers and maintain a common identity with them.

One cross-cutting factor about the middlemen covered by this study is that they are part and parcel of the communities in which they live and pursue their trading activities. Their associational life cuts across social and economic groups in which membership reflects the multiplicity of roles that middleman play as farmers, community members and economic actors. In this regard, it can be argued that middlemen are both spatially and

socially embedded actors. The embeddedness within the social and economic structure of the rural communes in which they live and do business makes them conform to what Richter (2017) refers to as embedded rural entrepreneurs. In this sense their embeddedness is more from a spatial (geographical) context because it means that they are located in an area and this encourages the formation of social relations that can influence the economic conduct of actors. It is however important to note that, as highlighted in the literature review section, the idea of spatial embeddedness which is observable here is not, on its own, does not necessarily imply social embeddedness in the Granovettarian sense. However, the findings of this study suggest that being situated in a specific geographical proximity creates conditions favourable to the emergence of socio-economic relationships that give rise to the Granovetterian form of social embeddedness.

Informality and middleman entrepreneurs

Apart from being enmeshed in local relations, findings of this study show that bean trading middlemen are predominantly informal enterprises that operate without full registration with government licensing agencies. While all middleman traders have some form of license from the local government authorities (local district councils), the majority are not registered with the Business Registrations and Licensing Agency of Tanzania (BRELA). This means that the middlemen are located within a twilight zone between informality and formality. The informal character of middleman traders is consistent with the observations of Hayami et al. (1993), who observed that crop trading middlemen fall within the informal sector domain where they straddle the line between self-employment and entrepreneurship. Apart from being informal in legal form, the study findings also show that middleman traders are informal in terms of business practices. For instance, all the contracting and transactions are based on verbal agreements with no formal contracts to back them up. This practice is resemblant of what Fafchamps (2001) refers to as relational contracting which dominates crop marketing arrangements in Sub-Saharan Africa.

The literature review section of this thesis considered the functions middleman traders from a business model perspective: how they engage in value creation, delivery, and appropriation. The findings of this study showed that the key focus of bean trading

middlemen is the buying and selling of beans with the intention of making a profit. In this way, the motive of middleman in this study resonates with the Austrian perspective of an arbitrager-entrepreneur whose entrepreneurial strategy lies in identifying profit opportunities emanating from price differentials on the market. Further, the findings revealed that the core buying and selling functions are accompanied by the ancillary functions of information searching, commodity transportation (for aggregation purposes), cleaning, sorting (grading), storage, and financing. While the value appropriation (profit-making) role is easily discernible, the perennial question on middleman centers around their utility in value creation, (Cooke, 2000; Abebe et al., 2016). The array of ancillary functions performed by middlemen covered by this study suggests that, instead of being mere value captors, these actors are part of the commodity value-adding process. Apart from increasing the physical appeal of the beans traded (through sorting and grading), the functions performed by these middlemen are instrumental in minimizing the overall transaction costs involved in the buying and selling process.

Overall, the discussion demonstrates that bean trading middleman are entrepreneurial actors who emerge out of the peasantry who constitute the majority within agro-based rural economies. Diverging from the theoretical argument that middleman roles are occupied by ethnic minorities, middlemen in this study emerge from and share the same socio-demographic characteristics with the rest of the population around them. Instead of middlemanship being linked to a certain population group, involvement in crop trading seems to be a manifestation of the undercurrents of informal sector entrepreneurial behavior that were initially flagged up by De Soto (1989) and popularized by other scholars under the banner of informal entrepreneurship (Webb et al., 2013; Williams, 2014). Based on the above, it can be inferred that middleman crop traders are a form of functional upgrading by farmers who mostly convert their accumulated agrarian capital into trading capital for entrepreneurial purposes.

6.2 Discussion of the findings

6.2.1 Social embeddedness of middlemen's entrepreneurial actions

The extent to which social relations and personal networks of middleman traders (crop trading entrepreneurs) influence their entrepreneurial behavior is the main question at the heart of this thesis. On an aggregate level, the study found that middleman traders involved in bean trade in Kasulu District are organized like a giant socio-economic network in which all the surveyed traders share direct and indirect ties. This bean trading network is a mix of both social and economic relationships which, together, serve as the main framework within which middlemen conduct their core entrepreneurial functions of opportunity identification, resource mobilization and opportunity exploitation (value creation, delivery, and exploitation). As presented in the preceding chapter, bean trading middlemen undertake their entrepreneurial functions within the context of both business and social relations. The distinction between social and business relations is blurred by the tendency for business relations to assume a social character and vice-versa. This subsection primarily discusses the social embeddedness of middlemen's entrepreneurial actions. This is done by discussing and critiquing the main findings through the lens of social embeddedness concepts of trust, patronage, clientelisation, and reciprocity. The aim is to unravel the ways in which the influence of social and personal relations is manifested in the entrepreneurial actions of middleman traders.

6.2.2 Patronage and middleman entrepreneurial actions

Throughout the study the concept of patronage emerged as a crosscutting theme and principle that pervades all entrepreneurial functions from opportunity identification, resource mobilization and opportunity exploitation. Results show that entrepreneurial relationships are organised on a patron-client basis in which middleman traders mostly occupy the role of client and their customers (buyers of aggregated beans) assume the role of patron. In local parlance, the patron is referred to as a "Tajiri" which loosely translates to wealthy person. Indeed, patrons mentioned in this study are commonly defined by their possession of important resources which middlemen traders need to undertake their bean trading activities. The link between patronage status and control of

resources corresponds to the depiction of patronage in extant literature, (Willis, 1993; Belair, 2021; Loiske & Brockington, 2021). As popularized in literature, the assignment of a patron status implies the existence of some kind of dependence of the client on the so-called patron (Moreau & Garaway, 2021). In this study the concept of patron (tajiri) assumes two senses that correspond to the role played by the patron in the entrepreneurial process. The first sense applies to wealthy individuals that have a social relationship with middleman traders but are not directly involved in the trading processes. Apart from the tag of *"Tajiri"* (rich man), these individuals are also referred to as "*wadhamini*" (Swahili for sponsors or guarantors). The sponsors or guarantors play an important role in assisting middlemen to access resources (such as trading capital) and opening opportunities (such as making an introduction to clients or vouching for the trustworthiness and reliability of an inexperienced trader). What especially sets this type of patronage apart is that the relationship with the client (middleman trader) is founded in a social relationship and the support provided is a packaged as a favour with no explicit commercial return to the patron. In the second and more important instance, the term patron (Tajiri) is used to refer to a customer (*mteja* in Swahili) who can provide advance capital for purchasing beans. This interpretation of patron aligns with Karimba et al.'s (2022, p.3) description of a "Tajiri" as "the person providing capital". While in the first instance, the word patron is a direct allusion to the wealthy status, the patron (Tajiri) status of the customer/buyer appears to be more metaphoric: it is more of an acknowledgement of the dependence that middlemen have on their buyers as sources of working capital. This interpretation converges with the observation made by Mangnus & Vellema, (2019) in the Malian cereal trade where middlemen reportedly referred to their bulk cereal customers as patrons in recognition of the role the latter played in financing the whole trade.

The findings presented in the preceding chapter showed that the hierarchy of relationships and power dynamics between middlemen and their trading partners are largely determined by working capital endowments of the various actors. Thus, control of trading capital (cash for buying and selling) is the basis upon which client-patron relationships are founded. The resultant patronage relationships, in turn, govern the way actors transact including accessing trading capital and choose who to trade with. Specifically, power asymmetries that result from middlemen's hierarchical dependence on their customers

(large-scale buyers) for working capital prefinancing tilts the power structure in favour of the latter. The tilted power structure is reflected in the price caps that financing traders (patrons) place on their middlemen suppliers (clients). This situation resembles what Seppala, (1998) noted in the crop trading markets in the Uruguru mountains area in Morogoro region of Tanzania.

Overall, patronage relationships appear to be the connecting thread that links bean trading middlemen in Kasulu and their bulk customers further down the chain. The patronage power derives from better resource endowments and occupancy of strategic positions within the marketing network as is the case with large-scale buyers that have access to markets further afield. Consistent with Belair's (2021) observation, patronage seems to shape business practices. Within a business-to-business trading environment, the buyer is seen to assume the role of patron based on a higher capital endowment status. Power positions are acquired and maintained based on the control of critical resources and ability to satisfy commercial expectations of trading partners. Interestingly, while a typical patron-client relationship is rooted in long-lasting power imbalances, the results of this study point to a hybrid and competitive form of patronage in which the patrons' power is constantly regulated by the possibility of their clients (middlemen) switching to new market partners who offer better trading conditions.

In sum, the foregoing discussion suggests that social embeddedness of economic actions manifests within the patronage relations that develop in informal market settings. To the extent that patronage involves a socio-economic relationship between the patron and client, patronage seems to constitute a form of social embeddedness. Results showed that sponsors (wadhamini) are especially important in the early stages when middlemen have not yet acquired a network of their own or acquired credibility and trustworthiness required to navigate the market on their own. During the opportunity exploitation stage (buying and selling), another category of patrons (customers/wateja) emerges to provide working capital in the form of trade advances which make it possible for middlemen to buy and aggregate beans for resale at scale.

6.2.3 Clientelisation

Another key theme which emerged from this investigation is the concept of clientelization. According to Geertz (1978, p. 30), clientelization is "the tendency for repetitive purchasers to establish continuing relationships with particular sellers than to go through the market with each occasion of need". Granovetter, (1990), describes the same tendency as captive market segment formation which ties a seller to a particular customer. As indicated in the findings chapter, bean trading middlemen were observed to enter strong and lasting relationships with their customers. The strength and longevity of these relations between middlemen and their customers emanates from their repetitive nature which resembles Geertz's (1978) in the peasant markets of the Moroccan highlands. The repetitive nature of exchange relations creates a close conceptual link between clientelization and patronage. This link has been subject of investigation by Abebe et al., (2016) who describe it as a form of relational lock-in which deters trading partners from switching to competing options. Past studies have emphasized the role of information search costs to clientelization tendencies, (Geertz, 1978; Granovetter, 1990). However, the clientelization observed in this study appears to be mainly a result of the dependency of middlemen on working capital from their customers. This difference could be due to behavioural differences between business-to-consumer and business-to-business dealings. In business-to-business dealings which characterise this study, access to working capital is far more important compared to business to consumer markets where the most important criterion is to land the best price deal.

In the context of this study, the observed clientelist behaviour seems to draw from the dependency that middleman traders have on their customers for both trading capital (cash advances) and market information. However, the resultant relationship appears to be symbiotic as customers (large-scale buyers) also rely on middlemen for supply-side information and sourcing transaction coordination. In this sense, the relationship between the seller and the customer (buyer) is both repetitive and reciprocal as noted by Granovetter, (1990). Given the prominence of the reciprocity concept in social embeddedness literature, this dimension is explored in a bit more detail in the section below.

Overall, the tendency for bean trading middlemen to maintain enduring trading relationships with customers and buying agents attest to the importance of clientelization in informal commodity trading. This clientelization happens within the context of trading networks which exude both a social and commercial character.

6.2.4 Reciprocity and trader transactional behaviour

Findings of this study indicate that reciprocity influences and shapes transactional behaviour of middlemen traders as entrepreneurs. The ruling ethos amongst middleman traders is that of mutual support and help. This is best exemplified by the tendency amongst traders to provide cash advances to each other on concessional terms. Referred to as "*kuazima*" in Swahili, this practice of peer-to-peer financial support is differentiated from commercial loaning (*kukopesha)* in the sense that the recipient of the funds does not pay any interest. In line with observations made by Dawson, (2021), the general principle that guides such exchanges is generalised reciprocity. This practice mirrors what Ogawa (1996) observed amongst traders of second-hand clothes in Tanzania's Mwanza City. In what he titled "earning amongst friends", general reciprocity principles enabled traders to exchange favours and resources. In this study, the influence of reciprocity on middleman traders' behaviour was also demonstrated in the sharing of customers and order pooling.

Inherent in the reciprocal behaviour exhibited middleman traders is a strong sense of trust which is developed within the context of social and business relationships that tie these actors together. This behaviour tends to confirm Tokuori's observation that relational proximity amongst actors within informal trading networks breeds solidarity and cooperation, Tokuori, (2006). To the extent that reciprocity is a key defining mark of middlemen, it suffices to say that such reciprocal behaviour is one of the ways in which social embeddedness of economic action is manifested.

6.2.5 Political embeddedness

Findings of this study show that the role of political leaders was highly limited. This may be due to the differences in the importance of crops involved. Except for the occasional

acknowledgement of the potential usefulness in resolving exchange-related conflicts, middlemen generally lack trust and confidence in local political leaders whom they see as out touch with market realities and, therefore, a hindrance to middleman trading activities. This finding diverges from Seppala's (1998) finding regarding the importance of political patronage in which traders' association with political leadership was perceived as helpful to business performance. This difference could be due to fact that Seppala's observation was made in relation to cashew which is a high-stakes crop with a lot of political and economic visibility. However, the insignificance of political embeddedness in bean trading could also be explained in terms of historical stigmatization and persecution of middlemen whom the government targeted as the visible face of the market during the socialist era, (Shivji, 1993).

6.2.6 Family and relations of affection

The study's findings regarding the role family members in middlemen trading activities are mixed. While family members are involved at different stages of the entrepreneurial process, the intensity of their direct involvement is far much less than what is anticipated for enterprises that operate in informal settings where the line between family and business is often blurred. Though the direct role of the family is understated, the results show that middlemen trading enterprises build on household core production where family labour and resources are the main inputs. In this sense, the trading activities are an extension of the household economy thereby reinforcing the view that family embeddedness is key to entrepreneurial start-ups, (Jack & Anderson, 2002). Consistent with the observations made by Dillon & Dambro, (2017), middleman traders make use of unremunerated labour of family members in carrying out their trading activities. This labour is more often not remunerated in commercial terms but recompensed in the broader context of satisfying familial obligations. This practice ties with the observation made by Moreau & Garaway, (2021) in relation to fish traders in the Rufiji area of Tanzania.

Overall, the level of family embeddedness observed in this study is not as strong as suggested in literature, (Jalloh, 1999; Fafchamps & Minten, 1999; Jabbar et al., 2008). On the contrary, there is significant consternation amongst trading middlemen when it

comes to involving family members in their business operations. Consequently, the role of family relations in middlemen trading activities is quite marginal compared to friendship and commercial networks that are built during marketplace interactions.

6.2.7 Trust

The major highlight of the findings of this study is centrality of trust in middlemen's commodity trading activities. Trust is consistently high for all relationships reported in the study. Referred to as "*uaminifu*" in Swahili, trust is a key criterion used to select trading partners. As reported by Brühwiler, (2015), the term "*uaminifu*" is used in a sense that translates to "trust" "trustworthiness" and "honesty". Middleman traders use it as a basis for selecting bean buying agents and large-scale buyers use it to select middlemen to do business with. The prominent role of trust observed in this study is not astounding given the hugely informal nature of trading transactions. As asserted by Granovetter (1985), in such circumstances, trustful relationships serve as a safeguard against default and malfeasance in trading transactions. As advanced by Odera (2013), trust in informal settings serves as an informal institution that fills the vacuum created by the absence of formalized governance and recourse mechanisms. This aligns with Uzzi's (1996, p.678) characterisation of trust as a "governance mechanism of embedded relationships".

An important dimension of trust which most respondents in the study alluded to was the role it played in facilitating access to trading capital. Middleman traders consistently equated trust to capital (mtaji in Swahili). This implied that trust is a make-or-break factor in middleman trading where access to working capital is a decisive factor. Consistent with the observation made by Zhang et al., (2020), existence of trust between actors eases exchange of financial resources that are essential for supporting entrepreneurial actions. In this study, provision of working capital advances is done based on trust. Middleman traders receive trade advances from their large-scale customers, and, in turn, they also provide working capital advances to their buying agents. As observed by Zanini & Migueles, (2013), all business relationships reported in the study are relational contracts that are rooted in mutual trust between the actors involved. Scott (1985) referred to this

type of trust as "*confianza*" and described it is a type of relationship accumulated while doing business.

An additional dimension of trust that emerges in this study is its mediated nature. The findings of this study show that middleman traders that are still new to the business can ride on the "trust" and reputation of their more established connections. This where the concept of sponsor/guarantor (*mdhamini*) kicks in. The underlying logic is that if the trader who has not established record defaults, the trusting party can seek recourse from the actor who has a tested record of trustworthiness. This aspect of mediated trust is also observable in how large buyers deal with middlemen trader groups. Generally, a large-scale buyer (*Tajiri*) develops a relationship of trust with a single agent middleman who then mobilizes his peer middlemen to cooperate. Thus, one trusted actor can cascade benefits of trustworthiness to other actors who would, otherwise, not be trustworthy on their own. This practice mirrors what Nguyen & Canh, (2020) refer to as peer guaranteeing which is typical in informal lending transactions. This characteristic of trust raises questions on whether it can be treated as a commodity as opined by Dasgupta, (2000).

One particular trait of trust which stands out in this study is its ability to serve as intangible collateral for credit. Based on the quality of being trustworthy, various categories can secure trade credit lines and informal loans. As observed by Platteau, (1994) seems to serve as an endogenous mechanism for the enforcement of informal credit arrangements.

The foregoing discussion on the theme of trust underscores its importance as a form of currency in informal trading settings. Embeddedness in trading networks helps middleman trading entrepreneurs to accumulate the trust of their peers and trading partners thereby opening opportunities for accessing entrepreneurial resources (working capital advances) and opportunities (such as bulk orders). Transaction behaviour in resource mobilization and trading processes is influenced and mediated by trust. Trust and its role in facilitating entrepreneurial processes serves as a practical manifestation of the influence of the social embeddedness of economic actions. This view matches Kim's (2016) characterisation of trust as fundamental source of social capital.

6.2.8 Resource flows and exchanges: social capital

One of the important questions explored by this study concerned the nature of resource exchanges by middleman traders and other actors. The findings showed that resources exchanged include labour, advice, information, financial capital (trading cash advances) and physical trading resources such as storage space and commodity weighing equipment. Middlemen's access to resources mainly takes place in two phases which can be described as pre-trade and in-trade. The pre-trade phase concerns resource mobilization that mainly happens in a broadly social context where production and market preparation activities take place. This includes farming activities that middlemen undertake to generate a core production of beans that constitute the nucleus stock that is augmented by buying from other farmers. In this phase middlemen tap into family labour (often unremunerated) and other household resources (farming implements, cash for agricultural inputs, storage space). Access to resources at this stage is rooted in family relations thereby resembling what Kweka & Fox, (2011) describe as the household enterprise. Use of family labour in bean production and aggregation is not compensated on commercial terms but recognition is made in the form of familial obligations (such as financial assistance in emergencies, gifts, and other forms of livelihood support) thereby conforming to the tenets of what Hyden, (1980) termed the economy of affection.

The in-trade phase of resource exchanges happens as part of the market exchange transactions of buying and selling with a profit motive. The most vital resource exchanged is cash which takes the form of trade advances from large-scale buyers to their middlemen trading partners. As observed by Brühwiler, (2014), in the case of agricultural produce trading in Dar es Salaam, trade advances are provided on a verbal basis with no legally enforceable agreements. The key determining factor in the provision of such advances is the existence of trust between the transacting parties. The role that trust plays in this case confirms the observations that Hayami & Kawagoe, (2001) made in relation to vegetable traders in Indonesia. In this case the trust that developed amongst traders with strong social ties was cited as an enabling factor for the granting of trade advances. Similarly, the findings of this study show that high trust levels between middleman traders and their

customers (large-scale buyers) are a key consideration for the provision of trade cash advances. Putting these observations within the context of the reference theory of social capital, the type of resource exchanges that take place amongst middleman traders and their peers seem to constitute what literature refers to as bonding social capital, (Leonard, 2004). This is because such resources are shared within a closely knit network where members share strong bonds and mutual trust. On the other hand, trading advances provided by buyers to middlemen conform to the description of bridging capital. Despite this distinction between bonding and bridging social capital types, access to both is underwritten by relationships of trust between involved actors.

One consideration with regards to the role of social networks in resource mobilization is the role of strong versus weak networks. In this study, it was difficult to draw a line between strong and weak ties. Due to the overriding importance of trust as an enforcement mechanism, surveyed middlemen were generally biased towards strong ties. Even relationships that start off as weak spot-market connections tend to be rapidly transformed into strong ties with high trust levels between the actors. While Granovetter, (2000) claimed that entrepreneurs rely on strong ties when starting up their enterprises but rely more on weak ties later, the findings in this study suggest that strong ties have a consistently important role in brokering continued access to capital and trading opportunities. On the other hand, weak ties (such as chance market encounters with new trading partners) seem to play an important role in assisting trading entrepreneurs to access startup capital. Significant resources exchanges are observed to flow within "friendship" networks. While the end goal of such resource sharing to the furtherance of commercial objectives, the resources are provided on non-commercial terms. As highlighted above, the underlying logic is that of generalized reciprocity under which middlemen traders provide support to the peers on the understanding that such favours will be reciprocated in the future.

Aligning with the findings of Fafchamps & Minten, (2002), in a study of agricultural traders in Madagascar, social capital emerges as an individualized asset which middleman traders appropriate for the advancement of their entrepreneurial activities. Overall, the results of this study give credence to Berrou's observation that both strong and weak ties

are helpful in assisting informal entrepreneurs to gain access to resources that they need to undertake their business activities. Middlemen traders clearly draw on both strong and weak ties during their trading activities.

6.2.9 Structural positions and entrepreneurial opportunities

One of the objectives of this study was to explore how personal and social connections between bean trading actors influence the resultant market structure and entrepreneurial opportunities therein. In this regard, study findings show that the bean trading market in Kasulu is organised as one giant network composed of subnetworks of personalised connections between trading actors. Consistent with observations made by Abebe et al. (2016) in the Ethiopian grain market where traders were observed to be organized like a social network structure. Mimicking a social network structure, all traders covered by this study are either directly or indirectly connected. At the core of the network are personal middleman trading networks consisting of the middleman trader and his buying agents. Middlemen and their buying agents serve as one closely connected network where actors are personally connected, and hierarchy is determined based on each actor's endowment of trading working capital. Middlemen possess more capital compared to their agents and that earns them the status of "patron". At the district level, all middleman traders combine to form at network of trading middlemen. This can also be termed supply network as, jointly, middlemen become the face of the bean supply end of the market to larger buyers. Across all the network levels, actor connections are based on "informal personal connections" in a manner which resembles market interactions reported in the Moroccan peasant bazaar markets, Geertz (1978). Power in the trading arena is also based on the value of market contacts that one has. Middlemen and buying agents that have access to end market contacts are viewed as some kind of "rainmakers" who bring business opportunities that benefit a broad section of network members.

It is notable that, while supply-side actors (middlemen and their buying agents), constitute one visible market, the same cannot be said of buyers who are primarily portrayed as individual actors without hardly any visible interconnections. Another unexplored network cluster consists of small-scale producers who sell beans to middleman traders and their sourcing agents. Due to their location in the network structure, middlemen

connect two groups of market actors: the smallholder bean farmers who act as the primary sellers and the end market buyers. This type of market organisation is consistent with the observation made by Marleni et al. (2019) in relation to the crop market structure in rural Indonesia.

From a structural perspective, spatial embeddedness manifests in the formation of informal associations of sourcing (purchasing) agents (dalals). Middleman traders and their agents originate and live in the areas where they do business. The results also show location is key in lending the agency role. All sourcing agents (dalals) identified in the study originate and reside in the areas in which they conduct their trading (buying and selling) activities. Their close communal and social ties with smallholder farmer producers gives them access to ingrained information about bean commodity supplies. Based on this trend, local embeddedness emerges as an important factor for participation in trade networks thereby providing support to Jack & Anderson's (2002) assertion that location within a social structure creates entrepreneurial opportunities.

6.2.10 Trader networks, risk management and reverse embeddedness

The findings of this study insinuate that middleman traders draw on their social relations and personal networks to cope with business challenges and risks. Resemblant of observations made by Mangnus & Vellema, (2019) in the Malian informal cereal trade, informal group norms and code are instrumental fostering reimbursement of concessional loans and provision of assistance to middleman trader network members in case of emergencies. This is consistent with Berrou & Combarnous' (2012), observation that strong bonds of trust and sense of solidarity that exists among middleman traders serve as a safety net during times of crisis.

Consistent with Walter's (1992) view that social networks promote business resilience amongst informal sector actors, middleman traders organize themselves in socio-economic solidarity groups that take the form of informal business membership associations. The function of these associations transcends economic motives as members also serve as platforms for the provision of social support to members, e.g., financial contributions to social events such as weddings and funerals that concern members.

Another important aspect observed in this study is the tendency of middleman traders to add a social dimension to relationships that start off as pure profit-driven market encounters. Relationships that originate through open market interactions gradually assume a social character and morph into matter-of-fact personal relationships in which social motives are blended with economic ones. In social embeddedness literature, this phenomenon falls under the concept of reverse embeddedness, (Uzzi, 1996). In describing reverse embeddedness scenarios, Uzzi, (1996, p.679) noted that "just as economic transactions are embedded in social relations, new social relationships are partly reverse embedded in economic transactions". The findings of this study showed that trading parties that meet during market transactions, reverse embed their relationships by introducing each other to their respective families, exchanging favors (e.g., accommodating the trading partner in one's house), gifts, and assigning each other social roles such as in-law (*shemeji*) and brother (*kaka*). These assigned social roles arouse certain affective bonds and create moral obligations on the part of trading partners so treated. Where assigned roles mimic kinship relations, the underlying motive is to condition the behaviour of the partner so that it is favourable to the interests of the other party. This tendency of overlaying economic relations with social relations constitutes an attempt to insulate themselves against potential malfeasance. By embedding economic relations in social relations, traders create a form of moral and social insurance which insulates them from potential malfeasance that may occur during business transactions. This tendency to cushion economic relationships with an overlaying veil of social relations lends support to Granovetter's (1985) argument that the creation of personal relationships between transacting parties deters malfeasance thereby creating a safe environment for engaging in economic exchanges.

6.2.11 Social embeddedness of the middleman trader business model

The last component of this study's theoretical and analytical framework is concerned with the nature of the business model which emerges out of the actions enacted by an entrepreneurial actor within a context of a personal network of social and economic relationships. As articulated in chapter three of this thesis, a business model is a representation of how an economic actor participates in the creation, delivery, and

appropriation of economic value. While past studies have often stated economic (entrepreneurial) outcomes in terms of quantitative measures like profits and revenues, this study treats a business model as an immediate outcome that results from the enterprising actions. The advantage of this approach lies in the fact that it recognizes the multi-stepped processual nature of entrepreneurship (Wigren-Kristofersen et al., 2019). Based on the understanding that the business model is an immediate outcome of the entrepreneurial process, the findings of this study attest to a strong influence of social relations on the business model employed by trading middlemen. The behavioural tendencies and patterns discussed in sections above (i.e., clientelization, reciprocity, reverse embeddedness, trust, and others) show that middleman traders heavily depend on social relations in executing their business functions of buying (sourcing) and selling beans. Likewise, the success of entrepreneurial actions of identifying market opportunities, capital raising, and business transaction depend on the existence and nature of relationships existing between middlemen and other actors on the market arena. Ultimately, the findings of this study suggest that entrepreneurial (economic) actions of middleman traders are inextricably linked to the social dimensions of their relationships with various actors whom they interact with in pursuing their entrepreneurial objectives. Thus, the configuration of value creation, delivery and capturing processes is influenced and patterned by the ever-evolving system of relations between middleman traders and other actors involved.

6.3 Research limitations

This study has some limitations which limit the applicability and generalizability of its results. Firstly, the collection of primary data for this study was based on a small sample of 40 survey respondents. While this sample size is in line with the standards for personal network surveys, the representativity of the results is limited. Linked to inherent shortcomings of personal network surveys, the study relied on information reported by middleman traders to obtain information on their trading partners such as sourcing agents and customers. Unlike a full network study, the personal network approach does not give a full picture of how the whole trading market is connected. Similarly, the scope of the study was restricted to a single district though the extended network goes well beyond the

district to cover regional and national markets. In the end, the study only covered the supply end of the market and left the demand end unexplored.

The study design adopted was cross-sectional nature of the study and this compromised its ability to track the evolution and dynamic nature of personal relations which happen over time. Moreover, middleman traders covered by this study operate on an informal basis and do not keep structured financial records. As a result, it was not possible to obtain reliable data to conduct some quantitative analysis or validate qualitative findings. Furthermore, this study covered a limited geographical scope and caution needs to be taken in generalizing the results to the rest of the country. Despite the growing integration with the rest of the country, Kigoma region remains much of an enclave where economic activity is dominated by informal actors. Thus, the crop trading dynamics in Kigoma are not representative of the rest of the country where agricultural marketing is dominated by formal firms.

6.4 Conclusion

This chapter has presented a discussion of the main findings in relation to the main research question of *"how social relations and personal networks shape, influence and sustain entrepreneurial actions of trading middlemen in informal agricultural output markets".* The discussion has underscored the hybrid nature of middleman traders as both social and economic actors. Middleman traders are not an alien group, but they emerge from the social structures of communities in which they conduct the entrepreneurial actions. Within the context of the theoretical and analytical framework, the discussion has shown that the social embeddedness of middleman traders' entrepreneurial actions manifests in a myriad of forms. Thus, social embeddedness of informal entrepreneurship is a composite phenomenon which is better understood through an interaction of several concepts that have, traditionally, been explored in isolation. Sociological concepts of patronage, clientelization, trust, reciprocity, and social capital appear to be all critical to an understanding of social embeddedness of informal entrepreneurship. Through these concepts, it becomes possible to investigate and account for social embeddedness of entrepreneurial action. This chapter has also highlighted some research limitations that need to be borne in mind when interpreting and applying the findings of this study. The

next chapter will provide a synthesis of the main findings and provide recommendations for future research.

Chapter 7: Summary, conclusions, and recommendations

7.0 Introduction

The study explored how social relations and personal networks shape, influence and sustain entrepreneurial actions of trading middlemen in informal agricultural output markets within a developing country context. This chapter provides a synoptic view of the research problem, methodological approach, key findings, contributions made to knowledge, and implications for further research and practice.

7.1 Recap of the research problem and methodology

In the quest to resolve the social embeddedness paradox of the informal economy, this study sets out to research the problem of how social ties and personal relations influence and support economic actions of entrepreneurial actors operating within the framework of the informal sector. The research problem extends from the observation that the performance of informal entrepreneurial actions is underpinned by social relations. Therefore, the research interest of the study was to explore the various ways in which social embeddedness manifests in informal entrepreneurship. This research interest was operationalized through the following research questions:

I. How do social relations between middlemen and their transacting partners influence their transaction behaviour?
II. What type of resources flows take place between middlemen and their social connections?
III. How do structural positions in social networks create and sustain economic advantages for middlemen in agricultural output markets?
IV. How do social relations influence the business model of a middleman?
V. How do middlemen draw on their social relations and personal networks to cope with business challenges and risks?

In addressing the above research questions, the study adopted a mixed methods social analysis (MMSNA) research design and deployed personal network ethnography as the main approach for data collection and analysis. This method involved conducting direct personal network interviews with 40 middleman traders and complementing that with

ethnographic techniques of in-depth biographical interviews, observations, and key informant interviews. The combination of personal network surveys and ethnographic methods yielded both quantitative and qualitative which was analysed with the aid of NVIVO software.

7.2 Synthesis of the main research findings

This section synthesizes and summarizes the study's main findings in relation to the key research questions. Overall, findings of this study suggest that social embeddedness is a multifaceted phenomenon that transcends the various actions of the entrepreneurial process. Social relations have an influence on opportunity identification, resource mobilization, transaction behaviour and risk management. Contrary to the common view that social relations precede economic relations, the study shows a tendency for entrepreneurial actors to introduce a layer of social relations on relationships that originate as arm's length market exchanges. The main motive for overlaying insulating economic relationships with social ones appears to be strategy for mitigating risks linked to informality. Thus, social relations are activated to cover the vacuum created by the absence of formal market institutions. This phenomenon of reverse social embeddedness has, so far, received very scant attention in literature.

Social relations and middleman transactional behaviour

The study showed that entrepreneurial actions of middleman traders take place within the context of multifaceted relationships in which social and economic are intertwined. Trust that is generated through social relations mediates middlemen's behaviour when dealing with entrepreneurial resource providers, commodity suppliers and customers. The level of trust influences how middleman traders cooperate and compete within the market. In sum, the study results show that the enactment of entrepreneurial actions is conditioned and moderated by personal relations through concepts of patronage, clientelisation, reciprocity and trust.

Social relations and resource exchanges (social capital)

The study has shown that personal trade networks established by middleman traders are an integral source of business information, labor, advice, and financial capital for trading

purposes. Labor is accessed through family and kinship ties while trading capital is mostly accessed through trading ties and friendship networks. Relationships of trust, born out of repeated market transactions, facilitate informal credit arrangements that help middleman traders to get financial resources for trading purposes. The observed flow of resources within context of social and economic relations vindicates the view that social capital should be explored within the integrated view of social embeddedness than as an isolated concept.

Middlemen structural positions and entrepreneurial opportunities

The bean trading market is organized as one giant network made up of several network clusters spanning the supply and demand ends of the market. The various network structures are connected by a mix of strong and weak ties. In this multi-network structure, bean trading middlemen, as an economic actor category, occupy structural hole positions between the network of producers and the end market buyer network cluster. Bridging the market space between small-scale bean producers and large-scale bean buyers creates an entrepreneurial arbitrage opportunity for middleman traders.

Social relations and the middleman trader business model

The core of the middleman bean trader's business model is buying and selling bean commodities with the motive of making a profit. This study has shown that the business model of middleman traders is deeply embedded in social relations. Business model actions of value creation, delivery and capture are moderated by relationships that middleman traders have with other partners within the trading network. Both commodity buying and selling are facilitated by networks of personal networks through which traders access business information, cash advances and commodity orders. In sum, the business model employed by middleman traders can be described as a socially embedded business model in which informal personal relations and practices have an influence on trading processes and outcomes. Concessional access to labour, financial capital and trading opportunities impacts entrepreneurial outcomes.

Social embeddedness and business resilience

This study sheds some light on the sources of business resilience and survival strategies for informal trading middlemen as a category of economic actors. By reverse embedding economic relations into social relations, entrepreneurs seek to create an institutional framework & safety net that can assist in governing informal and legally unenforceable contracts. In this way, social embeddedness of economic actions serves as a strategy for dealing with the risks and uncertainties by bridging the void resulting from missing formal institutional systems. The behaviour of middleman traders can be described as a form of relationship bricolage involving the adaptation of existing relationships to advance entrepreneurial interests. Overall, risk management and business resilience strategies of middleman traders are rooted in the principles of cooperation, mutual support, and generalized reciprocity.

7.3 Contributions to knowledge

The findings of this study have made some theoretical and practical contributions to the field of economic sociology and, particularly, the study of social embeddedness of informal entrepreneurship. Theoretically, the study has built on the Granovettarian notion of social embeddedness and associated concepts to develop an integrative theoretical framework which is essential for the investigation of this phenomenon of economic action. Previous investigations of social embeddedness have tended to explore social embeddedness concepts in isolation resulting in a fragmented and piecemeal approach which does not allow for a holistic understanding of social embeddedness. This study attempted to provide an answer to Storti's call to create a liaison of concepts related to social embeddedness to develop an integrative and coherent theoretical position, (Storti, 2018). In the end, the resultant integrative framework serves as a practical guideline for operationalizing social embeddedness research in entrepreneurial settings. Overall, this study suggests that there is merit in theorizing social embeddedness holistically by integrating component concepts and social network theories developed to date.

From a methodological standpoint, this study used a mixed methods social network analysis approach which is still new to the study of social embeddedness and entrepreneurship. By combining social network analysis and ethnographic methods, the

study contributed to the testing of new investigative approaches which can help deepen investigation and understanding of informal entrepreneurship. The combination of ethnographic techniques and social networks holds much promise for studying entrepreneurship in informal settings. Thus, this study has demonstrated that there is merit in combining methods.

Furthermore, this study has highlighted the significance of reverse embeddedness in entrepreneurial actions thereby issuing a clarion call for the need to properly account for this trend rather than giving it cursory attention. Past studies have tended to give cursory attention to the issue of antecedence and precedence in social embeddedness accounts. This study has contributed to the scant evidence on the phenomenon of reverse embeddedness of economic behaviour (i.e., the tendency for relations that start in the market assuming a social dimension).

While multiple strands and interpretations of social embeddedness have emerged over the years, this study has built on the microeconomic perspective that was advanced by Granovetter, (1985) in his seminal paper on the problem of embeddedness. In so doing, entrepreneurship was conceived as a quintessential economic act that has several action dimensions (such as opportunity identification, resource mobilization, opportunity exploitation). Putting entrepreneurship back at the centre signals a departure from the narrowed approach of researching isolated economic actions such as job-seeking and capital-raising. Centering the investigation of social embeddedness on entrepreneurship and its multidimensionality calls for the unification of several embeddedness strands that are normally explored in isolation.

Past investigations of social embeddedness have been pitched at the level of individual concepts such as social capital, trust, reciprocity, patronage and clientelisation. This study took a step towards an integrative approach by showing these various concepts constitute manifestations of social embeddedness of economic actions. Revealing the articulation between the various concepts provides a basis for the theoretical reconciliation of that have, hitherto, assumed independent theoretical lives in a manner which dwarfed the theoretical development of the social embeddedness perspective. Thus, this study makes

an important step towards the development of an integrative model for investigating and measuring social embeddedness in various entrepreneurship settings.

7.4 Research implications for development practice

The findings of this study harbour some important implications for economic development practice. Firstly, the study highlights the importance of personalised relations and informal associations in promoting entrepreneurial activities within informal economic settings. This underscores a need for development practitioners to pay attention to social relations and informal networks when designing entrepreneurship development programs. This study has spotlighted the role of trust as a mediator of informal trade credit in informal marketing (trading) activities. This challenges development practitioners to revisit Drucker's (1958) call to recognize marketing to be recognised as a stepping ladder for both entrepreneurship and economic development. The growing practice of market systems development can greatly benefit from adopting a social embeddedness perspective of markets that development actors seek to develop. Currently most efforts at market systems and private development largely draw from the neo-classical economics tradition with no explicit attention to the sociological perspectives represented by social embeddedness. Given that most markets in developing countries are overwhelmingly informal, the failure to account for the influential role of social relations in entrepreneurial endeavors would lead to suboptimal results. This findings of this study contribute to the search for a more inclusive market systems development model in which both the social and economic factors are well-integrated in line with the contemporary realities of markets in developing markets.

7.5 Recommendations for future research

This study has shed light into the patterns and dynamics of social embeddedness with an informal entrepreneurial setting. Apart from generating new insights, the study has identified areas that require further investigation to deepen theoretical understanding of social embeddedness and its practical application in the study of economic phenomena and informal entrepreneurship, in particular. While this study indicates that reverse embeddedness is a strategy employed by informal entrepreneurs to manage the institutional voids and risks of operating informal, the

tendency for reverse embeddedness remains under-explored in extant literature. The proposition that economic relations precede social relations in social embeddedness situations is mainly advanced on a speculative basis. Research that establishes antecedence and precedence of social embedded economic relations can help advance understanding and contribute to better theorization of the social embeddedness phenomenon.

Additionally, this study showed that patronage networks play a central role in organizing market relations and conditioning transactional behaviour. While the concept has been widely explored in literature, such explorations have tended to incline more towards a political economy perspective. The role of patronage in entrepreneurship and markets has only received marginal attention in scholarly research. Given that this study highlighted a prominent role of patronage in entrepreneurial relations, future studies should be more deliberate in investigating how patronage fits into the social embeddedness framework. This will mark a departure from an over-politicized conception of patronage and open an opportunity to explore the utility of the concept within market exchange and entrepreneurial settings.

Past research on social embeddedness is highly fragmented with massive conceptual incoherence. This study revealed the possibility to explain social embeddedness through such concepts as trust, patronage, clientelisation, and reciprocity. To pave way for a praxis of social embeddedness, future research should strive to establish clear articulation and convergence between these related concepts. A deeper understanding of the interconnections between these concepts is essential to the development of a theoretically coherent framework for studying social embeddedness.
This study revealed that interpersonal trust acts both as the glue and lubricant of informal activity but its components in socio-economic relations are not clear. There is a need to explore how both social and economic relations contribute to the emergence and sustenance of trust. Furthermore, the link between the concepts of trust, trustworthiness and patronage needs further investigation as current literature addresses these in a vastly incoherent way.

In addition, the scope of this study was restricted and it's worthwhile that future research considers expanded research scope that covers the full spectrum of actors along the supply-demand continuum. Such a full network study can provide a more complete picture of market network connections and dynamics. Particularly, a full network study would make it possible to explore the more structural dimensions of social embeddedness that are difficult to investigate within the scope of a personal network study. Ultimately, it would be beneficial for future studies on value chains to integrate a social network component as value chains tend to transcend formal and informal dimensions of the market.

7.6 Conclusion

This thesis has demonstrated that entrepreneurial actions and exchange relationships in informal entrepreneurship settings take place within the framework of personalised relationships and networks of trust. It showed that that trading middlemen are locally embedded actors that apply socially embedded business models in which their value creation, delivery and capturing processes are influenced by the ongoing system of personal relations and social structures. Social embeddedness manifests in the form of such concepts as trust, clientelisation, reciprocity, and patronage relationships. Interpersonal trust result emerges as both an asset and informal institutional mechanism that governs business relationships between trading parties. Furthermore, the thesis has shown that middleman trading entrepreneurs overlay economic with social relations to bridge institutional vacuums associated with operating in poorly regulated informal settings. This process of reversely embedding economic actions in social relations creates an institutional framework that safeguards actors against risks that arise during the entrepreneurial process. In this way social embeddedness occupies the institutional void that emanates from operating outside a formal set of rules. Finally, this thesis has made both methodological and theoretical contributions that can enhance the study of social embeddedness as a subfield of economic sociology. Further to that, areas for future research have been suggested to build on the findings of this thesis and address outstanding knowledge gaps.

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Appendices

Middleman Trader Personal Network Survey Questionnaire

	Basic respondent information	
	Trader code:	Unique code generated
	Market code:	Each market had code
	Village code:	Unique code generated
	Ward code:	Unique code generated
	District name:	Use actual district name
1	**Trader characteristics**	
1.1	When did you start your trading business?	Response options given
1.2	What is the type of agricultural produce in which you trade in?	Options provided
1.3	What is the type of trading activities in which you are engaged in?	Options provided
1.4	What is the most important source of the beans that you trade in?	Options provided
1.5	What is the best description of your business/business category?	Options provided
1.6	What are your various sources of income?	Options provided
1.7	What is the main source of income?	Options provided
2	**Trading enterprise information**	
2.1	What are the key business functions you perform in your bean trading business?	Options given
2.2	What is the size of working capital you have for bean trading?	Options given
2.3	What is your main source of working capital?	Options given
2.4	What is the volume of beans you trade/handle per year?	Options given
2.5	What is the value of your bean sales per year?	Options given
3	**Trader's core personal network data**	
3.1	As a bean trader, which people do consider to be significant to your business activities? Name up to 8 people.	Pseudo names used
3.2	For each person mentioned above, specify the following:	Based on name in question above
3.2.1	What role do they play as to make them significant?	Alter information
3.2.2	What is the nature of relationship that exists between you?	Alter information
3.2.3	How long have you known each other?	Alter information
3.2.4	How do you describe the strength of your relationship?	Alter information
3.2.5	In which age group do they fall?	Alter information
3.2.6	Where do they live?	Alter information
3.2.7	What is their religion?	Alter information
3.2.8	Please indicate the degree to which you trust this person	Alter information
4	**Trader's personal network at start-up stage**	

4.1	When you started off in this business, what were your sources of start-up capital?	Options given
4.2	Which people played a significant role in the process of starting up your trading business? Please name at most five such people.	Pseudo names used
	For each person mentioned above, specify the following:	
4.3	What is the nature of your relationship?	Alter information
4.4	How long have you known each other?	Alter information
4.5	How do you describe the strength of your relationship?	Alter information
4.6	What kind of support did they provide you?	Alter information
4.7	In which age group do they fall?	Alter information
4.8	Where do they live?	Alter information
4.9	What is their religion?	Alter information
	Trader network for horizontal cooperation	
5.1	**Traders often develop some relations of mutual aid, partnership or cooperation with other traders. Who are the traders with whom you have such kind of relations?**	Pseudo names used
	For each of the people mentioned above, specify the following:	
5.2	What is the nature of your relationship?	Pre-coded options given
5.3	How long have you known each other?	Pre-coded options given
5.4	How do you describe the strength of your relationship?	Pre-coded options given
5.5	What kind of support did they provide you?	Pre-coded options given
5.6	Where do they live?	Pre-coded options given
5.7	How frequently do you interact?	Pre-coded options given
5.8	How much do you trust this person?	Pre-coded options given
5.9	What is their religion?	Pre-coded options given
	Trader's personal network for business advice	
6	In running a business, one often needs advice on different matters. Please name at most five people to whom you go for advice regarding your business.	Pseudo names used
6.1	What is the nature of relationship that exists between you?	Pre-coded options given
6.2	How long have you known each other?	Pre-coded options given
6.3	How do you describe the strength of your relationship?	Pre-coded options given
6.4	In which age group do they fall?	Pre-coded options given
6.5	Where do they live?	Pre-coded options given
6.6	What is their religion?	Pre-coded options given
6.7	Please indicate the degree to which you trust this person	Pre-coded options given
	Trader's personal network for bean sourcing	
7	Do you have people/agents who assist in sourcing beans from farmers?	Yes/No option given
8	If Yes, name them. For each name person, provide the following information	Based on Yes response above
8.1	What is the nature of your relationship?	Pre-coded options given

8.2	How long have you known each other?	Pre-coded options given
8.3	How do you describe the strength of your relationship?	Pre-coded options given
8.4	What kind of support did they provide you?	Pre-coded options given
8.5	In which age group do they fall?	Pre-coded options given
8.6	Where do they live?	Pre-coded options given
8.7	How frequently do you interact?	Pre-coded options given
8.8	How much do you trust this person?	Pre-coded options given
8.9	What is their religion?	Pre-coded options given
9	**Please name up to five of your main buyers for your beans?**	
	For each of the following buyers, provide the following information:	
9.1	How did you first come to know them?	Pre-coded options given
9.2	How how long have you known each other?	Pre-coded options given
9.3	How would you best describe your current relationship?	Pre-coded options given
9.4	Do you have a formal business agreement?	Pre-coded options given
9.5	To what extent do you trust them?	Pre-coded options given
10	Which one of the buyers mentioned above know each other?	Matrix used to show alter links
	Trader network for financial support	
11	Name the people you would go to for financial support relating to running the business. For each person, provide the following information.	Pseudo names will be used
11.1	What is the nature of your relationship?	Pre-coded response options
11.2	How long have you known each other?	Pre-coded response options
11.3	How do you describe the strength of your relationship?	Pre-coded response options
11.4	What kind of support did they provide you?	Pre-coded response options
11.5	In which age group do they fall?	Pre-coded response options
11.6	Where do they live?	Pre-coded response options
11.7	How frequently do you interact?	Pre-coded response options
11.8	How much do you trust this person?	Pre-coded response options
11.9	What is their religion?	Pre-coded response options
	Involvement of the trader's family network in the business	
12	Do you have any family members that are involved in the running of your business activities?	Yes/No
	If Yes, provide the following information about them	Based on Yes response filter
12.1	Name	Pseudo names used
12.2	Nature of relationship	Pre-coded options given
12.3	Role in business	Pre-coded options given
12.4	Are they paid for services provided	Pre-coded options given
12.5	Do you give them any non-pay related financial aid	Pre-coded options given
13	**Are you a member of any social or community-based groups?**	Yes/No
	If yes, name them and answer the following questions about them.	Pre-coded options given
13.1	What type of group is it?	Pre-coded options given

13.2	For how long have you been a member of this group?	Pre-coded options given
13.3	How do you describe the strength of your membership in this group?	Pre-coded options given
13.4	Does your business activities from your membership in this group?	Pre-coded options given
13.5	If yes, how does the group benefit your business?	Pre-coded options given
	Influence of social relations on operational business decisions	
14	How do you get information about sources of dry food beans?	Pre-coded options given
15	What are your sources of market information?	Pre-coded options given
16	When buying commodities, does your relationship with the seller influence the price you offer?	Yes/No response option
17	When you sell, do you offer a different price to people that you have social relationship with compared to the one you offer to strangers?	Yes/No response option
18	Does your business make any donations/contributions (michango) to social causes within your community?	Yes/No response option
	Trust and credit relations	
19	Do you provide any credit to farmers?	Yes/No answer option
20	If you do provide, how is the repayment done?	Pre-coded options provided
21	Do you sometimes receive credit from your buyers?	Yes/No answer option
22	If you do, what is the credit used for?	Pre-coded options provided
23	**What are the 3 most pressing challenges you face in conducting your business?**	Pre-coded options provided
	Leveraging of social relations for resource access	
24	In running a business of this nature, one needs access to various resources and assistance. Which of the following resources do you access through your social connections?	Pre-coded option given
25	**Demographic details of the trader**	
25.1	Business categorisation:	Ego actor characteristics
25.2	Residential place (ward)	Ego actor characteristics
25.3	Residential place (village)	Ego actor characteristics
25.4	Age group	Ego actor characteristics
25.5	Level of education attained:	Ego actor characteristics
25.6	Marital status	Ego actor characteristics
25.7	Religion	Ego actor characteristics
25.8	Sources of income:	Ego actor characteristics
26	**Business enterprise characteristics**	
26.1	Is business formally registered	Yes/No response
26.2	If **Yes**, what type of registration applies?	Options provided
26.3	Business have TIN?	Yes/No Option
26.4	Size of invested capital?	TZS value

Map of study area

