

The Business Relationship for Empowerment: How Women Entrepreneurs Thrive in Resource-Poor Marketplaces

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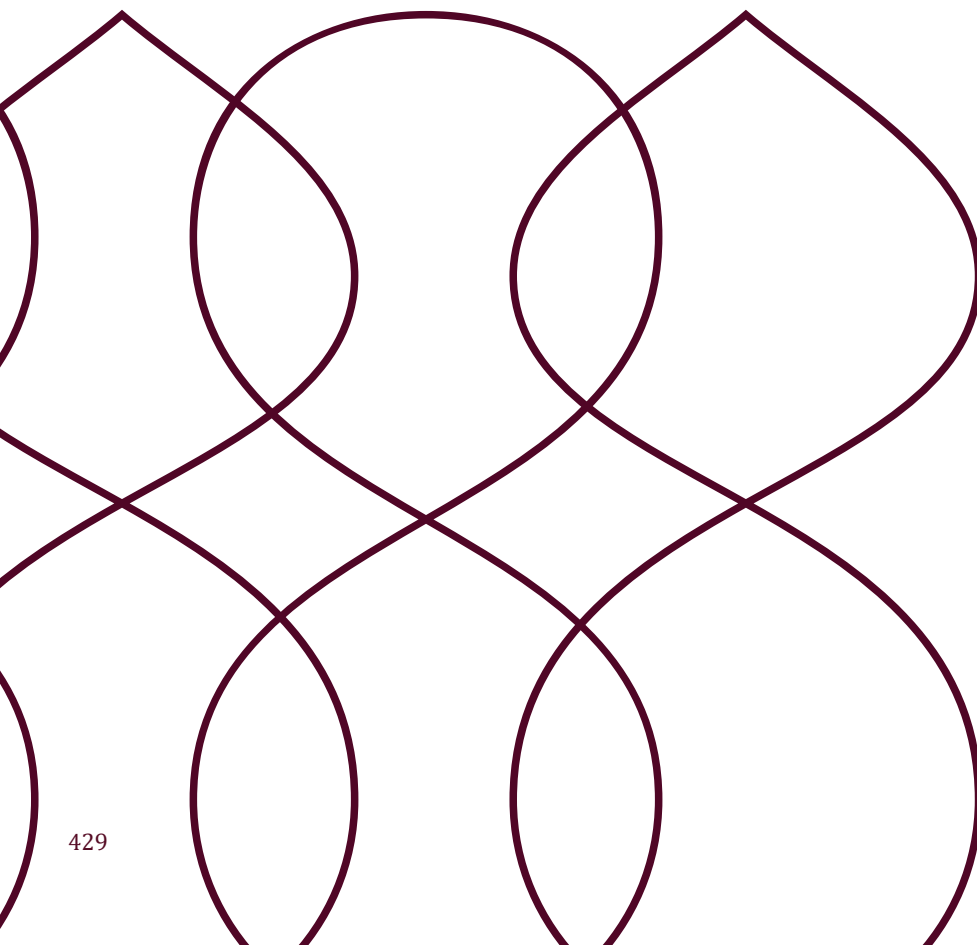
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Abstract:

Marketing can help pave the way to a better world by empowering women entrepreneurs through business-to-business (B2B) relationships in ultra-poor marketplaces. Although women's empowerment has received much attention in the international development literature, the marketing trajectories that women follow in their entrepreneurial activities and empowerment processes remain underexplored. Specifically, past marketing research has not empirically examined the influence of relationship dynamics on women's empowerment. This paper highlights how the quality of trust-based relationships helps alleviate poverty by shaping perceptions of respect and reciprocal exchanges among ultra-poor women in resource-poor settings. To test the causal chain of the B2B relationship drivers-empowerment model, our research drew on data from 301 ultra-poor women entrepreneurs (i.e., the business customers of a social bank) operating in B2B marketplaces in Bangladesh. Based on the social exchange, relationship marketing, and psychological empowerment theories, the findings confirm the effects of trust (ability, benevolence, integrity)—as the foundation of respect (recognition, responsibility, and empathy) and reciprocity (community informativeness, community support, and enjoyment)—on women customer empowerment of social banks (meaning, competence, self-determination, and impact) in ultra-poor marketplaces

Keywords:

Business to business relationship, trust, respect, reciprocity, customer empowerment.



1. Introduction :

Increasing numbers of academics are advocating that firms need to think beyond financial returns and play a more active and broader role in society (Ansari et al., 2012; Raghubanshi et al., 2021; Viswanathan et al., 2021). Businesses are increasingly being challenged to apply their innovation abilities to offer new solutions to widespread and pervasive socio-economic and environmental problems—including poverty, climate change, social injustice, and hunger—that partially stem from business activities (Pels & Sheth, 2017). One of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals listed in the United Nations 2030 Agenda for reducing poverty and achieving social impact pertains to the empowerment of women and girls (United Nations, 2018). Nevertheless, business studies, and specifically marketing ones, have paid little or no attention to solving these complex challenges.

Relationships founded on trust and sustained engagement constitute the cornerstone of social banking's capability to alleviate persistent poverty by empowering ultra-poor women (Barnett, 2001; Cornée, Kalmi, & Szafarz, 2016; Hani et al., 2021). The ultra-poor women—defined as those earning less than 50 cents per day, spending the majority of their income on food, unable to meet basic energy needs, and lacking property or land to generate income (Horner, 2020; The Guardian, 2015; McIntyre et al., 2011). Their potential for self-employment and retributed work is constrained by insufficient human capital endowments and restricted access to productive inputs (Bedoya et al., 2019). They face significant constraints on cognitive clarity, effective decision-making, relational stability, and the development of self-confidence, resulting from persistent economic deprivation and prolonged exposure to adverse conditions (Dercon, 2008; Aggarwal, 2014; Martin & Hill, 2012). Ansari et al. (2012) redefined poverty as a lack not only of financial resources but also of ability and relationships and suggested the usefulness of trust-based relationships in empowering the ultra-poor. Scholars increasingly agree that the route to empowering ultra-poor women in emerging nations involves engaging them in strong trust-based business relationships (Aggarwal, 2014; Ansari et al., 2012; Crittenden et al., 2019; Dowla, 2006). Studies have shown that, for ultra-poor women entrepreneurs, trust-based business relationships serve as the foundation for creating, capturing, and retaining value. For example, Aggarwal (2013) identified various relational dimensions, such as trust and respect, in relation to the progress of disadvantaged business owners,

who prioritize trust and the maintenance of interpersonal relationships over price in their business decisions. These small business entrepreneurs emphasize the role of trust in their business relationships and have been found to build strong relationships with reliable (90%) and honest (95%) business partners. Viswanathan et al. (2010) found that disadvantaged entrepreneurs place great importance on their business relationships, particularly in providing one another with knowledge and capital when in need. Similarly, in the Voices of the Poor study, Narayan et al. (2000) found that when evaluating an institution, people experiencing poverty prioritize respect, trust, and accountability. In a similar spirit, Cornée et al. (2012) proposed that one option for dealing with particularly susceptible business customers is to establish long-term relationships built on trust, regular face-to-face encounters, and physical contact. Although relationships are central to marketing, and the relationship marketing literature is increasingly oriented toward social impact, no clear theoretical framework for empowering ultra-poor women has yet emerged.

By embracing social exchange, psychological empowerment, and relationship marketing theories, we examined the relationship dynamics that evolve between ultra-poor women entrepreneurs and social banks. Trust, as the foundation of social exchange theory (SET), reduces informational opacity and enables women entrepreneurs to make sound decisions (Blau, 1964; Farr-Wharton & Brunetto, 2007). SET also helps explore the relational drivers and the exchange of non-economic benefits between exchange partners (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). In social banking, approving loans to ultra-poor women without collateral fosters trust-based relationships among the parties involved and creates platforms for social exchange that are grounded in these relationships. Within this business model, relationship marketing is critical to developing and maintaining lasting relationships that empower women entrepreneurs. In resource-poor settings, such empowerment can be achieved through the development of solid relationships characterized by trust, respect, and reciprocity (Hani et al., 2022). In our study, we defined customer (ultra-poor women entrepreneurs) empowerment as “a motivational construct manifested in four cognitions: meaning, competence, self-determination, and impact. Together, these four cognitions reflect an active, rather than a passive, orientation to a work role” (Spreitzer, 1995, p.1444). Thus, drawing on social exchange, relationship marketing, and empowerment theories, we explored the role of trust and its impact on respect and reciprocity in empowering ultra-poor women entrepreneurs.

Rising numbers of studies on business-to-business (B2B) relationships employ the concept of trust in relation to the establishment and maintenance of effective and long-lasting cooperative relationships (Hani et al., 2022; Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Moorman et al., 1993; Bolis, 1999; Ganesan, 1994; Kumar, 1996). In addition to trust, studies conducted in ultra-poor market contexts have identified the crucial roles of respect and reciprocity as relational drivers of women entrepreneurs' empowerment (Athanasopoulou & Blois, 2015; Bourassa et al., 2018; Hani et al., 2021, 2022; Yunus, 2007). However, empowerment has rarely been examined as an outcome of relationship quality, as organizations typically prioritize profit maximization (Mills & Ungson, 2003; Ergeneli et al., 2007; Cheung et al., 2012). Thus, in our study, we addressed this knowledge gap by investigating the impact of trust on two critical relational drivers (i.e., respect and reciprocity) in ultra-poor marketplaces. In particular, we aimed to investigate how the dimensions of relationship quality (i.e., trust, respect, and reciprocity) are interrelated and influence women customers' empowerment. Thus, we put forward the following research question:

How can trust, respect, and reciprocity in business relationships empower ultra-poor women entrepreneurs?

To address this question and validate the research model, we collected cross-sectional data from 301 ultra-poor women entrepreneurs in Bangladesh. Our study makes several contributions to this line of research. First, our findings capture the intricacies of the relationship dynamics that create and capture value for women entrepreneurs and challenge extant relationship marketing theories grounded in resource-rich settings. Since relationship quality in ultra-poor markets has received scant attention (e.g., Hani et al., 2022), our study is among the first to examine the causal effects of trust on other relational drivers (i.e., respect and reciprocity) and on customer empowerment. In doing so, it provides robust evidence that perceived trust is an antecedent of perceived respect, perceived reciprocity, and customer empowerment in ultra-poor B2B markets. This finding highlights the role of relationship-driven empowerment among these vulnerable customer groups and paves the way for future research on trust as the central individual-difference variable in ultra-poor markets.

2. Research Model and Theories:

Our study develops and validates a model on an attitude (trust), behaviour (respect and reciprocity), and outcome (customer empowerment) in an ultra-poor marketplace. In doing so, it references the existing literature on SET, using trust as the foundational attitude; this informs the proposed model's behaviour and outcomes. SET significantly influences trust, which is the central attitude of our proposed model (Kumar, Scheer, & Steenkamp, 1995; Morgan & Hunt, 1994). We also addressed the relationship between trust and two other relational dimensions (i.e., respect and reciprocity) based on the extant literature in social banking and relationship studies in resource-poor settings (Blois, 1999; Jiang, Cornée & Szafarz, 2014; Cornée et al., 2016; Henneberg & Naudé, 2011; Hani et al., 2021, 2022; Mouzas, Henneberg, & Naudé, 2007). We examined the model in the context of the relationship between ultra-poor women entrepreneurs and social banks in the developing world, as illustrated in Figure 1.

The study of business relationships in resource-poor settings benefits from social exchange and relationship marketing theories. The business relationship is often used as the unit of analysis in B2B exchanges (e.g., Jap, 1999; Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Palmatier et al., 2007). We took a similar approach, focusing on business relationships and understanding the role trust plays in them in relation to the empowerment of ultra-poor women entrepreneurs. More specifically, our unit of analysis was the relationship between social banks and ultra-poor women entrepreneurs in developing countries. The respondents, our unit of measurement, were ultra-poor women entrepreneurs who were social bank business customers.

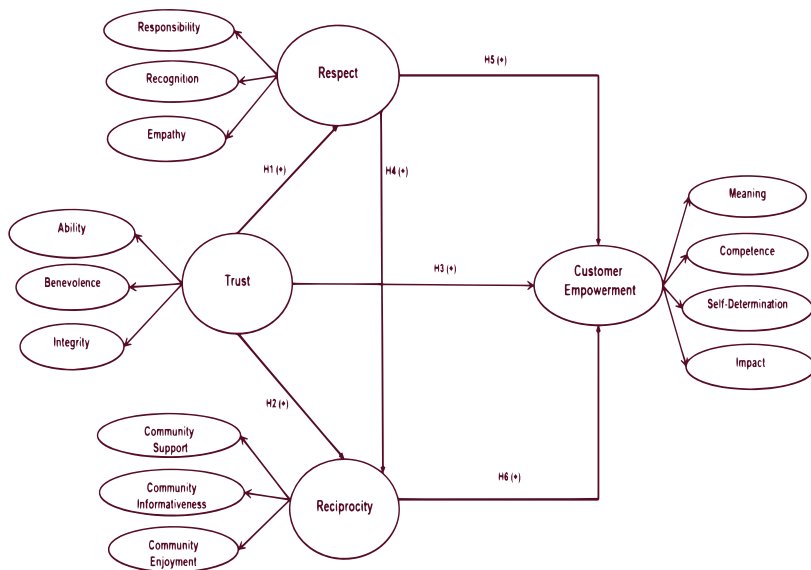


Figure 1. The Research Model

2.1 Trust and Perceived Respect

The extant literature on SET identifies trust as a building block of social exchange relationships (Blau, 1964; Mayer, 1995; Mishra & Spreitzer, 1998; Haas & Deseran, 1981). Trust is often treated as a unidimensional construct, and too few investigations have hitherto defined and empirically evaluated its multidimensional nature (Ashnai et al., 2016; Fang, 2008; Mayer, 1995). Rousseau et al. (1998) identified trust as a psychological phenomenon and advocated that it consists of the intention to accept vulnerability based on favourable expectations of another's intentions or behaviour. However, Giffin (1967) defined trust as the reliance on the attributes of an object, the occurrence of an event, or a person's behaviour to attain an uncertain but desired goal under precarious circumstances. Doney and Cannon (1997, p.26) defined trust as "the overall perception of an individual regarding the credibility and benevolence of the group of people representing the partnership firm in the relationship". In an effort to integrate the trust literature, Mayer (1995) defined it as being composed of three factors—ability, benevolence, and integrity—which is in line with much of the existing literature (Baker et al., 1999; Ganesan, 1994; Hewett & Bearden, 2001; Siguaw et al., 1998).

We defined trust as the expectations, beliefs, and sentiments elicited in ultra-poor women entrepreneurs by a social bank's ability, benevolence, and integrity (Colquitt et al., 2007; Ganesan, 1994; Mayer et al., 1995; McKnight et al., 2002). This capability of social banks is reflected in the provision of customized financial solutions and tailored investment advice aligned with each entrepreneur's constraints and goals (Coulter & Coulter, 2002). Research shows that people make greater efforts when interacting with respected targets (Cornin, 2004) and that people feel disrespected when they are ignored, neglected, disregarded, and dismissed lightly or thoughtlessly (Laschinger & Finegan, 2005). Thus, the efforts a social bank expends in providing customized support influence the level of respect ultra-poor women entrepreneurs perceive. Consequently, the level of trust female entrepreneurs have in a social bank could be expected to influence their perceptions of respect. Benevolence refers to the extent to which a social bank is perceived to act with genuine concern for clients' well-being under changing circumstances, thereby strengthening relational bonds and business partners' loyalty through support, care, and openness (Colquitt, 2007; Mayer, 1995). Specifically, women living in

conditions of extreme disadvantage are especially vulnerable to sudden social and environmental shocks, as well as to family and community violence (Duflo, 2009). In such a context, trust and respect are reinforced by the ultra-poor women's interpretation of social banks' supportive behaviour, and transparent transactions as signals of benevolence and integrity (Kumar et al., 1995; Finegan, 2005; Hani et al., 2024).

Understanding these complex social exchanges involves unpacking the business relationship that exists between a social bank and ultra-poor women entrepreneurs (Ashnai et al., 2016; Emerson, 1981). Building on these dynamics, trust reflects ultra-poor women entrepreneurs' assessments of a social bank's credibility, while respect—rooted in trust—captures their perceptions of personal value and dignity within the relationship (Cronin, 2004; Ramarajan et al., 2008). According to Cremer and Tyler (2005), the relational argument concerns whether the ultra-poor feel respected as a function of the trustworthy attitudes of social banks, which affects how they perceive themselves when dealing with such banks. Accordingly, respect is not formed solely through individuals' internal evaluations but is shaped by judgments about how they are treated by the social bank (Cremer & Tyler, 2005; Umme et al., 2024). Although trust and respect are complex constructs that are equally important in forming high-quality relationships, their interplay has received little attention. Thus, by combining ability, benevolence, and integrity as trust, we posited:

H1. Trust has a significant positive impact on respect.

2.2 Trust and Reciprocity

Trust is a significant factor in numerous exchanges (Doney et al., 1998). Mutual trust creates ideal conditions for cooperation and enhanced partner performance (McEvily et al., 2003). Moreover, high levels of inter-organizational trust substantially and positively affect innovation and interdependence (Delbufalo, 2012). Research also confirms that when businesses trust one another, they are more likely to be honest, which is a favourable condition for information exchange (Squire et al., 2009). In this sense, trust may have a relevant influence on reciprocity. For instance, a trustworthy attitude held by a trustor (e.g., ability, benevolence, and integrity) increases the trustee's expectations of how such a trustor may act in the future, enabling a mode of reciprocity that entails reciprocal obligations. Building on this approach, we proposed that a trustworthy attitude displayed by a social bank plays a key role in shaping reciprocal behaviours. We hypothesized that

ultra-poor women entrepreneurs perceive that trust in social banking influences their norms of reciprocity in business relationships. In this study, reciprocity is conceptualized by the social banks' hosted reciprocity norms. In such a context, ultra-poor women entrepreneurs are expected to collaboratively address shared challenges through community support, information sharing, and enjoyment (Pai, 2016). Social banks cultivate trust-based relationships and reinforce these reciprocity norms. This enables mutual assistance and serves as a critical relational resource for coping with persistent stress and uncertainty in highly marginalized and uncertain contexts (Huda et al., 2000; Uphoff, 1993; Abbott & Freeth, 2008). When ultra-poor women entrepreneurs perceive that a social bank has a high ability to perform its job, they may also feel less stress or anxiety, thus increasing their enjoyment of using the social banking service (To and Trinh, 2021; Young & Daniel, 2003; Abosag & Lee, 2013). For example, the reciprocity component of perceived enjoyment can be enhanced if a social bank provides alternative solutions tailored to the unique challenges faced by ultra-poor women entrepreneurs. Additionally, when entrepreneurs perceive social banks as benevolent, they may view their vulnerability as less threatening because they expect such banks to be on their side in challenging situations, which increases the reciprocal aspect of perceived community support. For instance, if a social bank demonstrates a benevolent attitude by offering emotional support to ultra-poor women entrepreneurs during any difficult business circumstances, such entrepreneurs' perceptions of community support will increase. Finally, when entrepreneurs feel that a social bank has a high level of integrity, they may be prompted to engage in seamless bilateral communication and coordination, hence maximizing community informativeness. For example, perceived informativeness will increase if a social bank is open in dealing and prompt in answering questions or sharing relevant information with ultra-poor women entrepreneurs. Therefore, their vulnerability will be reduced, and they will also be keen to share information. The trustworthy attitude held by a social bank establishes a belief that creates a psychological contract pertaining to what ultra-poor women owe to that bank, thus obligating them to reciprocate through community support, enjoyment, and community informativeness to other entrepreneurs in the bank since they received the same from the social bank (Guo, Gruen, & Tang, 2017). Thus, we posited that:

H2. Trust has a significant positive impact on reciprocity.

2.3 Trust as a Driver of Empowerment

We argue that the trust placed in social banking by ultra-poor women entrepreneurs influences their sense of empowerment by mitigating the challenges and helplessness inherent in their economic setting. Drawing on Spreitzer's (1995) conceptualization, empowerment is defined as an increase in entrepreneurs' perceived capacity to cope effectively with the challenges. Previous studies have shown that trusting relationships may help lessen the negative psychological impacts of poverty. This is because, according to Brockner et al. (1998), when people in a relationship feel more in control of their situation, they experience less vulnerability and helplessness. Economic and social vulnerability is common among ultra-poor women entrepreneurs, who face chronic resource constraints and limited coping capacity (Umme et al., 2024). According to Mayer et al. (1995) and Mishra and Spreitzer (1998), ultra-poor women entrepreneurs experience empowerment when they have a trustworthy orientation at social banks. This orientation encompasses ability, benevolence, and integrity, which enhance confidence and help navigate entrepreneurial challenges, even in times of uncertainty. Thus, we hypothesized:

H3. Trust has a significant positive impact on empowerment.

2.4 Respect and Its Role in Reciprocity and Empowerment

Drawing on the findings of Ali and Ndubisi (2011) and Bourassa et al. (2018), we identify three subdimensions of respect in social banking—recognition, responsibility, and empathy. We will now discuss how each subdimension of respect influences reciprocity (as a behaviour) and empowerment (as a relationship's outcome) in social banking.

Recognition entails treating others with dignity by acknowledging their inherent worth and ensuring that each person's distinct needs receive individual attention (Bourassa et al., 2018). It acknowledges that ultra-poor women are capable of entrepreneurship despite their challenging social, economic, and educational backgrounds. Several studies have highlighted that poor women in developing countries are subjected to rudeness and insults and lack the voice to protest (Chakravarti, 2006; Banerjee, Duflo, & Sharma, 2021). When these destitute women feel recognized, they are more likely to share and exchange information (Jehn & Mannix, 2001), which ultimately influences reciprocity of

social banking. In addition, any recognition accorded to the ultra-poor can boost their sense of worth and confidence (Clarke & Mahadi, 2017). Self-efficacy theory predicts that, because of these intangible benefits, ultra-poor women will confidently engage in social banking (Bandura, 1989; Betz & Hackett, 1986). Furthermore, ultra-poor women's sense of identity in society will improve as a result of the increased self-esteem brought on by the recognition they receive.

Responsibility supports the needs and desires of ultra-poor women in pursuing their entrepreneurial goals (Ali, 2011). People living in extreme poverty are often ignored and disrespected when they seek help (Chakravarti, 2006). However, the responsibility to constructively facilitate the common goal of basic human rights (such as access to financial services) has been characterized as respect (Arnold, 2010). Thus, we considered responsibility as a defining characteristic of respect. According to Dillon (1992), human beings are not designed to be self-reliant. Similarly, ultra-poor women entrepreneurs engaged with social banks require ongoing assistance. Social banks carry out such responsibilities through entrepreneurial training or education, nutritional knowledge, health information, coaching in money saving, life skills, and education about the rights of ultra-poor women (Banerjee, Duflo, & Sharma, 2021; Huda, Sabeel, & Catherine, 2005; Morduch, 2010), which shape their perceived responsibility. When ultra-poor women entrepreneurs receive such respect from social banks, they are more likely to comply with any decisions favourable to the group and promote group-oriented behaviours (Tyler et al., 1992). For example, while receiving training and education from a social bank, they also tend to support each other within the group. This sense of group support that emerges from responsibility also influences the norms of reciprocity. Similarly, when vulnerable women feel valued by a social bank's responsible approach (e.g., in training, education, monitoring, and consideration of their opinions), their perceived vulnerability and uncertainty decrease, and their perceived empowerment increases. Thus, the perceived responsibility of ultra-poor women entrepreneurs influences their empowerment.

Finally, empathy refers to any response arising from awareness of another's emotional state and from experiencing another's affliction as if it were one's own (Eisenberg & Morris, 2001). Wang et al. (2019) described empathy as the comprehension of the desires and objectives of other individuals. Others have primarily defined it as the willingness to perceive the world through another person's eyes from a meaningful and independent perspective without making assumptions about their lives, values, or agency (Magri, 2019). Empathy plays a vital role in reducing vulnerability, anxiety, and fear within the context of marginalized commu-

nities (Shamasundar, 1999). According to Segal (2007), empathy is a novel phenomenon in relation to overcoming poverty. We also argued that empathetic persons in decision-making positions design policies and initiatives that are relevant and responsive to the necessities of those in need. Hence, we defined empathy as a social bank's willingness to respect the thoughts and emotions of ultra-poor women entrepreneurs when making a decision. Empathetic attitudes held by the social bank can alleviate the distress experienced in the daily lives of ultra-poor women (Shamasundar, 1999). We found that empathetic interactions—which are made up of feelings, thoughts, attitudes, and values—are almost perfectly reciprocal. Besides, growing evidence suggests that empathy promotes beneficial behaviours (Lee & Murnighan, 2001). For example, a social bank's empathy can be manifested in the shape of collateral-free loans, with ultra-poor women who receive such loans then feeling compelled to 'pay them forward' by lending a helping hand or accepting decisions beneficial to the other social banking group members (Hani et al., 2021). Therefore, in social banking, the norms of reciprocity are shaped by the perceptions of empathy held by ultra-poor women. Similarly, empathy can play a significant role in assisting vulnerable individuals regain their sense of self-worth (Halpern, 2001; Ratcliffe, 2015). Thus, we hypothesized:

H4. Respect has a significant positive impact on reciprocity.

H5. Respect has a significant positive impact on empowerment.

2.5 Reciprocity as a Driver of Empowerment

While ultra-poor women entrepreneurs in emerging markets are hindered by aspects such as low literacy levels and limited access to critical services, their reciprocal relationships are their greatest strength (Viswanathan et al., 2021; Viswanathan, Sridharan, & Ritchie, 2010). In resource-constrained contexts, disadvantaged groups rely on reciprocity, shared resources, and extended kinship networks as key mechanisms for survival and resilience (Toledo-López et al., 2012). Studies conducted in highly disadvantaged contexts have demonstrated that the norm of reciprocity is a driving factor in promoting entrepreneurship and empowerment in local communities (Venugopal, Viswanathan, & Jung, 2015). When studying populations that are both extremely impoverished and vulnerable, subsistence researchers frequently stress the significance of cultivating mu-

tually beneficial relationships (Viswanathan, Sridharan, & Ritchie, 2010), which produce better long-term economic outcomes (Venugopal & Viswanathan, 2021). Drawing on Pai and Tsai (2016), we defined the norm of reciprocity as community support, community informativeness, and community enjoyment in the context of social banking, whose business customers are primarily ultra-poor women entrepreneurs. Community support refers to the linkage among ultra-poor women entrepreneurs who are customers of a social bank, which generates and maintains an expectation of reciprocation in their business relationships (Pai & Tsai, 2016). Community informativeness is the extent to which women entrepreneurs perceive the level of helpfulness (e.g., usefulness, relevance, accuracy, and reliability) of information provided by other entrepreneurs within the community (Pai & Tsai, 2016). Finally, enjoyment refers to the degree to which ultra-poor women entrepreneurs who are customers of a social bank perceive interactions and activities with other entrepreneurs as enjoyable (Pai & Tsai, 2016). Our research suggests that the social bank-hosted reciprocity norm can influence the perceived empowerment of ultra-poor women entrepreneurs involved in social banking.

Empowerment among women entrepreneurs is an intrinsic motivational state composed of four interrelated cognitive dimensions—meaning, competence, self-determination, and impact—which capture the perceived significance of work, confidence in task performance, autonomy in action, and belief in influencing outcomes. Together, these dimensions collectively define the construct of customer empowerment (Spreitzer, 1995; Spreitzer & Mishra, 1998).

For ultra-poor women business owners, perceptions of reciprocity have a number of emotional and mental consequences that should significantly affect their experiences across all four dimensions of empowerment. First, when ultra-poor women entrepreneurs are shown reciprocity—in the form of support, enjoyment, and information—from their communities, they perceive that the value of their efforts is being recognized. As a result, their sense of accomplishment and pride in their job grows. Reciprocal interactions within social banking groups reinforce positive self-perceptions among ultra-poor women entrepreneurs, thereby enhancing the perceived meaningfulness of their entrepreneurial activities. Furthermore, reciprocity—expressed through community support, information exchange, and relational enjoyment—strengthens women entrepreneurs' confidence in their knowledge base and professional competence, supporting their effective engagement in entrepreneurial work (Christens & Lin, 2014; Viswanathan et al.,

2021). We anticipated that, as a consequence, female entrepreneurs would develop greater self-confidence and competence in their professional lives. Third, when female business owners obtain support, information, and enjoyment from the community through social banking, their likelihood of vulnerability decreases. Consequently, they are more open to taking risks because doing so increases their feelings of autonomy (Baer et al., 2015; Salamon & Robinson, 2008), which results in greater self-determination and impact. When all four factors are combined in the social banking context, ultra-poor women entrepreneurs feel more empowered due to the impact of reciprocity. Thus, we posited:

H6. Reciprocity has a significant positive impact on empowerment.

2.6 Mediating Effects

Our study was aimed at exploring the role played by trust (attitude) in the empowerment of ultra-poor women (outcome) through respect and reciprocity (behaviour) in B2B relationships. We thus propose an attitude-behaviour-outcome model by positing trust as an attitude that influences the perceptions of respectful and reciprocal behaviours and results in relationship performance/outcomes (i.e., the empowerment of women). The extant relationship marketing literature has explored various relationship outcomes through relationship quality studies (Crosby et al., 1990; Hani et al., 2021; Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Palmatier et al., 2006). The non-financial nature of relationship outcomes, such as empowerment, reflects the extent of the changes taking place in customers' wellbeing due to the perceptions of B2B relationship dynamics (Hani et al., 2022; Selnes & Salis, 2003). We conceptualized respect and reciprocity as mediators in the model because trust has both direct and indirect impacts on women's empowerment. Thus, we posited:

H7.1. Respect mediates the relationship between trust and empowerment.

H7.2. Reciprocity mediates the relationship between trust and empowerment.

3. Methods

3.1 Research Setting

Our research setting was Bangladesh, where nearly half (49.6%) of the population is ultra-poor (UNDP, 2005, 2009). According to the Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI), an estimated 58% of the population in this developing country is poor in multiple dimensions (e.g., food insecurity, living standards, education, and health) (Alkire & Santos, 2010). Specifically, we focused on ultra-poor women entrepreneurs who were business customers of the Grameen Bank. These women entrepreneurs were the only breadwinners in their households, irrespective of the presence of other dependent adults (e.g., husbands, partners, or children). The Grameen Bank is a pioneering social bank serving over 10.22 million customers in rural Bangladesh and has disbursed approximately US\$35.35 billion in microcredit, primarily to ultra-poor women. Its empowerment-focused model now operates in 50 countries worldwide (Grameen Bank, 2022; Hussain, Maskooki, & Gunasekaran, 2022).

3.2 Scale Development

We adapted scales from past studies, such as the trust scale, which includes ability (Coulter, 2002), benevolence (Mayer et al., 1995), and integrity (Ganesan, 1994); the respect scale, which includes recognition (Bourassa et al., 2018), responsibility (Ali, 2011) and empathy (Bourassa et al., 2018; Simon, 2013); and the reciprocity scale (Pai, 2015), which includes community support, enjoyment, and community informativeness (see Appendix 1). In order to measure the outcome construct, we measured customer empowerment using meaning, competence, self-determination, and impact (Spreitzer, 1995). The control variables included age, location, experience, and business types. All the exogenous and endogenous constructs, except the control variables, were measured using a 7-point Likert scale. We first developed a questionnaire in English, translated it into the local language (Bangla), and retranslated it into English until a panel of experts proficient in both languages confirmed alignment between the versions (Andaleeb, 2001). We then pre-tested the initial version of the locally translated questionnaire with 33 respondents to check the items, scale format, questionnaire layout, and overall structure. In the next phase, we conducted a pilot test of the questionnaire by collecting cross-sectional data from 51 respondents to assess the measurement properties and nomological chain.

3.3 Data collection

In 2020, through a Bangladeshi professional market research agency, we approached 721 ultra-poor women entrepreneurs who met the screening criteria of gender (female), age (18+), and at least three years of experience in business ventures. Of these, 361 completed the survey questionnaire. After removing spurious data identified through quality checks (e.g., speeders, flat liners, and missing values), we obtained 301 complete datasets suitable for analysis. The diversity of our sample was ensured through various location, age, business type, and experience (see Table 1).

Table 1. Respondents' demographic profiles

Items	Categories	%	Items	Categories	%
Location (Division / State)	Dhaka	20	Age	18-25	15
	Rajshahi	13		26-33	27
	Chittagong	13		34-41	25
	Khulna	11		42-49	18
	Sylhet	13		50+	15
	Barisal	10			
	Rangpur	09			
	Mymensingh	11			
Experience in social banking	years 3-5	44	Business Types	Farming	31
	+ years 5	56		Knitting	25
				Retail	29
		Others		15	

3.4 Data Analysis

To estimate the higher-order trust, respect, reciprocity, and empowerment constructs, we applied Partial Least Squares (PLS) based Structural Equation Modelling (SEM). Due to the reflective nature of the higher-order constructs, we took a repeated indicator approach (Becker et al., 2012; Sarstedt et al., 2019; Wetzels et al., 2009) under consistent PLS (PLSc) (Dijkstra & Henseler, 2015). In addition to the algorithmic benefits of traditional PLS, which include factor identification and factor determinacy, PLSc consistently estimates indicator loadings, path coefficients, and constructs correlations, with goodness of fit estimates (Dijkstra & Henseler, 2015). Indeed, PLS tends to underestimate the correlation coefficients and overestimate the loadings in linear factor models (Dijkstra & Henseler, 2015). PLSc ensures corrections in estimates when PLS is used for reflective models, specifically in indicator loadings and path coefficients, when the number of reflective indicators and observations is large—in Wold's (1982) words, "consistency at large". Therefore, to estimate the path weighting scheme for inside approximation, we applied a non-parametric bootstrapping with 10,000 replications using SmartPLS 4 (Ringle, Wende, & Becker, 2022).

3.5 Measurement Model

As part of assessing the measurement properties of the second-order model, we first estimated the loading and composite reliability (CR) and average variance extracted (AVE) of each first-order construct (ability, benevolence, integrity, responsibility, recognition, empathy, customer support, community support, community informativeness, community enjoyment, meaning, competence, self-determination, and impact). The findings (Table 2) show that all the loadings were found to be greater than 0.70, thus proving the significance of each item ($p < 0.001$) and the reliability of the scale. The values found for CR (> 0.80) and AVE (> 0.50) ensured convergent validity as they exceeded their respective cut-off values (Fornell & Larcker, 1981; Hair Jr. et al., 2017; Chin, 2010). As the control variables were measured using formative items, we estimated the weights and variance inflation factors (VIF), which were found to fall within the threshold (≤ 5), thus not providing any evidence of collinearity.

Table 2: Assessment of the First-Order, Reflective Model

Reflective Constructs	Items	Loadings	CR	AVE
(Meaning (MEAN	MEAN1	0.895	0.915	0.782
	MEAN2	0.889		
	MEAN3	0.869		
(Competence (COMP	COMP1	0.915	0.924	0.803
	COMP2	0.914		
	COMP3	0.858		
(Self-determination (SEDE	SEDE1	0.908	0.937	0.832
	SEDE2	0.937		
	SEDE3	0.891		
(Impact (IMPA	IMPA1	0.944	0.961	0.892
	IMPA2	0.942		
	IMPA3	0.947		
(Ability (ABIL	ABIL1	0.919	0.930	0.768
	ABIL2	0.855		
	ABIL3	0.827		
	ABIL4	0.901		
(Benevolence (BENE	BENE1	0.911	0.928	0.764
	BENE2	0.876		
	BENE3	0.845		
	BENE4	0.864		
(Integrity (INTE	INTE1	0.869	0.920	0.741
	INTE2	0.872		
	INTE3	0.844		
	INTE4	0.858		
(Responsibility (RESP	RESP1	0.909	0.923	0.800
	RESP2	0.873		
	RESP3	0.900		

Reflective Constructs	Items	Loadings	CR	AVE
(Recognition (RECO	RECO ₁	0.918	0.911	0.774
	RECO ₂	0.878		
	RECO ₃	0.842		
(Empathy (EMPA	EMPA ₁	0.883	0.895	0.741
	EMPA ₂	0.847		
	EMPA ₃	0.851		
(Community Support (COSU	COSU ₁	0.933	0.924	0.802
	COSU ₂	0.893		
	COSU ₃	0.859		
Community Informativeness (COIN)	COIN ₁	0.884	0.898	0.747
	COIN ₂	0.854		
	COIN ₃	0.854		
(Community Enjoyment (COEN	COEN ₁	0.931	0.933	0.822
	COEN ₂	0.877		
	COEN ₃	0.907		
Formative construct	Items	Weights	t-value	VIF
(Control variables (COVA	Location	0.215	1.202	1.342
	Age	0.196	1.415	1.231
	Business Experience	0.337	1.236	1.222
		0.336	1.397	1.421

In order to examine discriminant validity, we first checked the cross-loadings and ensured that each construct had a relatively significant amount of higher loadings of its own items than other ones (Chin, 2010; Hair Jr. et al., 2017a). Second, we estimated the square root of the AVEs in the diagonals in Table 3, which were found to exceed the values of the coefficients in the correlation matrix (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Finally, our examination of the heterotrait-monotrait (HTMT) criterion provided sufficient evidence of discriminant validity, as all the values were found to be lower than 0.90 (Henseler, Ringle, & Sarstedt, 2015).

Table 3: Correlations of LVs, AVEs and Descriptive Statistics*

Construct	Mean	S.D	MEAN	COMP	SEDE	IMPA	ABIL	BENE	INTE	RESP	RECO	EMPA	COSU	COIN	COEN	COVA
(Meaning (MEAN	5.852	0.761	0.884													
Competence ((COMP	5.911	0.811	0.484	0.896												
Self-determination ((SEDE	5.788	0.792	0.492	0.466	0.912											
(Impact (IMPA	5.895	0.754	0.511	0.489	0.433	0.944										
(Ability (ABIL	5.756	0.691	0.441	0.465	0.391	0.511	0.876									
Benevolence ((BENE	5.876	0.675	0.423	0.431	0.411	0.452	0.426	0.874								
(Integrity (INTE	5.923	0.832	0.455	0.465	0.322	0.490	0.409	0.355	0.861							
Responsibility ((RESP	5.955	0.851	0.411	0.382	0.476	0.470	0.461	0.391	0.412	0.894						
Recognition ((RECO	5.833		0.422	0.474	0.481	0.432	0.439	0.411	0.432	0.422	0.880					
(Empathy (EMPA	5.791	0.765	0.391	0.444	0.511	0.488	0.462	0.387	0.411	0.432	0.522	0.861				
Community Support (COSU	5.888	0.763	0.431	0.491	0.468	0.432	0.420	0.367	0.391	0.411	0.521	0.412	0.895			
Community Informativeness ((COIN	5.895	0.712	0.351	0.432	0.455	0.492	0.488	0.391	0.467	0.466	0.533	0.401	0.354	0.864		
Community Employment (COEN	5.678	0.732	0.422	0.476	0.489	0.493	0.513	0.435	0.455	0.512	0.521	0.422	0.344	0.387	0.906	
Control Variables (COVA	.n.a	.n.a	0.032	0.043	0.021	0.112	0.192	0.111	0.231		0.091	0.075	0.084	0.09	0.063	.n.a

*square root of AVE on the diagonal

We identified empowerment, trust, respect, and reciprocity as second-order constructs. As part of assessing the higher-order measurement properties, we found all the path coefficients between the second- and first-order constructs to be significant at $p < 0.001$ (Table 4) (Becker et al., 2012; Sarstedt et al., 2019; Wetzels et al., 2009). For example, the outcome construct empowerment was found to be reflected by meaning ($\beta = 0.710$), competence ($\beta = 0.809$), self-determination ($\beta = 0.756$), and impact ($\beta = 0.601$). Similarly, trust was found to be manifested by ability ($\beta = 0.773$), benevolence ($\beta = 0.776$), and integrity ($\beta = 0.749$); respect to be reflected by responsibility ($\beta = 0.765$), recognition ($\beta = 0.754$), and empathy ($\beta = 0.769$), and reciprocity to be represented by community support ($\beta = 0.752$), community informativeness ($\beta = 0.792$) and community enjoyment ($\beta = 0.765$). The significance of the path coefficients between the second and first-order constructs confirmed the robustness of the hierarchical measurement model.

Table 4: Assessment of the higher-order model

Models	Latent constructs	First-order dimensions	β		t-statistic
Second-order	Empowerment	Meaning	0.710		14.622
		Competence	0.809		39.416
		Self-determination	0.756		21.306
		Impact	0.601		8.1660
Models	Latent constructs	First-order dimensions	β	R square	t-statistic
Second-order	Trust	Ability	0.773	0.768	28.150
		Benevolence	0.776	0.764	29.994
		Integrity	0.749	0.741	17.636
	Respect	Responsibility	0.765	0.800	31.457
		Recognition	0.754	0.774	23.442
		Empathy	0.769	0.769	17.954
	Reciprocity	Community support	0.752	0.802	24.165
		Customer informativeness	0.792	0.747	26.478
		Community enjoyment	0.765	0.822	33.425

3.6 Structural Model

In order to test our hypotheses, we estimated the path coefficients (β) and the coefficient of determination (R^2). The results (Table 5) show that trust has a significant and positive impact on respect ($\beta = 0.630, p < 0.001$), reciprocity ($R^2 = 0.271, p < 0.001$), and empowerment ($\beta = 0.248, p < 0.001$). Thus, the findings support H1, H2, and H3. As part of testing the impact of respect on the research model, the results confirm its significant and positive impact on reciprocity ($\beta = 0.432, p < 0.001$) and empowerment ($R^2 = 0.268, p < 0.001$). Similarly, the findings also provide evidence for the impact of reciprocity on empowerment ($\beta = 0.253, p < 0.001$). Thus, H4, H5, and H6 were found to be supported. In terms of the coefficient of determination, trust was found to explain 53% of the variance of respect, 52% of the variance of reciprocity, and 52% of the variance of empowerment through the mediating effects of respect and reciprocity. Following Cohen's (1988) guidelines to assess goodness of fit, these findings provide evidence of strong effects ($R^2 = 0.350$). Drawing on Hayes, Preacher, and Myers (2011) and on Preacher and Hayes (2008), the findings on indirect effects (Table 6) confirm the partial mediating roles of respect ($\beta = 0.221, p < 0.001$) and reciprocity ($R^2 = 0.069, p < 0.001$). Respect was found to explain 48%, and reciprocity to explain 21% of the Variance Accounted For (VAF) to measure the size of indirect effects (Akter et al., 2011).

Table 5: Results of the structural model

Hypotheses	Main Model		Path coefficients	Stand. Error	.t-stat
H1	Trust	Respect	0.630	0.089	7.091
H2	Trust	Reciprocity	0.271	0.067	4.054
H3	Trust	Empowerment	0.248	0.065	3.796
H4	Respect	Reciprocity	0.432	0.075	5.764
H5	Respect	Empowerment	0.268	0.061	4.389
H6	Reciprocity	Empowerment	0.253	0.069	3.671

Table 6: Results of the mediation testing

Hypotheses	Mediating paths	Indirect effect	t-value	Significance ((p<0.001
H7a	Trust - Respect- Empowerment	0.169	3.318	0.001
H7b	Trust-Reciprocity-Empowerment	0.062	2.714	0.007

4. Discussion

4.1 Summary of findings

The findings confirm that trust, respect, and reciprocity are significant antecedents of customer empowerment in ultra-poor settings. The second-order trust construct was found to be reflected by three first-order subdimensions. The most important of these, in terms of variance explained, was found to be the perceived ability of a social bank to serve its customers (77%), followed by benevolence (78%) and integrity in banking operations (74%). However, all these subdimensions were found to be equally significant in their contribution to the trust construct because the magnitudes of the differences, in terms of variance explained, were found to be very close to each other. Similarly, respect was found to be reflected by the responsibility of a social bank to support the needs of ultra-poor women entrepreneurs (80%), the recognition of their unique business endeavours (77%), and the perceived empathic ability to understand each perspective (77%). Finally, reciprocity was found to be manifested by the intrinsic enjoyment experienced by ultra-poor women through their participation in community meetings (82%), community support (80%), and community informativeness (75%). The findings also confirm the significant impact of trust, respect, and reciprocity on customer empowerment; in this nomological chain, respect and reciprocity play key mediating roles. Customer empowerment was found to be significantly manifested by four subdimensions. The most important of these was found to be competence in running a business (81%), followed by self-determination (76%), understanding the meaning of a venture (71%), and impact on business (60%). The strength of the nomological net is evidenced

by the significant impact of trust on customer empowerment (52%) through the influence of respect (53%) and reciprocity (52%) (see Table 5).

4.2 Theoretical Contributions

The aim of this study was to investigate how relationship quality dynamics empower ultra-poor women entrepreneurs based in a developing country who are most susceptible to income shocks, food insecurity, and natural disasters. Our findings fill a gap in the extant relationship marketing literature, which often suggests that marketing programmes often 'miss' or 'exclude' the ultra-poor segment of the market. Specifically, our findings clarify how trust among ultra-poor women entrepreneurs can be built through the customization ability to offer loans to be invested in the business, benevolent credit programmes aimed at serving the best interests of clients, and integrity in financial exchanges (e.g., credit repayment schedules). The findings clearly highlight the role played by trust as a building block in the establishment of a relationship aimed at reducing economic risk and subsequent stress between ultra-poor women entrepreneurs and a social bank.

By applying social exchange theory and modelling the impact of trust on two other relationship dimensions (i.e., respect and reciprocity), we uncovered the relationship dyad and provided a multifaceted view of relationships in relation to capturing customer empowerment in ultra-poor settings. Our findings extend relationship marketing theory by pioneering the premise that the customer empowerment generated from B2B relationships stems not only from trust but also from the interaction among the relational drivers (respect and reciprocity). As "no single or best relationship mediator can capture the full essence" of a relationship (Palmatier et al., 2006, p.150), our findings confirm respect and reciprocity as significant partial mediators in the theoretical model.

Although the relationship between trust and relationship quality is well understood, little research has hitherto explored the connection between trust and other context-specific relational elements (i.e., respect and reciprocity) and their specific effects on relationship outcomes (e.g., customer empowerment) in ultra-poor settings. Our findings extend relationship marketing theory by identifying the key mediating roles played by respect and reciprocity in identifying the relational content of exchange and empowering ultra-poor business customers. In relation to resource-poor settings, extant relationship marketing theory should include respect, reciprocity, and other context-specific

elements to improve the model of the impact of relationship quality on outcomes. Any omission of context-specific relational elements may yield misleading performance-relevant information. The path-dependent nature of the nomological net asserts that “relational variables develop together, growing and declining in parallel” (Palmatier et al., 2013, p.27; cf. Hibbard et al., 2001). The dynamic nature of this relationship network identifies trust as a key antecedent and suggests that the levels of respect, reciprocity, and empowerment appear to depend on the direction, rate, and level of change in trust.

In line with the previous relationship literature, our findings reveal the missing ‘relationship attributes’ between a social bank and its ultra-poor women entrepreneur customers and confirm the multidimensional perspectives of trust (ability, benevolence, integrity), respect (responsibility, recognition, empathy), and reciprocity (community support, community informativeness, and community enjoyment). The integration of these relational perspectives yields three higher-order quality dimensions of business customer empowerment in resource-poor settings and may reveal a more holistic constellation of relational subdimensions. This aligns with past literature in that relationship quality is multidimensional, context-specific, and hierarchical, and each dimension yields specific relationship strengths that empower customers. Given the depth and breadth of deprivation faced by women in ultra-poor settings, the virtual circle of the relationship-empowerment network could deliver far more effective theoretical connections for women’s empowerment in such settings.

4.3 Practical Implications

Our findings have several practical implications with regard to relationship dynamics and women’s empowerment in ultra-poor markets. To begin with, they show how a social bank could create, organize, and scale up its activities, focusing on relationship quality. To effectively manage relationship dynamics, social bank managers must deepen their understanding of local socio-economic conditions, cultural contexts, consumption practices, product needs, and marketing processes, as such insights are essential for breaking persistent cycles of poverty. Our findings show that social banks can earn the trust of ultra-poor women entrepreneurs by repeatedly supporting them and embedding ability, benevolence, and integrity in their business model, specifically in the face of uncertainties (e.g., conflicts, natural disasters, and poverty). Our findings further reveal that trust perceived by ultra-poor women entrepreneurs significantly enhances their sense of

respect, which in turn motivates the continuation of exchange relationships. This highlights the importance of designing responsible and empathetic banking offerings that can help navigate uncertainty. However, these relationally embedded business models remain vulnerable and may weaken in the presence of relational conflict or when banks fail to recognize and incorporate the perspectives and lived experiences of ultra-poor women entrepreneurs. A respectful relationship with these long-neglected customers can endow them with a safety net against the tyranny of poverty by recognizing their dignity and status. Our findings show that managers should reflect respect by opening up a line of responsible communication in order to explain their social banking policies and actions in the context of negative perceptions. Our findings also highlight how empathetic offerings, in the form of respect, can provide a buffer against damaging relationships and foster reciprocity at both the organization-to-customer and customer-to-customer levels. Moreover, by disentangling the effects of trust and respect, our study sheds light on the distinct yet complementary roles these constructs play in fostering reciprocity in ultra-poor market settings. This is critical for managers to design support groups among customers for conflict resolution, emotional assistance, and approval. Our findings show that community informativeness and community enjoyment are instrumental in social banking, which can be deliberately designed by managers to embrace diversity of thought, the inclusion of marginal groups, and equity in dealings for this vulnerable customer group. As "the ultra-poor are not a homogenous group" (Matin et al., 2008, p. 27), this finding helps managers gain deeper insight into the challenges, realities, and lived experiences of women entrepreneurs (e.g., Prakash & Masud Rana, 2006; Hani et al, 2024). Finally, our findings provide managers with inputs adequate to the development of relationship-driven strategies aimed at supporting underappreciated, undercapitalized, and under-recognized ultra-poor women entrepreneurs. Our study's critical insights into the relational interactions among trust, respect, and reciprocity can help managers develop empowerment programmes for ultra-poor customers. The interactions among relational drivers provide a new empowerment message for social bank managers in ultra-poor markets. By embracing a triple-bottom-line approach in their business models, social banks can effectively promote women's empowerment. This approach clarifies the purpose of their ventures within the community, acknowledges the often-overlooked entrepreneurial talents of women, celebrates their strong motivation for independence, and emphasizes the positive social development impact of their work (Hani et al., 2024). Overall, our findings point at the significance of relationship-driven

marketing practices, which might prompt social banks to hire and train more staff on relationship formation mechanisms, women empowerment avenues, marketplace literacy, and psychological well-being.

4.4 Limitations, Future Research Directions, and Conclusions

Our study was based on single cross-sectional data collected from women entrepreneurs in ultra-poor settings in Bangladesh. Future researchers could extend the investigation to other developing countries as well as to developed ones, as social banks operate in this target market in both settings. Comparative studies conducted in both contexts could help portray any social, demographic, psychographic, and behavioural differences in relation to capturing relationship dynamics and their effects on empowerment. Future research could explore constructs related to quality of life, situational control, and psychological well-being. Apart from economic development, future research could explore political participation and the basic rights to education, healthcare, and freedom (Duflo, 2011). Focussing on the sources of deprivation faced by women entrepreneurs in ultra-poor settings, future studies could explore a variety of factors that inhibit relationship formation—such as humiliation, disrespect, social exclusion and abuse, access to literacy, lack of confidence, religious practices, and an inability to visualize future outcomes. Although our findings on reciprocity clearly highlight the role played by marketplace information, future studies could explore relationship-driven marketplace literacy, as “more effective consumer behavior leads to saving money, obtaining better-quality products, avoiding being cheated, and processing marketing information to make the right decision” (Viswanathan et al., 2021, p.116). As empowerment is one of the critical constructs in international development (Cornwall, 2016), it would be important to explore context-specific foundational feminist thinking in relation to empowerment, along with multi-disciplinary and multi-country perspectives in various ultra-poor settings. Future studies could also involve mixed methods—particularly the triangulation of various volumes of big data—to develop a deeper understanding of complex relationship-empowerment dynamics. Although methodological diversity is a common subject in the women’s empowerment literature, marketing research has yet to embrace methodological pluralism to advance, sustain, and create a cumulative body of knowledge for ultra-poor markets. Our findings evidence that women’s empowerment can significantly influence development. Thus, future studies could explore the role played by policymakers in paving the way for market mechanisms and exchange conditions suited to ensure level playing

Appendix 1: operationalization of constructs

Constructs	Sub-constructs	Definitions	Item labels	Items
Customer empowerment	Meaning	It refers to the significance of a business venture to an ultra-poor woman entrepreneur.	MEAN1	.The business I do is very important to me
			MEAN2	My business activities are personally meaningful to me
			MEAN3	.The business I do is meaningful to me
	Competence	It refers to the ability of an ultra-poor woman entrepreneur to successfully run her business	COMP1	I am confident about my ability to do my business.
			COMP2	I am self-assured about my capabilities to perform my work activities
			COMP3	I have mastered the skills necessary for my business
	Self-determination	It refers to the extent of autonomy of an ultra-poor woman entrepreneur in doing business with the borrowed money from the (Grameen Bank (GB	SEDE1	I have significant autonomy in determining how I do my business
			SEDE2	I can decide on my own how to go about doing my business
			SEDE3	I have considerable opportunity for independence and freedom in how I do my business
Impact	It refers to the extent of influence of an ultra-poor woman entrepreneur in managing goals of her business	IMPA1	My impact on what happens in my business is large	
		IMPA2	I have a great deal of control over what happens in my business	
		IMPA3	I have significant influence over what happens in my business	

Constructs	Sub-constructs	Definitions	Item labels	Items
Trust	Ability	The degree to which the GB has the ability (or willingness) to meet ultra-poor women customers' needs (Coulter, 2002)	ABIL1	The GB provides customized solutions to address my needs
			ABIL2	The GB provides me with well throughout alternatives to suit my unique needs
			ABIL3	The GB keeps my dealing with them confidential
			ABIL4	The GB provides me with customized advice on how I should invest my money
Trust	Benevolence	The extent to which the GB is believed to do good for the women entrepreneur in ultra-poor settings (Mayer et al., 1995)	BENE1	The GB cares for me
			BENE2	My needs and desires are very important to the GB
			BENE3	In a time of need, the GB will extend its hand to help me
			BENE4	The GB has policies that favour my best interest
	Integrity	The extent to which GB has the required expertise to perform the job effectively and reliably (Ganesan, 1994)	INTE1	Promises made by the microfinance institution (GB) are reliable
			INTE2	The GB does not make false claims to me
			INTE3	The GB is open to dealing with me
			INTE4	The GB is very prompt in answering my question

Constructs	Sub-constructs	Definitions	Item labels	Items
Respect	Responsibility	The degree to which GB helps an ultra-poor women customer to pursue goals by supporting their .(needs (Ali, 2011	RESP1	The GB responds to me as part of their responsibility
			RESP2	.The GB respects me as an important customer
			RESP3	.The GB wants to hear my comment and opinion
	Recognition	The degree to which the GB treats every ultra-poor woman entrepreneur as an individual business customer and acknowledges the objectives and goals (Bourassa et .(al., 2018	RECO1	The GB acknowledges that I am unique as an .individual business owner
			RECO2	The GB treats me well irrespective of my social, .economic and educational background
			RECO3	The GB makes an effort to recognize my goals .and objectives
	Empathy	It refers to the GB's ability to understand the situation from an ultra-poor woman customer's point of view and make decisions or act considering the feeling and thoughts of the customer (Bourassa et .(sa et al., 2018; Simon, 2013	EMPA1	The GB employee puts himself or herself in my .shoes while giving me suggestions
			EMPA2	The GB employee tries to understand my needs .by adopting my perspective
			EMPA3	Overall, the GB employee has a high level of em- .pathy with respect to my needs as a customer

Constructs	Sub-constructs	Definitions	Item labels	Items
Reciprocity	Community Support	The degree to which the GB fulfils its ultra-poor women customers' needs for emotional support, affiliation, esteem, and approval ((Pai, 2015	COSU1	The GB community members respond to my ideas quickly
			COSU2	When I raise questions or concerns, my fellow GB community members address them immediately
			COSU3	Help is available from the GB community members when I have a problem
	Community Informativeness	It is the degree to which the GB community offers information that members perceive as useful ((Pai 2015	COIN1	The information provided by the GB community is useful
			COIN2	The information provided by the GB community is helpful
			COIN3	The information provided by the GB community is resourceful
	Community Enjoyment	It reflects the intrinsic reward by the ultra-poor women entrepreneur community during past participation processes (Pai 2015	COEN1	Participation in GB's weekly community meeting is enjoyable
			COEN2	Participation in the GB's weekly community meeting is exciting
			COEN3	Participation in the GB's weekly community meeting is interesting

Appendix 1: operationalization of constructs

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