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The Entrepreneurial Network of Muslim Women Entrepreneurs: The Study of Multiple-Cases of Small Businesses in the Southern Region of Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to empirically explore the dynamics roles of strong and weak ties within Muslim female entrepreneurs' networks during critical problems ("tipping points"), and how this affects the subsequent performance of the small businesses. The literature review shows that many studies have explored the mix of strong and weak ties in small businesses linking them to stages of business development. More recent literature, however, has conceptualized firm growth through the notion of critical problems or "tipping points" that must be successfully tackled in order to continue on a development path. While the importance of network ties has been well documented in relation to growth stages, limited work has investigated the contribution that strong and weak ties make as a firm faces specific "tipping points," thus showing a call for further investigation. This is a qualitative study involving four cases of small-sized food manufacturing firms in the Southern region of Malaysia. The main data collection method is an in-depth interview with the owner-managers using critical incident interview technique. The triangulation of data has been carried out by interviewing individuals who are seen as strong and weak ties of the network. They suggest that the dynamics roles of strong and weak ties are essential during the "tipping points." The findings have implications for firms, networks and the government. It also provides a detailed understanding on the nature of entrepreneurial network of entrepreneurs in Malaysia. Recommendations are presented that address the need to support small businesses in dealing with critical problems in relation to their networking practices.

Keywords: Social Network, Network Ties, Growth, Tipping Points, Small Businesses

JEL Classifications: M000

1. INTRODUCTION

The concept of network in entrepreneurial study has been heavily researched in recent years. Social networks are now considered a crucial feature in entrepreneurship (Chell and Baines, 2000; Hoang and Antoncic, 2003; Jack et al., 2008; Jack, 2010; Slotte-Kock and Coviello, 2010). They are referred to as all the relationships or ties an entrepreneur establishes around him or herself. They are useful in obtaining resources (Aldrich and Zimmer, 1986; Birley, 1985; Casson and Della Giusta, 2007) and gaining information such as market strategy and competitors (Steier and Greenwood, 2000), and these informed entrepreneurs' decision making. Social networks are not only considered important in the process of

business formation (Johannisson, 1986) but also function to support business growth and the development process (Elfring and Hulsink, 2003; Hite, 2005; Jack, 2005). Discussions on networks centre on the network ties which can be strong or weak.

Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) play a vital role in the development of Malaysian economy. Their contributions resulted in big impacts to the economy as a whole. SMEs are also important trader and service providers to primary industries and a large number of them are also producers of finished goods and services. Collectively, these SMEs contributed to the growth various sectors namely manufacturing, services and agriculture sectors, as well as information communication technology

services, in terms of output, value-added, employment and exports (IMP3, 2006). Additionally, Hashim and Wafa (2002); Rasli et al., (2014), mention that SMEs offer job opportunities, initiate improvement, accelerate competition and support big company. Recent evidence shows that SMEs contribute to 32% to gross domestic product, 56.4% to employment opportunities and 19% to export (Aris, 2007). Thus, it is important to understand their growth and development as it brings numerous advantages to the economy. Extant research employs stages of SMEs business development in looking at their growth. However, it is recently argued that stages perspective is no longer relevant to organisation (Phelps et al., 2007). More recent literature has conceptualized firm growth through the notion of critical problems or tipping points. Therefore, it is worth taking up this challenge to fill in the gap by looking at the roles of network ties during the critical problems of small businesses.

The research is a qualitative cases study investigating four Muslim women entrepreneurs who are the manufacturers of food and beverages in the southern part of Malaysia (Johor). Data gathered are assessed in the light of relevant concepts from academic literature, and emergent themes are identified. The findings offer fresh insight into how entrepreneurs utilise networks within dynamic business conditions and at the critical states of the business. This paper seeks to empirically explore the dynamics roles of strong and weak ties within entrepreneurs' networks during periods when the owner-managers of SMEs face critical problems "tipping points." Specifically, the objectives of the study are: (1) To identify the network involvement of Muslim women entrepreneurs in the Southern Region of Malaysia in the business environment, (2) to explore the change and development of network ties of these entrepreneurs with regard to the tipping points they encountered.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Social networks can be regarded as a set of linkages among individuals which are bonded by the set of ties formed amongst them (Aldrich and Zimmer, 1986). Social networking involves forming and maintaining relationships with all the actors in the business environment. They consist of interconnected dyadic relationships where the nodes may be roles, individuals, or organizations (Johannisson et al., 2002). Dubini and Aldrich (1991) argue that an entrepreneur's network consists of all the people with whom an entrepreneur has direct relations including partners, suppliers, customers, bankers, family members, and so forth. Entrepreneurs are embedded in social relationships in which every individual is viewed as a node in the network. This network provides a wide array of resources including information (data, technical knowledge and expertise), physical and capital resources (funds, materials, space and time) and symbolic support (endorsement, approval and legitimacy) (Larson and Starr, 1993).

Even though social networks have a number of dimensions, the network tie is the most noticeable dimension and has received a tremendous amount of attention in entrepreneurial study (Elfring and Hulsink, 2007). According to Jack (2005), the majority of network research (for example: Uzzi, 1996, 1997; Steier and

Greenwood, 2000; Schutjens and Stam, 2003; and Jack, 2005) employed Granovetter's (1973, 1982) strong and weak hypothesis, and indeed the hypothesis itself, has made a remarkable contribution towards the understanding of the concept. This theoretical context is on the basis that an individual person has a diversity of ties that can be associated with the wide range of opportunities open to that individual person (Granovetter 1973, 1982). They argue that strong ties include family members, close relatives and good friends while weak ties are contacts that are not so well known; these can be suppliers, customers, government agencies, business chambers and others. While strong ties are built on strong relationships in which everyone in the network can be counted upon, weak ties are not based on emotional attachment (Dubini and Aldrich, 1991).

This study argues that an entrepreneur's network must consist of a holistic picture of a network itself in the sense that it includes all parties in a society to which an entrepreneur belongs. This argument rests on the premise that different network types provide different forms of support for entrepreneurs in developing the business (Elfring and Hulsink, 2003). Thus, this study follows the categorization of entrepreneurial networks proposed by Lechner and Dowling (2003) and then modifies it into various categories - namely, personal, business, professional, reputation, and competition networks - and embeds various links with different individuals. Lechner and Dowling's (2003) relational mix is adopted as it provides a thorough categorization of meta-networks that link to an entrepreneurial venture's development and growth. It is modified by not including marketing and knowledge, technology and innovation networks as it has little bearing on this study; instead it focuses on business and professional networks. This network provides a wide array of resources including information (data, technical knowledge and expertise), physical and capital resources (funds, materials, space and time) and symbolic support (endorsement, approval and legitimacy) (Larson and Starr, 1993).

2.1. Strong versus Weak Ties

Ties with family members, relatives and close friends are regarded as strong (Granovetter, 1983). This is due to the fact that relations with these parties have long existed and exchanges have already taken place within these relationships. It is argued that strong ties are more supportive and more easily available to provide assistance to entrepreneurs (Granovetter, 1973). Furthermore, they tend to connect similar people in long-term and intense relationships (Elfring and Hulsink, 2003), thus promoting the development of trust and the transfer of fine-grained information and tacit knowledge to entrepreneurs (Rowley et al., 2000; SMIDEC, 2002). Nevertheless, strong ties have a constraint which is the risk of over embeddedness (Uzzi, 1997), which refers to the redundancy of information from close acquaintances in the same circle, which may cause entrepreneurs to become "locked-in." However, Burt (1992) argues that strong ties can consist of non-redundant contacts, although they are likely to provide redundant information from the same circle.

Weak ties, on the other hand, refer to the wider set of relations with whom an entrepreneur has infrequent contact (Elfring and Hulsink, 2003; Granovetter, 1973). These free and unemotional relationships tend to increase the chances of meeting new business

contacts (Burt, 1995; Granovetter, 1995). In addition, weak ties such as customers, suppliers or new business friends serve as channels for entrepreneurs to access a wide variety of resources: Information such as new business locations, potential market for goods and services, discussion and advice, sources of capital (Aldrich and Zimmer, 1986), and supplier and customer referrals (Jack et al., 2004). Further, Granovetter (1973) suggests that weak ties provide information that is not readily available by strong ties and this he regards as the “strength of weak tie.” This hypothesis is built on the belief that strong ties comprise a dense network of actors that are strongly connected, which eventually results in the redundancy of information. Weak ties, in contrast, are usually regarded as networks of actors that move in social circles other than those in which the focal actor operates. He also argues that weak ties assist in opportunity discovering since these weak ties serve as bridges to new and different information (Granovetter, 1983). Hansen (1999) states that even though weak ties are regarded as providing redundant information, they, however, may certainly not result in non-redundant contacts. Voluminous network literature (Aldrich and Zimmer, 1986; Birley et al., 1991; Dubini and Aldrich, 1991), however, emphasized the importance of weak ties on the relative value of strong versus weak ties (Jack, 2005).

Granovetter (1973) and Burt (1992) argue that a perfect entrepreneurial network must contain a combination of strong and weak ties because the nature of these ties has impacts on the operation and structure of networks. Findings from many entrepreneurial and network studies supported this argument, such as the works of Johannisson (1986), Uzzi (1997), Rowley et al. (2000), Chell and Baines (2000), and Elfring and Huslink (2003). These authors found that the accurate blends of strong and weak ties are essential to ensure the effectiveness of an entrepreneur’s social network. Chell and Baines (2000) found that not only weak ties but also strong ties contributed to business growth. These different ties are necessary for different reasons and functions (Lechner and Dowling, 2003). For example, weak ties are used for certain purposes such as recruitment while strong ties promote mutual trust (Chell and Baines, 2000; Rowley et al., 2000). Rowley et al.’s (2000) study of the steel and semiconductor industry found that the combinations of strong and weak ties are positively related to firm performance depending on the conditions surrounding the firms. Besides that, Elfring and Hulsink (2003) examined how the entrepreneurial processes such as discovering opportunities, securing resources and gaining legitimacy are influenced by strong and weak ties. These authors studied three high-technology firms in The Netherlands and found that the mix of strong and weak ties is indispensable for the entrepreneurial process particularly in opportunity discovery and gaining legitimacy. The inconsistent findings on the mix of ties and the recent discoveries on the existence of other types of tie encourages further empirical exploration of the variations of the multiplicity of the entrepreneurial network ties in small businesses.

2.2. Small Business Growth and the Tipping Points

Research on growth of small businesses has received a tremendous amount of attention recently (see, for example, Levie and Lichtenstein, 2010; Mckelvie and Wiklund, 2010; Hansen and Hamilton, 2011). This is the case due to a lack of theories (Mckelvie

and Wiklund, 2010) (Khan et al., 2014), that many questions remain unanswered (Leitch, Hill and Neergaard, 2010); one key question is why some firms grow and others do not (Hansen and Hamilton, 2011). These authors generally argue that the stage growth model has constraints and limitations and could not be employed as a growth model although it is the most popular model in the growth study. As Levie and Lichtenstein (2010) found from reviewing 104 papers of management literature; there is no agreement on the basic constructs of the stage growth model and no validation from the empirical perspective. While Mckelvie and Wiklund (2010) proposed a shift in thinking from the extant literature to a focus on the growth mode, rather than growth rate in conceptualizing the growth of small businesses; Phelps et al. (2007) and Levie and Lichtenstein (2010) introduced a dynamic states approach to explain growth in relation to entrepreneurship.

A study has conceptualized a firm growth through the notion of critical problems or “tipping points.” Following Levie and Hay (1998); Phelps et al. (2007) proposed a firm growth framework based on states rather than stages. The notion of “tipping points” was first introduced by Gladwell (2000), and it explains the critical incidents/problems faced by the firms. Phelps et al. (2007) asserted,

“Tipping points are encountered during growth or are the consequence of environmental changes, and will depend on the specific context of the firm in its environment” (p. 8).

They develop the tipping points based on the managerial problems as follows; people management, strategic orientation, and formalization of systems, new market entry, obtaining finance and operational improvement, and then taking into consideration the need of organizational knowledge to steer through these tipping points. Since conceptualizing small firms’ growth through the stages of business development has been widely critiqued, Phelps et al.’s (2007) work is increasingly recognized by recent studies. It is worth adopting this framework given that, to date, neither network nor entrepreneurship research has looked into the roles of network ties that contribute to the growth of small business development by conceptualizing growth through the notion of tipping points. Thus, this study addresses the need to explore the different functions of entrepreneurial networking ties at the specific tipping points. Although Phelps et al.’s (2007) key tipping points are embraced, this will not limit the variations of critical problems that may emerge from this present study; thus signifying the nature of exploratory study.

3. METHODOLOGY

This is a qualitative study involving four cases of Muslim women small businesses in Johor Malaysia. This method is particularly appropriate for the study that specifically deals with complex social phenomenon where relationships of entrepreneurs, which can be characterised as abstract and subjective, can only be gathered through interactions with the respondents and the stakeholders that entails the richness of data (Uzzi, 1997; Hoang and Antoncic, 2003). In addition, study on network ties and their development especially during the businesses’ critical problems require detailed data that can only be obtained through qualitative

method (Jack, 2005; Jack et al., 2008) and is difficult to acquire through quantitative method (Patton, 2002). The multiple-case study approach was adopted as it enables development of a “nuanced view of reality” (Flyvbjerg, 2006) for the cases under study. More importantly, it offers the advantage of comparing the phenomenon under study. The data obtained in the multiple case study research design could generate higher internal and external validity of the findings thus providing robust interpretations (Yin, 2000).

The cases for this study were selected based on purposeful sampling, and they are the Muslim Women Indigenous (Bumiputera) entrepreneurs of small manufacturers in the Food and Beverages sector in Johor Malaysia. They were selected accordingly to answer the research questions and to shed light on the given phenomenon. It is considered that purposeful sampling has logic and power that is derived from the in-depth understanding of information-rich cases (Patton, 2002). The number of cases selected for this study is four women entrepreneurs of small manufacturers of food products in Johor Malaysia. The researcher considers that four cases are sufficient to illuminate the phenomenon being studied, and this stance follows Eisenhardt (1989) who argued that cases must be between four and ten for it will be difficult to explore a phenomenon in depth with less than four cases because of its complexity and will result in less convincing findings. The respondents were selected based on the following criteria:

- Muslim Women Bumiputera (Indigenous) entrepreneurs of small manufacturing of food and beverages firms;
- The firms have already been incorporated (termed as Sendirian Berhad);
- The firms have been operating for more than 5 years;
- The firms are located in Johor (Southern Region of Malaysia).

This study employed in-depth interview technique, which were based on open ended and semi-structured design, and critical incident interview technique. The critical incident interview technique (Flanagan, 1954) is useful for obtaining rich information on significant events or occurrences, the way they are managed, and the outcomes (Chell, 2004). In this study, it is used to gather detailed description of the configurations of network ties during the “tipping points.” The in-depth interviews were carried out with the entrepreneurs as well as other actors who were deemed as the strong and weak ties of the entrepreneurs including suppliers, customers, family members and others to acquire the overall picture of the subject being studied. The total number of interviews is 13. These different sources of data from various parties help the researcher to validate and cross-check findings, thus supporting triangulation in data collection that increases the credibility of the research (Patton, 2002). The interviews were audio-taped recorded and were then transcribed to allow for data analysis which were based on inductive technique, featuring processes based on data reduction, data display, and drawing conclusions and verification (Miles and Huberman, 1994). This study employed coding using the NVivo8 software. It helps tremendously in saving the researcher’s time in grouping and organising the data; nonetheless it is the role of the researcher to analyse those data and to produce an analytical argument for the subject under study.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

4.1. Network Involvement and the Roles of Strong Ties and Weak Ties

The overall findings in relation to network involvement are shown in Table 1. All cases revealed that they do have connections with the personal, business and professional networks but not with reputation and competition network. An emerging theme (ET) was found that adds on to the network involvement of the respondents is the community network. These are discussed below.

4.1.1. Personal network

The results of the study indicate that the personal networks (i.e., spouse, family, close relatives and close friends) of all of these entrepreneurs, who they regard as strong ties, are vital for both the start-up and the developing phase. This is because the relationship has existed long before the business was established, and they are readily available in terms of supporting the entrepreneurs. This supports previous research by Anderson et al. (2005) and Birley (1985). This has also supported the previous findings by Jones et al., (1997); and Dekker (2004) who found that long-term relationships that exist increase their strong bond, nurture tacit knowledge and exert informal control among each other. For example, for Case 1, the husband and close friend were the strong tie for the entrepreneur and the tie remains strong in the development stage. This result may be explained by the fact that the culture of the Malaysian Bumiputera places high importance on the family, in the sense that family members are very significant to them. This has supported Hofstede’s (1980) theory that Malay Bumiputera entrepreneurs are from a collectivistic society that creates collectivist entrepreneurs that are characterised as having few close ties and long-term relationships in leveraging resources (Tiessen, 1997). As mentioned by Anderson (1999); Anderson et al. (2004); and Foley (2008) culture is vital for indigenous people for it has effects on attitude specifically attitude on business venturing and networking.

4.1.2. Business network

The findings support the idea of Curran et al. (1993) that the relationship with business networks (suppliers, customers and employees) is established at the start-up stage for they are the individuals/parties that entrepreneurs strongly rely on to run the business. However, connections with other individuals/parties of the business network (such as financial institutions, government agencies, clubs and associations, and other entrepreneurs) are established at the developing phase of the business. All cases regard their suppliers and customers as their weak ties in the start-up stage of the business but then this varies in the developing stages. This broad finding supported Martinez and Aldrich’s (2011); Jamil and Hassan, (2014); and Birley’s (1985) empirical work which found that relationships with individual-based or firms-based customers and suppliers are relatively weak in the initial stage for they only involve instrumental transactions, but then become strong when frequent interactions occur, increasing the intensity of trust thus creating an “arms-length” with “embedded” transactions. This is where the network involvement process occurs.

Table 1: The summary of the network involvement of the cases

Cases no.	Progression of the business	Personal network (PT)	Business network (PT)	Professional network (PT)	Reputation network (PT)	Competition network (PT)	Community network (ET)
1.	Start-up	Strong ties (friend)	Weak ties (suppliers, customers, employees)	NIL	NIL	NIL	
	Developing	Strong ties (Spouse and children)	Weak ties (suppliers, customers, employees government agencies, other entrepreneurs, banks) no linkage with clubs. Linkage with the government agencies has stopped at some point	Weak tie (consultant for getting expertise and account auditing)	NIL	NIL	Weak tie (women nascent entrepreneurs who have no capital)
2.	Start-up	Strong ties (spouse, mother, siblings)	Weak ties (suppliers, customers, employees)	NIL	NIL	NIL	
	Developing	Strong ties (spouse, daughter, son-in-law, siblings)	Weak ties (government agencies, suppliers, customers, clubs, other entrepreneurs, banks)	Weak tie (consultant for the GMP facilities factory - introduced by the government agency)	NIL	NIL	Weak tie (women nascent entrepreneurs without capital)
3.	Start-up	Strong tie (spouse)	Weak ties (suppliers, customers, employees)	NIL	NIL	NIL	
	Developing	Strong ties (spouse, children)	Strong ties (suppliers/other entrepreneurs) Weak ties (government agencies, suppliers, customers, clubs, other entrepreneurs, banks) has issue with the cooperative	NIL	NIL	NIL	Weak ties (poor and needy people become employees)
4.	Start-up	Strong tie (spouse)	Weak ties (suppliers, customers, employees)	NIL	NIL	NIL	
	Developing	Strong ties (spouse, children)	Weak ties (government agencies, suppliers, customers, clubs, other entrepreneurs, banks)	NIL	NIL	NIL	Weak ties (poor and needy people become employees)

*PT: Priori theme, ET: Emerging theme, GMP: Geometric mean productivity

4.1.3. Professional network

The results of the study indicate that all cases have no links at all with a professional network during the starting-up stage. Even so, two of the cases started to create linkages with a network group in their developing stages. For example, Case 1 appointed his friend to become a consultant to check his financial accounting for the firm at the end of each year. His friend holds a professional certificate in account auditing and runs a consultant of auditing services, thus he was then regarded by Case 1 as a professional network tie. Other Cases (2 and 3) looked to the consultant for acquiring new skills and expertise in the field, as well as for getting involved in the franchising business.

4.1.4. Reputation and competition network

All cases do not have connection with reputation network and competition network; not only at the starting-up stage but also during the development stage. The reasons for this are attributed to how the entrepreneurs perceived that the size of their businesses (i.e., small sized) meant they were less able to form connections with the more reputable and prominent firms and the big players in the industry. As mentioned by Case 3,

“I don’t get involved with the big industry at this stage yet, for me, I am not ready... my production capability, my sales, my business performance is not there yet.” (Respondent of Case 3)

She believes that at a point in the future, the firm will be in a position to engage in wider networking opportunities. This perception has limited the network diversity among the cases investigated in the sense that the substantial variations in social characteristics a firm needs to grow could not be achieved. While network theory emphasises the need of network diversity (such as Granovetter 1973, 1982, on strong and weak ties hypotheses) to secure vast number of opportunities, this study found otherwise.

Besides that, most cases report connections with the clubs/associations which is one of the categories of a business network, except for one case (Case 1). When asked, the respondent of Case 1 replied,

“I am still new in the business, so I don’t want to get involved in the clubs/associations for I am taking a low profile step, I don’t like publicity and getting attention from the public”. (Respondent of Case 1)

4.1.5. Community network

A new emerging finding in relation to the types of network that has been involved and/or established by all cases is the community network. In this regard, the community network refers to the relationship creation with the community in the local area to provide benefits to them, which is very much related to the corporate social responsibility discipline. Findings show that these

cases have a high level of concern for these groups of individuals such as unemployed graduates, people with disabilities, nascent rural women entrepreneurs (specifically without financial capital), and poor and needy people. These relationships are evident in Cases 1, 3 and 4. To illustrate, Case 2 has offered facilities and business opportunities to rural women nascent entrepreneurs in her locality, Cases 3 and 4 employ poor and needy people in their production departments. These actions aim to help the disadvantaged members of the community to improve their lives, and thereby the life of the community overall.

These two major findings above contrasted with the expectation and argument of this study that an entrepreneur's network consists of a holistic and universal representation that includes all parties and/or individuals in a society/business environment within the frame of reference of the entrepreneur. The meta-categorization of networks that is adapted from Lechner and Dowling (2003) could not be applied in the context of this study of the Muslim Women small business entrepreneurs. This result could be associated with the reason of underdevelopment of Malay Bumiputera entrepreneurs in comparison to one of the other ethnicities; i.e., the Chinese entrepreneurs. However, it is noteworthy that this study discovers a new emerging finding on the relationships with the community network that have been created by all cases. Table 1 shows the summary of network involvement of all cases that include the themes and sub-themes.

4.2. Roles of Strong Ties and Weak Ties

It has been found that there is a mix of strong and weak ties in providing various forms of support to the cases. The strong and weak network ties correspond to the varieties of network groups, such as the family/personal network, business network, professional, reputation, and competition networks as well as the community network in Bumiputera entrepreneurial networking activity. They play crucial roles in the development of these small businesses. Support gained from the close familial relationships and close friends provides a huge motivational impact, especially in the initial stages. For example, the entrepreneurs receive encouraging words and positive feedback from the family members to keep going although they have to face difficulties

in setting up the business. This finding supported the findings of Reynolds (2004). In addition, the spouses have provided tremendous support to the husbands since the starting-up stage, and towards the developing stage. This finding supported Bruderl and Preisendorfer (1998), who found that spouse and family members are the crucial resources for a firm's growth and survival. Not only that, the findings are in line with an argument by Kontinen and Ojala (2011), who claimed that spouse and family members appeared to help in business when their skills and competencies matched the needs of the business. The business and married relationship between an entrepreneur and the spouse is termed as "copreneurship" in the sense that couples possess shared responsibility of owning and managing a business (Blekinsopp and Owens, 2010). Previous studies have proved that this spousal relationship contributes to business growth. It is interesting to note that, all cases rely strongly to the husband for most of the business functions of the firm. This could be attributed to the values and religious beliefs of Muslim women Bumiputera entrepreneurs who are accentuating the religious effects of their actions.

This study produced results, which corroborate the findings of a great deal of the previous research in the field in relation to sources of financial funding during the initial stages of the business such as Moore (1994); and Saemundsson and Dahlstrand (1999). It is found that (Case 2) spouse and family members are the ones that an entrepreneur will seek out for financial capital sources at the preliminary stage since other sources, for example, loans from banking institutions, require some kind of collateral (Martinez and Aldrich, 2011). The family members in the personal network and close friends (Case 1) also provided an "easy" loan for the entrepreneurs without restrictive payback terms or conditions. Nevertheless, as their firms grow, the reliance on the strong cohesive ties of family and close friends in funding their businesses shifted to financial institutions for a bigger scale. It is interesting to note that family bonding and teamwork among the family members (as occurred in Cases 2, 3, and 4) have contributed in the development of businesses tremendously. They claimed that the reason for this is due to the strong bonding of family ties as well as the mutual understanding of values, attitudes and the way they perform certain task. These findings support previous research by Jones et al., (1997);

Table 2: The summary of support of the personal ties network and the related quotes

Case	Family ties	Roles/support	Quotes
1	Spouse, close friend	Emotional, financial and management	"My relationship with this friend is so unique. We actually did not have a very close or warm friendship at first, but she offered to loan me money to fund my business. It was started with a small amount (RM5, 000) but then increased to RM50, 000. I repaid her loan after a short period of time with interest added, even though she would never have required it"
2	Spouse, siblings, children	Emotional, financial and productions	"My family has provided strong support ever since my business started-my mother and my siblings were happy to provide me with money. Although the amount was not much, it was really helpful to me at that time. They were also my main moral support. My sisters now also produce my products to my specs at their home factory. I then purchase their products to be sold by my sales reps"
3	Spouse, children	Emotional and productions	"I am lucky that I have a husband who always supports me in doing things that I like. After he retired, he retired early at the age of 40, he then became fully involved in the business and carried out the operations of the business"
4	Spouse	Emotional and productions	"My husband always make me feels motivated and inspired through his encouraging words, he helped me out in producing the products, although at that time he was not involved formally in the business during the starting-up stage...even the fact that he allowed me to do business has made me feel supported"

and Dekker (2004). Refer to Table 2 for the summary of support of the personal ties network and the related quotations.

4.3. The Exploration of the Tipping Points and the Triggering Factors of Network Change

These cases experienced a range of critical problems in running their businesses. The discussions of the critical problems are based on a priori themes identified in the literature review while assimilating the new ETs in answering how, why and when the entrepreneurial network ties change from one form to the other.

Findings suggest that network change happens not only due to the staged life-cycle process of the business as proposed by Jack et al. (2008) but it also happens when the entrepreneurs and/or firms are facing the tipping points and/or critical problems. As argued by this study, conceptualizing the business development and growth through the lenses of the tipping points and/or critical problems could provide in-depth analysis of when, how and why network ties change. They are being added, dropped, progressed, regressed, and even remaining constant over time. These findings revealed that financial problems, new market entry and strategic orientation as proposed by Phelps et al. (2007) are the tipping points that have been experienced by the cases that trigger network evolution. Five new ETs have been identified in this research; these are the external/environment factor, trust breaking, network broker, the entrepreneur-level context and the dyadic-level context, and they are briefly illustrated as below.

First, the financial problems encountered by the cases can be categorized into several, which are internal financial management, obtaining external financing for growth, and financial problems resulting from earlier incidents. Second, the discussion on new market entry is twofold; the failure of export activity and the attempt of the cases to expand the firms' market through business development programs and/or new product development, and identification of new areas for new market penetration. Third, the findings portray most cases that have embarked on strategic planning of the business, which has in turn resulted in the evolvement of network ties. As for Case 2, it is evident that she creates network variations when she initiates the price comparison strategy to ensure that the suppliers are not cheating them. Fourth, most cases experienced stiff competition from various parties, namely the other entrepreneurs in the same industry - Chinese or Malay

businesses, hypermarkets and importers that have triggered for network evolvement in the business environment. 50, the critical problems have also been caused by the external events/environments such as huge loss due to flash flood and the economic recessions. These events are interrelated to the financial problem that has been discussed above that requires network change. Sixth, trust breaking is happening to the weak ties customers of the cases; those who are newly appointed and would normally have made only one or two transactions, whereas the strong ties customers have a relatively longer relationship with entrepreneurs and there is a higher degree of trust and reciprocal commitment between each other. The findings of tie rejection of weak ties customers contradicts Martinez and Aldrich (2011) who proposed that these customers provide significant opportunities in connecting with previously unconnected ties in the business environment; instead, they are rejected due to the payment problem. Seventh, findings show that network brokers, who act as intermediaries between two individuals, facilitate new connections established by most of the cases with various ties, particularly the business ties. They play crucial roles in most of the cases. Eighth, the multidimensionality of the individual entrepreneur is demonstrated through their demographic factors, personal values, experience and capabilities. Therefore, they differ in responding to changes in their networks. Finally, dyadic multidimensionality is found in the tie's content, structure and governance as well as in the dyadic life cycle. Table 3 summarizes these themes.

Birley's (1985) research highlighted that, over time, the entrepreneur changes the focus of his network and a shift occurs from informal network contacts to formal, commercial business contact such as banks, accountants, lawyers and the Chamber of Commerce during the subsequent stages in the life path of the firm. However, this study found that the majority of the cases do not totally switch; rather they progress and sometimes regress the strength and intensity of some of their network ties. They somehow maintain the relationship with certain parties by letting it lie dormant, for subsequent use in the future.

5. CONCLUSION

The findings show that the majority of the cases regard their close familial relationships as the strong ties in both the

Table 3: Summary of the triggering factors of network change

No.	'A PT	Sub-themes	No.	ET	Sub-themes
1.	Financial problem	1. Internal financial management 2. External financing	4.	Competition	NIL
2.	New market entry	1. Export failure 2. Business development programmes 3. Penetrating new market	5.	External events/ environmental	1. Flash Flood 2. Economic recession
3.	Strategic orientation	NIL	6.	Trust breaking	NIL
			7.	Network broker	NIL
			8.	Multidimensional of entrepreneur-level context	1. Demographic factors 2. Personal values 3. Experiences
			9.	Multidimensional of dyadic-level context	1. Dyadic structure 2. Dyadic content 3. Dyadic governance

PTs: Piori themes, ET: Emerging themes

starting-up stage and the developing stage. They offer support ranging from various kinds of roles such as management and administration, financial capital, productions and operations, marketing and sales, motivational and emotional support, as well as new ideas and tasting new recipes. The findings show that the strong ties of Muslim Women entrepreneurs are among not only the family members and close friends, but also range from customers, suppliers, other entrepreneurs and distribution agents, as businesses grow over time. These findings thus rejects the proposition by Granovetter (1973) that the strong ties are just the family members, close relatives and close friends, and supports the findings of Jack et al. (2004) who claimed that customers and suppliers are the strong ties to entrepreneurs for they provide intense support during the business development.

This study contributes to the network change literature by providing evidence on the use of the notions “tipping points” and/or critical problems to conceptualise the growth of business, and at the same time providing evidence of the triggering factors for network ties change and development. This study identified three tipping points as outlined by Phelps et al. (2007) - financial problem, new market entry and strategic orientation - and discovered six ETs that are competition, external/environment, trust breaking, network broker, multidimensionality of entrepreneur and the dyadic contexts. These findings have not been documented elsewhere, thus signifying adding value to the field under study. With regard to the Malaysian context, although the issue of Malay entrepreneurial networking has long been of interest to Malay scholars, academics, government officials, politicians and the public of Malaysia, in-depth studies of Malay entrepreneurship are scarce and scattered. To date, no empirical evidence has been produced, in particular studies on Muslim Women Bumiputera entrepreneurs, that focuses on SME entrepreneurial networking. Nevertheless, Farinda et al., (2009) developed a conceptual framework about business networking in Malaysian SMEs. However, it does not present a holistic approach to entrepreneurial networking of Malaysian SMEs; rather they focus on the determinants of business networking activities. Thus, this in-depth study is expected to contribute to the development of entrepreneurial networking literature of the Malaysian context.

Finally, this study provides managerial and policy implications to be taken into considerations. It is essential for entrepreneurs to manage and maintain their contacts in their entrepreneurial network. To do this, they are advised to recognise the nature of the relationships and the tie intensity with the network members. In maintaining the relationships, entrepreneurs are required to ensure that they invest in network-nurturing activities. It is recommended for them to fully utilise the network relationships available in facing the problems and difficulties encountered in running the business and also be involved actively in the clubs/associations, and other ethnic group such as the Chinese. This study demonstrates that there is necessity for the government agencies to increase their attentiveness to and knowledge of the value and implications of networking. Governments have provided extensive supports to these entrepreneurs, however, more importantly, government agencies have to understand that what is more critical is to educate these entrepreneurs with networking skills so that they

will be able to manage their entrepreneurial networks effectively and utilise them systematically in enhancing the business growth.

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