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The Moderating Effect of Business Support Services on the Relationship Between Group Identification and Women's Economic Empowerment

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*Group Identification,
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Services,
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Empowerment.*

This study investigated the moderating effect of Business Support Services on the relationship between Group Identification and Women's Economic Empowerment. The study participants were drawn from women groups under PEWOSA. The data was collected using questionnaires, interviews, documentary reviews and focus group discussions. The study used structural equation modelling techniques to analyze the quantitative data. The qualitative data is analyzed thematically. The study findings revealed that group identification improves women's economic empowerment. Business support services positively impact women's economic empowerment. The interaction effect showed that whereas combining group identification with training improves women's economic empowerment, it may not lead to better results if group identification is combined with supervision. It is recommended that activities that bring women together be strengthened, tailor training activities and the supervisory function be strengthened.

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INTRODUCTION

Women's economic empowerment intervention programmes have grown to increase attention among strategic and development practitioners. The economic empowerment of women is seen as one of the most effective ways to reduce gender inequality and poverty among households (Benish, & Saima, 2020; World Bank, 2016). Globally, there has been an evolution towards more women's economic empowerment with a higher rate of change after the end of World War II (Kaitlyn et al., 2019). The 2005 UNDP Human Development report estimated that 70% of the 1.3 billion people who live on less than 1 dollar a day are women. It is estimated that women represent more than 40% of the global labour force and run the majority of micro, small and medium-sized firms (World Bank, 2016).

Women's economic empowerment is the process of achieving women's equal access to and control over economic resources and ensuring they can use them to exert increased control over other areas of their lives (Benish, & Saima, 2020; Kandpal et al., 2012). Women's groups are often formed to provide a safe and supportive space for women to come together, share their experiences, and work towards common goals of gender equality and empowerment (Vukovic et al., 2021). Not only does economic empowerment improve the opportunity for women to access financial and non-financial resources, but it also facilitates skill development and access to market information (Addai, 2017; Alshebami, & Khandare, 2015; Wanjiku, & Nijiru, 2016).

The economic empowerment of women is an essential aspect of sustainable development and gender equality. Women's participation in economic activities, decision-making, and access to economic resources are critical in reducing poverty, promoting inclusive growth, and achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals

(SDGs) (UN, 2015). Developed and developing countries have adopted numerous steps to provide institutional frameworks for women's economic empowerment activities through business capacity support and microcredit facilities among others (Kate et al., 2020). In Uganda, the efforts towards women's economic empowerment have been espoused through various government policies, legislation and programmes. These, among others, include the Local Economic Development Policy (GoU, 2014), the Uganda Cooperative Societies Regulations (1992) and the Cooperative Societies Act among others (GoU, 1991). Women's economic empowerment can be viewed from the level of the individual, the group, and empowerment in close relationships (Tandon, 2016).

In this study, women's economic empowerment was measured through the lens of women's ability to invest, make decisions and possess financial autonomy and economic security. The study context was women's saving and lending associations under the Project for Empowering Women through Savings and Loans Associations (PEWOSA). We study women's economic empowerment (WEP) from the perspective of the individual within the group and the group as a whole. Group identification is our explanatory variable measuring the extent to which an individual shares intentions with other members of a particular social group and perceives them as distinct from those outside the group. It is a sense of belonging, attachment and alignment with the values, norms and goals of the group. Specifically, we measure Group identification in terms of group centrality, in-group affect, and in-group ties.

Group identification in the form of participation in women-focused cooperatives, self-help groups, or women entrepreneur networks is essential for women's economic empowerment (Kabeer, 2020).

Centrality is operationalized in terms of the importance and prominence PEWOSA members assign to their affiliation with the group in shaping their sense of self and personal identity (Leach et al., 2007). In-group affect is used to refer to the positive sentiments and sense of belongingness that PEWOSA members develop towards the group they identify with. The in-group ties were used to refer to the social connections and relationships that PEWOSA individuals have with members of their in-group. The Group affect refers to the emotional climate within a group (World Bank, 2018). The in-group effect occurs when preferential treatment is accorded to those who have already settled in the groups compared to the new ones (Jannati et al., 2023). Business support services are aimed at creating value for the client (Derera et al., 2020). We conceptualize business support services in this study as training and supervision provided to the PEWOSA groups.

The Project for Empowering Women through Savings and Loans Associations (PEWOSA) was initiated by Buganda Kingdom Central Broadcasting Services (CBS) to enable women to overcome challenges of access to financial services in order to enhance their social economic development. The PEWOSA are groups of 20-30 people (mostly women) who save together and take small low-interest loans from those savings. The Central Broadcasting radio station came up with the initiative of organizing and empowering people under the group formation model. The women empowerment groups (PEWOSA) are self-formed and managed, bound by cultural and social norms and shared expectations and set rules and regulations meant to regulate group behaviour. As part of their corporate social responsibility, CBS-FM radio teamed up with the Stromme Foundation to help women who were mobilized into groups. The groups were taken through a sensitization programme, trained and equipped with various skills. The skills included skills in savings, mobilization, group dynamics, leadership skills,

record keeping, business skills and credit management among others.

The various project reports from the Stromme Foundation in 2017, 2018, and 2019, revealed an increase in the number of women groups. To strengthen the activities of these groups, the foundation intervened by providing business support services under PEWOSA. The reports are however largely silent about the extent to which the interventions have economically empowered the women. The project reports do not reflect tangible outcomes with regard to changes in WEP. Without empowering women economically, there is a risk that the undesirable effects of gender inequality may worsen. This study examined the moderating role of business support services on the relationship between group identification and women's economic empowerment. We set two hypotheses to guide this study; 1) H_1 : There is no relationship between the effects of group identification constructs and women's economic empowerment 2) H_2 : Business support services do not moderate the relationship between group identification and women's economic empowerment.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Foundations of the Study

This study was underpinned by the social identity theory (Tajfel, & Turner, 1970). The social identity theory propounds that individuals derive their self-esteem from their membership in social groups which they identify based on common characteristics such as age, gender, race, religion, occupation, or nationality. We use this theory in the study to understand the effect of group identification on women's financial autonomy, economic security, investments and decision-making. The theory is limited in its ability to explain how power dynamics shape intergroup relations (Raskovic, & Takacs-Haynes, 2021).

Women's Economic Empowerment

Women's economic empowerment has a long history dating back to the early days of the feminist movement in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Women need to be empowered by ensuring their economic rights, such as the right to work and equal pay (Kate et al., 2020; Mukorera, 2020). Women's participation in economic activities, decision-making, and access to economic resources are critical in reducing poverty and promoting inclusive growth. Research has shown that women's economic empowerment has a positive impact on economic growth, poverty reduction, and social development (Kabeer, 2020). Research studies have shown that investing in women's education, health, and economic empowerment can increase productivity, promote gender equality, and reduce gender-based violence (Barnes, & Li, 2013; Kabeer, 2019).

Kabeer (1999) exposes the multi-dimensional nature of WEP. This study measured WEP using four indicators: financial autonomy, investments, economic security and decision-making. Financial autonomy was viewed as the freedom for a woman to make independent financial decisions without having to refer to someone else (Kristy and Bryce, 2019). The ability of a person to save is a positive indicator of financial autonomy (Tandon, 2016). The World Bank's Gender Equality Strategy recognizes the importance of women's access to and control over financial resources. The strategy highlights the need to "expand women's access to formal financial services and products, such as savings accounts, insurance, and credit, and strengthen their ability to control and manage their financial resources" (World Bank, 2016). Hilary et al., (2021) decried the continued dependency of women on their spouses to guide their decisions on finances.

Women's savings and loan associations can be an important source of investment capital for members, particularly those who may not have access to

traditional banking services or other sources of funding (Meagher, 2016). To foster women's empowerment, the World Bank's Gender Equality Strategy, (2016) lays emphasis on targeted investments in infrastructure, education and training, business development services, and credit access. Investments are needed to ensure sustainable income generation (Schuler, & Nazneen, 2018). Compared to men, studies report women to be risk averse (Baporikar, & Akino, 2020) with a more conservative attitude towards investment (Rottenberg, 2019; Scelza et al., 2020; Reshi, & Sudha, 2023).

In this study, economic security is perceived as the state of the individual or group members to adequately meet their basic needs. Parfitt and Barnes (2020) posit that economic security builds the group's capacity to absorb and withstand the different forms of shocks. The groups provide a form of social safety net through which women can access credit for growth leading to better economic empowerment (Bongomin et al., 2020).

Group Identification and Women's Economic Empowerment

Group identification is the association or a sense of attachment one has with a particular group. Individuals who share similar goals and values form the "in-group" while individuals who have opposite opinions are considered as "out-group". The social identification theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) posits that individuals identify with social groups that reflect shared values. This is echoed in (Konovalova, & Le Mens, 2020). The synergies arising out of group investments strengthen the desire of individuals to join groups (Huang, & Liu, 2015). A strong group identity tends to lead to more cooperative economic behaviour. Consensus building is vital for a harmonious group relationship (Tran, 2020; Liu et al., 2020; Urena et al., 2019; Wan et al., 2021). The study adopted the dimensions of group identification by Leach et al., (2007) viz; centrality, in-group affect and in-group ties.

Group Centrality

Group centrality plays a significant role in shaping women's access to economic resources and opportunities (Grootaert et al., 2004; Masson, & Barth, 2019). Research studies associate group centrality with improved economic security (Rahman, 2013; Njau et al., 2018; Dapilah et al., 2020; Kyegombe et al., 2019; Kouzou et al., 2018). The in-group bias occurs when group members show a favourable disposition towards entrants with views similar to those held by the old members (Obermaier et al., 2023; Butāne et al., 2022). Community-led interventions among groups with strong group identification tend to exhibit better women's economic empowerment outcomes (Loha, 2018; Nanyonjo, & Nchanji, 2023).

In-group Affect

Group affect is the emotional attachment to a group that benefits a member of the group in the form of preferential treatment that may not be accorded to non-group members (Jannati et al., 2023). The in-group provides an opportunity to save as a group and minimize the financial pressures from relatives and friends (Amaning & Paul, 2019). A positive emotional climate motivates and encourages members of the group to work harder to achieve financial independence (World Bank, 2018).

In-group Ties

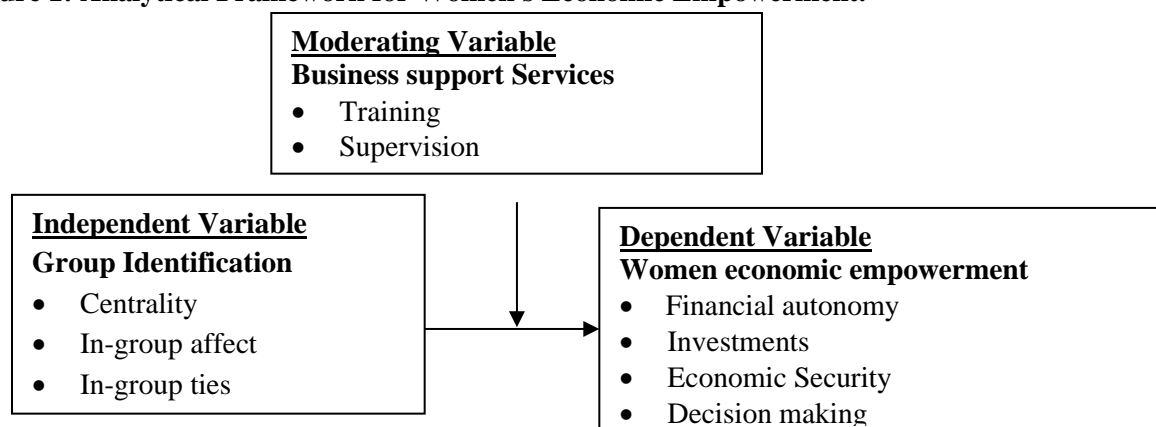
In-group ties refer to the social relationships and networks between members of the savings group (Mukras & Bachewe, 2018). It refers to the sense of belongingness to a particular group. In-group ties are strengthened by trust, cooperation, and information sharing between group members. In-group ties tend to have a positive effect on women's economic empowerment (Ohara et al., 2017).

Business Support Services and Women Economic Empowerment

Microcredit integrated with business support services is associated with improved performance (Derera et al., 2020), reduced poverty among women entrepreneurs (Bandiera et al., 2020; Chikanda & Tawodzera, 2017) and improved women empowerment (Arindam, & Pravat, 2014). Aguinisan and Kraiger (2009) argue that training has a positive impact on group centrality, in-group ties and group performance. In the same line, support supervision tends to lead to improved performance (Parsons, et al., 2020). The women who received microcredit plus services were found to be more likely to start their own businesses than those who did not receive support (Yadav, 2021).

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The relationship between group identification, business support services and women's economic empowerment is depicted in the analytical framework presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Analytical Framework for Women's Economic Empowerment.

Source: Developed through a critical review of the literature (Kabeer, 2015; Lester et al., 2013; Stam, Arzlanian, & Elfring, 2014; Tandon, 2016)

The outcome variable was women's economic empowerment, the explanatory variable was group identification, whereas business support services were the moderating variable.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopted a mixed methods design. Mixed methods research is recommended for its ability to maximize the benefits of both quantitative and qualitative research methods (Bloomfield & Fisher, 2019). The quantitative data was collected using questionnaires that were given to group members while qualitative data was collected using key informant interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs). The key informants included the project staff, CBS FM leadership and PEWOSA group leaders. The questionnaires were explanatory and factual in nature with items covering the study constructs. This was complemented by interviews and FGDs with key informants. Secondary data were obtained from the review of archival records, publications and PEWOSA reports (the CBS FM (2019), the Stromme foundation reports (2017, 2018, 2019) and other relevant documents. The study undertook a cross-sectional survey design that allows for data collection from different study groups at a particular point in time (Wang & Cheng,

2020; Bloomfield & Fisher, 2019; Lefebvre, et al., 2019; Spector, 2019; Johnson et al., 2020).

Study Area and Population

This study was conducted in Wakiso district in the central region of Uganda with 9000 group members in the 300 PEWOSA groups that must have been in existence for more than five years. The area was chosen because PEWOSA originated in the Wakiso district. This makes the district the ideal location to assess the operational effectiveness, sustainability and long-term impact of PEWOSA. The district also provides a representative sample of POWESA's influence on community development which makes it an ideal study area to better understand the broader implications of PEWOSA initiatives. The unit of analysis was the groups while the unit of inquiry was the members of the women's savings and loans associations.

Sample Size and Characteristics

Following Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) guidance on sample determination, a sample of 368 respondents was obtained from the 9,000 members. Similarly, from the 300 PEWOSA groups, a sample of 169 groups was selected. In addition, 5 project staff, 4 people from the leadership at Central Broadcasting Services (CBS) and 12 group leaders were purposively selected. The purposively

selected participants participated in the qualitative data collection methods. Sampling adequacy was tested using Kaiser & Bartlett's test of sphericity.

Data Entry and Analysis

Quantitative data was analyzed using SPSS and SMART PLS VERSION 4. Data were tested for normality, linearity, collinearity, and homogeneity of variance. To aid the analysis, a factor analysis was performed. To create the measurement model

and structural model needed to test the hypotheses, SMART PLS VERSION 4 was used to run the partial least squares modelling. The data was tested for both convergent validity and discriminant validity where an acceptable discriminant validity of <0.7 was obtained implying that the measurement of the set of constructs was consistent. A factor analysis was then conducted to help extract those study factors that represented the study variables.

Figure 1: Measurement Model for Business Support Services

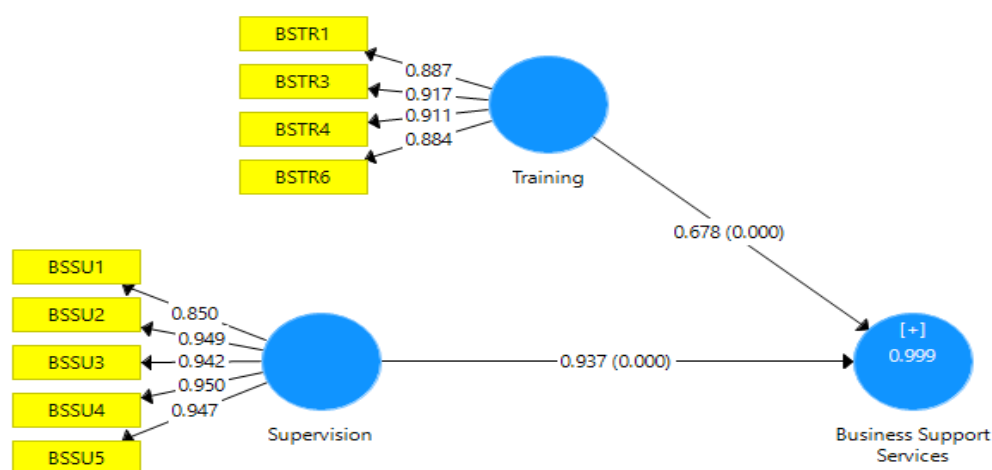


Figure 1 shows that the two dimensions of training and supervision account for 99.9% of the variance in business support services.

Hypothesis Testing

The partial least square (PLS) method was used given its ability to analyze latent variables (Hair et al., 2019). The measurement (outer) model specifies the relationships between the indicator variables and the latent variables, whereas the structural (inner) model specifies the links between the latent variables.

Qualitative Data Analysis

The process of qualitative data analysis involved preparing data by transcribing interviews and

FGDs, document review, typing up field notes, sorting and arranging the data into different themes and by source of information. Thematic and content analysis was used for qualitative data generated through audio recordings and open-ended responses. The data is presented using direct quotes from the participants. The ethical issues of informed consent, risk of harm, confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the study.

RESULTS

A total of 360 females participated in the study. The majority of the respondents 302(83.8%) were married, 35(9.7%) were single, 12(3.4%) were widowed and 11(3.1) never responded. All the variables were measured on an anchor of a five-

point Likert scale. The mean scores for the group identification variable were 4.03 indicating a high level of group identification. The sub-components used to measure group identification posted high levels; centrality (Mean 3.91), in-group affect (Mean 4.101) and in-group ties (Mean 4.081). The business support services mean value of 3.55 suggests a moderate level of support services received by the groups. The mean values of the sub-components of training (Mean 3.672) and supervision (Mean 3.431) confirm the moderate

level of support services as perceived by the groups. The mean of 3.84 for women's economic empowerment indicates a relatively high level of empowerment. The subcomponent values indicate a moderate level of investment (Mean 3.542), and high levels of financial autonomy (Mean 3.704), economic security (Mean 3.942) and decision-making (Mean 4.178).

Correlation Test

Table 1: Correlation between the Study Constructs

Variables of study	1	2	3
Group Identification (1)	1.000		
Business Support Services (2)	.463**	1.000	
Women Economic Empowerment (WEP) (3)	.616**	.392**	1.000

Table 1 revealed the existence of a positive and strongly significant relationship between Group Identification and WEP ($r=0.616$, $P<0.05$), and a positive and fair significant relationship between Business Support Services and WEP ($r=0.392$, $P<0.05$). Group identification and Business Support Services were found to be positive and moderately significantly related ($r=0.463$, $P<0.05$)

Statistical Results for the Hypotheses

Hypothesis testing was done using the partial least squares (PLS) method. The explanatory factor analysis was used to understand the factor structure of the variables and to examine their internal reliability. The structural model estimates for the prediction of WEP showed that the group identification constructs could explain 40.8% of the variation in women's economic empowerment. The greatest contributors to WEP from highest to lowest were: in-group affect (44.9%), centrality (22.9%) and in-group ties (22.3%). The findings attest to the value of emotional connection, the feeling of being valued and the role positive relationships within the

group play in improving women's economic empowerment.

It was revealed that in-group ties and in-group affect are instrumental in delivering financial autonomy, a key aspect of WEP, whereas centrality does not. In terms of decision-making, in-group affect and centrality matter a lot whereas in-group ties do not. In terms of economic security, in-group affect and in-group ties were significant at 0.05 level of significance while centrality was significant at 0.10. The variables centrality, in-group affect and in-group ties were all statistically positively significantly related to investment.

H₁: There Is No Relationship between the Effects of Group Identification Constructs and Women's Economic Empowerment

The results revealed the existence of a positive relationship between the effects of group centrality ($\beta=0.229$, $p<0.05$), in-group affect ($\beta=0.449$, $p<0.05$), in group ties ($\beta=0.223$, $p<0.05$) and WEP as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Measurement Model Estimates for Group Identification and WEP

Variable	β	SE	T-Stat	P-values
Centrality \rightarrow Women's Empowerment	0.229	0.077	2.96	0.04
In-group affect \rightarrow Women's Empowerment	0.449	0.064	7.015	0
In-group ties \rightarrow Women Empowerment	0.223	0.047	4.685	0

Further analysis revealed that centrality was positively significantly related to all the sub-components used to measure WEP except financial autonomy. The non-significance of financial autonomy is attributed to weak leadership as verified by the remarks from some members of the FGDs

'...the rules & regulations set by ourselves on how to choose leaders... That no one should be in office for more than two terms; you will still find that some members keep occupying these positions...' (FGD/S/006).

A second explanation for the non-significance of centrality in relation to financial autonomy could be attributed to the leadership in some groups where leaders have overstayed and this has created a do-not-care attitude where leaders can give out group funds without following the rules and regulations. In one of the FGDs, a member said;

'There are many leaders that have over-stayed in office... It becomes very hard for friends not to keep their friends in leadership positions.' (FGD/W/001, FGD/S/008)

Another person in another focus group said;

'Voting for a leader in our groups sometimes depends on who recruited you to the group unless you do not want to access loans in the shortest time when you get a problem. The slogan is vote me and I will always help you'. (FGD/K/001)

Another member said;

'Our group has faced leadership problems, for example, our chairperson has been in office for a long time...' (FGD/N/012)

Financial autonomy requires access to resources and opportunities to generate income. If the group lacks adequate resources or the means to access them, it may impede women's ability to achieve financial autonomy. If trust is lacking, it may hinder the development of mechanisms that empower women financially (Mayoux & Linda, 2001).

The relationship between centrality and decision-making was found positive and statistically significant. In one of the FGDs a participant said;

'We laid down the rules & regulations ourselves on how to choose leaders in our groups. That no one should be in office for more than two terms; you will still find that some members keep occupying these positions... Sometimes they are chosen... richer than all of us or because it is them that started the group' (FGD/S/006).

The relationship between centrality and investment was positive and significant. This is supported by the results from the FGD where a member said;

'Members have been supportive towards me...' (FGD/W/016).

Though membership was originally open to only women, of late men have been allowed to join the groups provided they are the minority.

The results revealed the existence of a positive relationship between the effects of in-group affect and WEP ($\beta=0.449$, $p<0.05$). This means that the positive emotional experiences, satisfaction, and

attachment within the group positively influence women's economic empowerment. The in-group affect improves the women's financial autonomy as a member of one of the FGDs testified;

We meet every week ... as required by our rules. This has created attachment of members to the groups.....and has made members become hard-working...they help one another even beyond the groups.....in case of any problem, group members will stand with you. (FGD/K/007)

Another member reported that;

'The weekly meeting has enabled us to become close to each other... (FGD/K/017)

Another key informant said;

'It is one of the requirements for the groups to meet on a weekly basis... Their participation in group meetings would enable them access information on how to acquire financial autonomy'

Positive group affect, characterized by trust, solidarity, and a sense of belonging, plays a crucial role in shaping decision-making dynamics within a group. The strong emotional attachment among group members tends to improve the decision-making process. This is supported by a member of the FGD who said that;

'In our group, we all contribute to the decisions taken. For example, two years ago we agreed to start saving for 'Munno mukabi' money which was a top-up on our weekly savings to help us in terms of trouble such as the death or sickness of any of the group members' (FGD/S/002).

From the FGDs, the satisfaction of the members with their groups was revealed. The members interviewed, indicated that they loved the groups and they were determined to promote the goals of the groups. They expressed no regrets forever joining the groups. Despite this, a few reported dissatisfaction with the groups mainly citing

weaknesses with the weak internal conflict resolution mechanisms.

The in-group affect is positively related to economic security. This means that the existence of a strong emotional connection to the group is associated with the willingness of members to work together and support each other in overcoming economic setbacks or pursuing new economic opportunities. This was strengthened by a member of the FGD.

'I have borrowed money from my group several times which I use to pay fees for my children... I would not have been able to take her that far without PEWOSA.'

Another informant reported;

'The group has been beneficial to me during times of need . . . I sometimes fall short of capital . . . I have a backup for my business which is PEWOSA'.

The relationship between in-group affect and investment was positive and significant. This is vivid from the comment from one of the informant's remarks;

'We have so far managed to purchase 15 plastic chairs in the last three years that can be hired out or even used by members when the need arises, whereas if all members were supportive of the idea, we would by now be having more chairs.' (FGD/K/002).

Another member remarked;

'I have borrowed money from my group and purchased land and after a period of three years, I borrowed and constructed three rental houses and I am now a landlord as a result of my group. (FGD/S/010)

Another member said;

'I bought land and started a brick-making business and whenever I need capital to buy firewood to burn my bricks, the group comes out

to help me and as soon as they buy my bricks, I pay back the group's money. (FGD/K/011)

The results revealed the existence of a positive and significant relationship between in-group ties and WEP. The in-group ties positively relate to financial autonomy, economic security and investment but not decision-making. The supportive networks that arise from group membership improve members' economic security. The in-group ties provided women with access to financial resources and information that can help them make informed investment decisions. A member from the FGDs reported;

'The group members... are now my friends... My friends once advised me to start a small market selling tomatoes, onions, matooke etc. near my home since my husband was not supporting my idea of leaving home for work'. (FGD/K/014)

In-group ties provide emotional and psychological support, which can be critical for individuals who are facing challenges or setbacks. By leveraging their in-group ties, individuals were enabled to access capital; networks and markets that can help them start and grow their businesses which can in turn lead to economic empowerment.

However, some members reported gossiping among women and poor leadership as the limiting factor to the emotional attachment of members. The internal conflict resolution mechanism was reported to be weak. The weak leadership was summarized by one of the FGDs as follows;

"Some members were leaving the groups due to the problems in the group leadership or favouritism. Some members are given money above their security because of their friendship with the leadership and end up not paying, some members are denied access to the group property such as chairs on the pretence that they are not available. This kills the bond members have towards the group members" (FGD/N/011).

The in-group ties and decision-making lacked a significant relationship. This implies that having strong in-group ties may not necessarily impact the members' decision-making processes at the household level. This is exemplified by the remarks of a member from the FGD;

'We usually make decisions for the group as members, but in my home, I usually have to consult my husband.' (FGD/N/017)

H₂: Business Support Services Do Not Moderate the Relationship between Group Identification and Women's Economic Empowerment

The bootstrap method was used to estimate the significance of the interaction effect of business support services as a moderator variable between group identification and WEP as focal variables in the structural equation model. Business support services were measured in terms of training and supervision. We set the hypothesis that 'Training does not moderate the relationship between group identification and women's economic empowerment'. The results are presented in Table 3

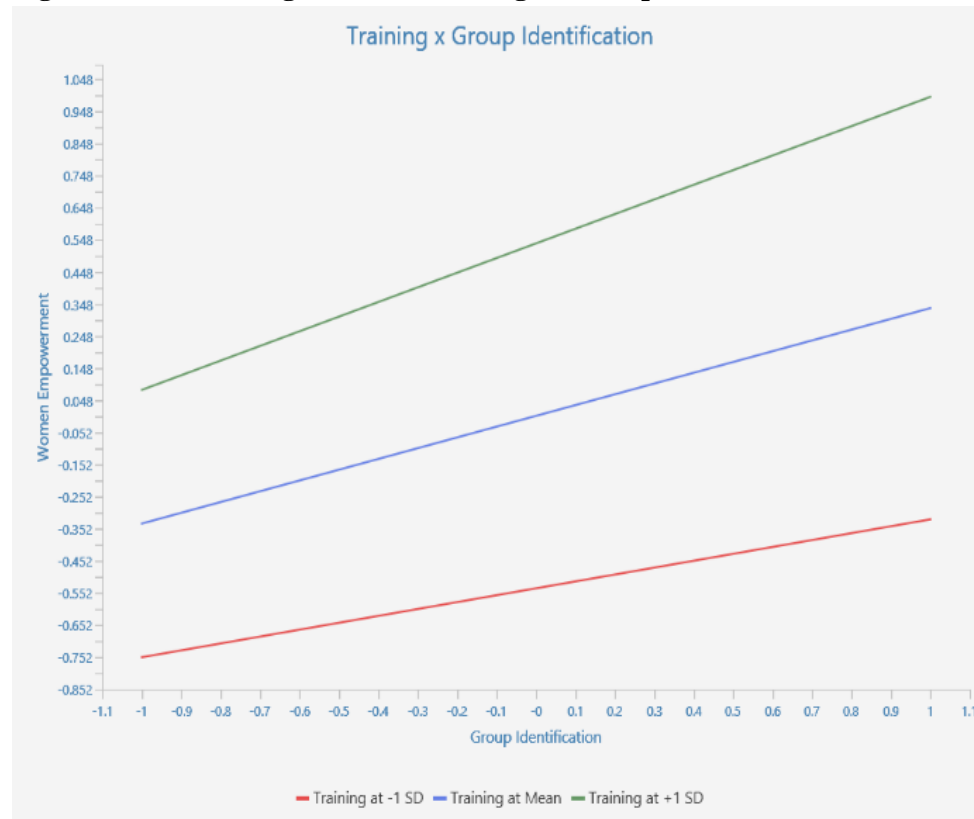
Table 3: The Moderating Effect of Training on the Relationship between Group Identification and Women's Economic Empowerment

Variable	β	SE	T-Stat	P-values
Group Identification \rightarrow WE	0.336	0.065	5.160	0
Training \rightarrow WE	0.537	0.054	9.964	0
Group identification X Training \rightarrow WE	0.121	0.049	2.453	0.014

The results revealed that a one-unit increase in group identification improves women's empowerment by 33.6%. Training positively impacts WEP ($\beta=0.537$, $p<0.001$). The combined effect of group identification and training is greater than the individual effects. For each additional unit

of group identification and training, women's economic empowerment increases by 0.121 units beyond the individual effects. In Figure 2, the positive moderating effect of training on group identification and WEP is even made clearer.

Fig 2: The Moderating Effect of Training on Group Identification and WEP



The results suggested that the relationship between group identification and women's economic empowerment was moderated by training. The more training a group receives, the higher the level of WEP.

The Moderating Effect of Supervision on the Relationship between Group Identification and Women's Economic Empowerment

We set the hypothesis that 'Supervision does not moderate the relationship between group identification and WEP'. The results are presented in Table 4

Table 4: Moderating Effect of Supervision on the Relationship between Group Identification and Women Economic Empowerment (WEP)

Variable	β	SE	T-Stat	P-values
Group Identification \rightarrow WEP	0.387	0.084	4.578	0
Supervision \rightarrow WEP	0.265	0.057	4.648	0
Supervision X Group Identification \rightarrow WEP	0.123	0.079	1.556	0.12

The results revealed that a one-unit increase in group identification improves WEP by 38.7%. Supervision positively impacts on WEP ($\beta=0.265$, $p<0.001$). However, combining group identification with supervision is unlikely to enhance women's economic empowerment. The lack of significance of the interaction term can be explained by the remarks of a member in one of the FGDs;

'Supervision is sometimes irregular in our groups... Leaders are lending the group savings without the member's decision' (FGD/W/017)'.

DISCUSSION

H₁: There Is No Relationship between the Effects of Group Identification Constructs and Women's Economic Empowerment

The set hypothesis was rejected. Group identification positively impacts WEP. All the sub-constructs studied under group identification, that is, group centrality, in-group affect and in-group ties were positively related to WEP. Group centrality positively impacted decision-making and investment, though it could not influence an individual's financial autonomy. The role of centrality in WEP resonates with Ohara et al. (2017); Mayoux, (2001). The lack of significance between centrality and financial autonomy points to its insufficiency to make changes in women's financial autonomy. This contradicts previous findings of Mayoux (2001); Buvinic & O'Donnell (2019). The finding points to the possibility of the phenomenon of low group centrality in some of the groups that hinders effective collaboration and weaken the group. Group cohesion is associated with improved group performance (Kouzou et al., 2018)

The association with a group has the benefits of improved economic security. This is in agreement with Kyegombe et al. (2019); Njau et al. (2018); Narayan (2002). This finding is in support of the social identity theory that attaches influence in the group to the position one holds (Tajfel & Turner,

1979). The influence one yields in the group better positions her to access information necessary for informed decision-making (Grootaert, et al. 2004).

The in-group affect improves the women's economic security, investment decisions, decision-making capacities and financial autonomy. This is enabled by the positive emotional climate within the group that enhances trust, cooperation, and motivation among group members. The positive attachment to a group is a form of social capital that is key to WEP (Jardina, 2019; Ohara et al., 2017; Goette et al., 2012; Mayoux, 2001; Putnam, 2000). The qualitative findings attributed the strong emotional attachments to the group to arise from the weekly meetings, support for each other and open sharing. The limiting factor was identified to be members that keep it to themselves during the meetings, but express dissatisfaction in other fora.

The in-group ties improve the women's economic security, investment decisions and financial autonomy but not their decision-making capacities. From the FGDs, challenges to group identification included cases where members withdraw mid-way through the cycle of saving and borrowing; default by some members and failure to change leadership. The promotion of economic security among women groups arises out of the trust that exists between members. This is supported by Abebe et al., 2018. The in-group ties did not influence decision-making, especially at the household level. From the qualitative findings, it was revealed that women continued to depend on their spouses during the decision-making process. Yet others borrowed money from the groups on behalf of their spouses. The lack of significance of in-group ties in decision-making echoes Narayan, 2002; Hilary et al., 2021.

H₂: Business Support Services Do Not Moderate the Relationship between Group Identification and Women's Economic Empowerment

The study findings revealed that integrating training with group identification activities yields synergetic effects on WEP. The need for tailored training that

was voiced during the discussions augurs well with various researchers (Derera et al., 2020; Jhuma 2017). Impactful training largely depends on a carefully executed training needs assessment. Whereas both group identification and supervision positively impact WEP, providing the two concurrently may not post better empowerment results.

CONCLUSION AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions

From the study findings, it is concluded that group identification has a positive influence on WEP. Centrality plays a key role in WEP through its influence on group integration, though it does little to influence member financial autonomy. Caution should be taken to limit the danger of members overstaying in leadership positions. The positive emotional climate within the group enhances trust, cooperation, and motivation among members which promotes WEP. The sense of connection to the group motivates individuals to invest in projects or businesses that benefit not only themselves but also their groups, families, and the wider community. Belonging to a group is a source of social capital that women can exploit to better their economic standing. However, in-group ties do less to influence decision-making as women still consult their husbands on issues concerning individual borrowing and investing. This may be explained by the prevailing social and cultural influences in our communities. The weak in-group ties often resulting from poor leadership limits the potential for women's economic empowerment.

The moderating effect of supervision on group identification and women's economic empowerment was confirmed, though not significant. Training positively moderates the relationship between group identification and women's economic empowerment. By combining training and group identification activities, women's economic empowerment is strengthened. The

training should be aligned with the specific needs of the group members. This would require any training program to be based on the pre-training needs assessment of a given group.

Policy Recommendations

The study has revealed the need to base training on a clear needs assessment that enables tailored training to the needs of a specific group. The leadership challenge inhibits the proper functioning of the women groups. There is a need to foster a culture of shared leadership where leadership roles are rotational. This would minimize situations of overstaying in leadership positions by particular 'privileged' members.

To foster and strengthen a positive emotional climate, group leaders should adhere to principles of transparency, fairness, and inclusivity. Activities that encourage regular meetings and sharing between group members should be encouraged. For example, annual get-together parties.

Monitoring and regular supervision of the women groups independent of group identification activities should be strengthened. This is because women's empowerment improves when the unique benefits of each are individually exploited.

Study Limitations

This study overly relied on self-reported responses which are often associated with personal biases. The cross-sectional survey design employed by the study is limited to facts at a particular time.

Areas for Further Research

A study exploring the effect of other potential moderating factors, such as demographic characteristics, access to resources, spouse support and so on women's economic empowerment is recommended.

Ethical Statement

This study received ethical clearance from the Uganda National Council of Science and Technology.

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