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Emotions and Resilience in Saudi Women's Digital Entrepreneurship during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract: The adoption of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 5 on gender equality and the growth in the number of women entrepreneurs in the MENA region is likely to change the rules of the game. A growing body of research is addressing this and the factors pertaining to this growth, including digital entrepreneurship. However, little remains known about the growth and resilience of women-owned digital microbusinesses during adverse social and economic disruptions, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, in Saudi Arabia. Hence, this study explores the impact of emotions on the resilience of women entrepreneurs in “Saudi Arabia in transformation”, to explore the impact this has on shaping the digital entrepreneurship journeys of women entrepreneurs. A qualitative longitudinal approach was utilized to capture the processual nature of entrepreneurship during crises, and the broaden-and-build theory offered the theoretical framing for the study. Of the eight women-owned digital microbusinesses participating in this study, six survived the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings show that digital entrepreneurship contributed to sustaining microbusinesses during adversity, and entrepreneurs motivated by passion are also infused with positive emotions and positive thoughts and actions, empowering their resilience, despite the adversity.

Keywords: emotion; resilience; microbusinesses; women entrepreneurs; Saudi Arabia



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1. Introduction

The United Nations General Assembly approved the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015 to enhance sustainable development for people, prosperity, and the planet. These SDGs address the needs of current and forthcoming stakeholders by promoting the organization, operationalization, and integration of sustainability [1,2]. Pertinent to our study is UN SDG 5, which focuses upon gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls. However, similar to all 17 SDGs, SDG 5 cannot be addressed in isolation and is instead interrelated to the aims and objectives of other SDGs. For instance, while SDG 1 focuses on “no poverty”, and SDG 2 aims to achieve “zero hunger”, SDG 4 emphasizes quality education, SDG 8 aims for decent work and economic growth, and SDG 11 focuses on sustainable cities and communities [2,3]. Saudi Arabia's government has gained international recognition for its comprehensive program of gender reforms and adoption of the principles of UN SDG 5 on gender equality. For example, the World Bank's Women, Law and Business Report [4] ranks Saudi Arabia first in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and second in the Arab World for twelve laws relating to women. To protect women, these legislative changes include the elimination of discrimination based on gender in employment and access to financial services to safeguard women [4].

Digital entrepreneurship offers a “way out” for female entrepreneurs as it enables them to work free of gendered boundaries imposed by patriarchal Arab society and culture [5], and therefore contributes to the achievement of UN SDG 5. In fact, female entrepreneurs in the Arab world generally agree that technology is a rare occupational space where gender

norms can be beaten [6] and, potentially, where economic vulnerabilities resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic can also be overcome. In the Arab world, one in every three technology startups is founded or led by a woman [7], compared to the global average of one in every ten technology entrepreneurs [8]. Several explanations are advanced to explain the presence of Arab women in digital technologies. These include the newness of the technology industry in the Arab world and the tech-savvy age demographic highly engaged in the digital economy [5]. Many of the recent changes have helped nations in the Arab world to adopt measures to realize the UN SDG 5 focused upon gender equality [5]. Central to these efforts is the digitalization of commerce and strengthened internet capacity to reach wider markets and customers. Within this study, we focus upon the under-researched context of Saudi Arabia, where internet penetration in January 2020 was 97.8% [9] and where policy reforms addressing gender equality and women's rights have been sweeping the nation since 2016 [10].

Prior to the introduction of the reform measured in 2016, encapsulating the Kingdom's Vision 2030 strategy, women entrepreneurs faced unique challenges compared to those in advanced liberal economies [10]. These challenges restricted women's independence, mobility, career choices, and employment opportunities [7]. However, now, the gender reforms have changed this, and research accounting for the impact of this on women's digital entrepreneurship is needed. This research responds to calls for exploring how digital technologies impact the growth and resilience of small businesses, and calls for a better understanding of resilience and women's digital entrepreneurship [11]. Hence, this exploratory longitudinal study investigates the influence of digital entrepreneurship in promoting the resilience of Saudi women-owned microbusinesses.

In particular, the primary purpose of this study is to explore the impact of the motivations, emotions, and other catalysts of Saudi women entrepreneurs upon their resilience and that of their digital enterprises. As such, our research question asks how the resilience of Saudi women digital entrepreneurs is influenced by their motivations and catalysts.

Saudi Arabia's ongoing transition and economic, social, and political transformations offer an opportune moment to examine how digitalization affects entrepreneurial processes and outcomes in this high-income, non-OECD country. Furthermore, women's contributions to general prosperity have become increasingly recognized in many Saudi homes. As a consequence, a behavioral shift in tandem with the implementation of the newly appointed regulations is witnessed [12] and experienced by both women and men residing and working in Saudi Arabia.

Additionally, Saudi Arabia's preventative COVID-19 pandemic processes to safeguard residents, its control measures to prevent the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as its supportive mechanisms to foster the resilience of entrepreneurship during the COVID-19 pandemic, positioned Saudi Arabia as one of the pioneering nations in the battle against the COVID-19 pandemic [13]. Furthermore, Ducheck [14] reported a gap in the general understanding of the antecedents and drivers of resilience, especially in unstable economic and social contexts. Advancing research in these areas will enable the enhancement of our understandings on business resilience in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) [15], especially during crises and disruption. This study contributes to bridging this gap by exploring the resilience of women-owned digital enterprises operating in Saudi Arabia before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. To do so effectively, the broaden-and-build theory is adopted due to its emphasis on how thinking positively helps individuals overcome adversities. More specifically, the broaden-and-build theory emphasizes the importance of sustaining a set of pleasant emotions, such as joy, curiosity, contentment, and passion, to help individuals not only cope with adversity, but also grow. As such, this study addresses the emotional aspects that influence the resilience and adaptive capacity of digital Saudi women entrepreneurs as they navigated the COVID-19 pandemic.

In exploring the role of digital entrepreneurship, emotions, and resilience in shaping entrepreneurial women's journeys between 2018 and 2021 and the subsequent influence on business growth, this study contributes to digital entrepreneurship and entrepreneurial

resilience research (e.g., [16–18]), as these do not address the gendered aspects of digital entrepreneurship and small business resilience, especially during adverse circumstances such as the COVID-19 pandemic and in non-US/Eurocentric contexts.

In specific, this study makes a significant contribution to the research on small business resilience by identifying a set of digital women entrepreneurs' adaptive mechanisms for dealing with disruption. Entrepreneurs are leading the way for the transfer of old business practices into an increasingly digitalized environment, notably during COVID-19, by providing solutions and chances for doing so. As a result, given the limited current research, there is an urgent need for further research on this topic [18]. The last contribution this study makes to the literature on digital entrepreneurship and microbusiness resilience is that it uses the broaden-and-build theory to explore and analyze the journeys of female digital entrepreneurs as they pave their own ways to grow resilient businesses. Within the broaden-and-build theory, "love" is a fundamental emotional catalyst [19]. In focusing upon "passion" in this study, we respond to recommendations for further research into the impact of diverse emotional catalysts of the same valence, and their varying effects on outcomes depending on what event or item prompts that emotion [20,21]. "Passion" was established in both phase 1 and 2 of the data collection, where it was reported by the participants as their key motive for sustaining and growing their businesses. This finding is aligned with Alhothali [22].

The theoretical framework embedding the broaden-and-build theory within resilience and digital entrepreneurship will now be presented. This is followed by a description of the context of the research, the methodology employed in this study, and the findings and discussion. The paper concludes with a set of future research directions and implications for policy and practice.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Business Resilience and Entrepreneurship

In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, the act of being resilient has lately attracted the attention of scholars and practitioners interested in entrepreneurship, organization management [23], and entrepreneurial ecosystems [24,25]. The extant literature has long recognized resilience as a critical feature in the entrepreneur's personality and character [26]. Furthermore, it is recognized as an essential aspect in the entrepreneurial process [27], driving the organization to achieve successful outcomes [28]. Burnard and Bhamra claim that resilience is a business feature that is an outcome of the interaction between a particular sociotechnical aspect and the operating environment of a system [29]. Further research suggests that the formalization of resilience is linked to an increase in responsiveness to extreme events [27].

A considerable amount of research has also been devoted to understanding the essence of resilience (e.g., [29,30]). Regardless, it has been argued that the concept remains fuzzy [31], and its definition is inconsistent, especially with regard to its temporal phases [29,30,32]. This inhibits the usefulness of the resilience concept, and calls for further research, focus, and refinement. Early attempts to define resilience date back to Holling's resilience theory, developed in 1973, that first described the ecological system [33]. Accordingly, resilience refers to a system's ability to adapt to changes in state variables, driving factors, and other characteristics, while remaining stable [34]. Since then, many attempts have been made to define resilience and entrepreneurship [30]. A wide range of definitions were found for organizational resilience, which tended to describe the concept as an ability [35], a competency [36], a capacity [37], and a capability [38]. Another stream of research defines the resilience concept as a trait [39], a process in time [32], and a dynamic absorption of hardship [40,41]. Furthermore, the engineering perspective of resilience is the theoretical basis for a large number of studies that describe resilience as bouncing back or returning to a previous equilibrium condition [42,43]. However, according to the dynamic capabilities viewpoint, researchers assume that resilience is a company's ability to contain disturbances, generate situation-specific solutions, and take action to capitalize on

those shocks [40]. Recently, Herbane [27] defined resilience as “an adaptive process and the capacity of an organization to address major acute and strategic challenges through responsiveness and reinvention to achieve organizational renewal” [27], (p. 478).

Previous research refers to entrepreneurial resilience as a resource that anticipates an entrepreneur’s, firm’s, or macro-level entity’s ability to overcome future problems [16,38]. However, much of the resilience literature has not focused specifically on small businesses nor on digital enterprises. This is a significant gap given that small businesses are more malleable in the face of adversity, and their ability to rapidly adapt and innovate makes them well-suited for researching resilience [44]. This was also argued by Corey and Deitch [45] in their research on Hurricane Katrina, which showed that the size of a business had a significant impact on the ability of the business to recover. In the current study, business resilience refers to the entrepreneur’s successful navigation of disruptions, challenges in supply chain management, shortage of labor and funds, and the adoption of multi-channel distribution to sustain and grow the digital microbusiness during adversity.

2.2. Individual Resilience and Entrepreneurship

In an attempt to differentiate between individual and entrepreneurial resilience, and to test whether entrepreneurial resilience impacts upon SMEs’ resilience, Branicki and colleagues [46] found that relationships, contexts, attitudes, and behaviors are more important than structural and resource-intensive factors in the resilience of SMEs. Indeed, entrepreneurial businesses are prone to failure due to a combination of internal and external factors. The internal factors include the entrepreneur’s stress, burnout, and/or psychological disorders, and the external factors entail resources, culture, rules, and regulations [47]. Researchers are compelled to investigate the elements that enable entrepreneurs to successfully navigate such internal and external factors along their pathways to entrepreneurship success [47]. From a psychological perspective, resilient individuals are those who are able to tolerate stress and cope with pressure. There are a number of scholarly studies that lend themselves to the investigation of individual resilience [48] stemming from the two overall factors of protectivity and risk [49]. Protective factors include reference persons, supportive networks, or positive family environments, whereas risk factors (such as domestic violence, abuse, or neglect in childhood) generally reduce the probability of an individual’s positive development. Protective factors enable an entrepreneur to overcome adversities and remain psychologically healthy and well [50]. Risk can be buffered, interrupted, or even prevented when a protective factor is present [51]. Protective factors can be both internal, like self-efficacy, and external, like strong relationships and community support. Self-efficacy is one example of an internal protective factor [51].

Following psychological studies on resilience, a number of studies investigated the role of individual resilience in fostering entrepreneurial intentions [52] and succeeding in entrepreneurial businesses [53]. These attempts were narrowly focused on the psychological aspects of entrepreneurial resilience, and therefore, a more comprehensive analysis of the concept is recommended [47].

Prior research that demonstrates the influence of the individual’s resilience on business resilience reveals that individual resilience is a collection of personal traits such as emotional intelligence [54], motivation and life experience [55], and self-efficacy [56]. In particular, de Vries and Shields define individual resilience as “an amalgamation of behavioural patterns” [55], (p. 33). Flexibility, motivation, perseverance, and optimism were highlighted as resilience-enhancing behaviors by owner–managers in SMEs. They also suggest that individual resilience is a product of life experience rather than a psychological feature [55]. From a psychological perspective, psychological resilience is defined as the ability to cope and adapt in the face of adversity, pain, or failure [57]. Prior studies have also shown that resilient individuals have optimistic, zestful, and energizing outlooks on life, are interested in and open to new experiences, and are characterized by high levels of positive emotion [58].

Moreover, according to Nisula and Olander [59], motivation and self-concept are the most significant considerations for the resilience and creativity of university graduate entrepreneurs. Despite the growth in research about individual resilience, few studies have examined whether individual resilience fosters entrepreneurial resilience from a gender perspective [60]. Matharu and Juneja [61] are an exception; their study reveals that entrepreneurial traits, resourcefulness, networking, adaptability, and continuity have influenced the resilience of female business owners in the face of a crisis. We anticipate that this gap in the resilience literature, which we contribute to bridging, will be addressed more fully as the world recovers from the COVID-19 pandemic and as nations strive to achieve UN SDG 5 on gender equality.

2.3. Broaden-and-Build Theory

The extant literature has shown an interest in the relationship between individual motivation, emotions, and performance [62,63]. Theories such as self-determination [64–66] lend themselves to investigating the emotional states of individuals and have been widely applied to understanding the motivations of individuals in a variety of different sectors such as sports, education, healthcare, and organizations [67–69]. According to self-determination theory, pre-established intrinsic motivation has been shown to boost the level of positive emotions [63], and intrinsic motivation is when people perform an action or a behavior because they enjoy it and acquire spontaneous satisfaction from it [65]. By emphasizing positive thinking, the broaden-and-build theory complements self-determination theory. The broaden-and-build theory regards positive thinking as a secret weapon for overcoming adversity [19,70]. More specifically, the theory focuses on the importance of sustaining a subset of pleasant emotions, such as joy, curiosity, contentment, and passion, and how these emotions can help individuals cope with adversity [19,70]. As a result, the term “joy” refers both to the state of happiness as well as the activation of pleasant feelings such as amusement, elation, and gladness [71,72], whereas “interest” refers to “a feeling of wanting to investigate, become involved, or extend or expand the self by incorporating new information and having new experiences with the person or object that has stimulated the interest” [73], (p. 216). When people recognize another person as the cause of their unexpected good fortune, they feel a sense of “gratitude”. However, positive feelings of “pride” are aroused when individuals take credit for a well-recognized social good.

The essence of this theory is that positive emotions have a subsequent effect [74] in broadening “the person’s thought–action repertoire through which joy triggers the need to play, interest sparks the urge to explore..., and love sparks a recurring cycle of each of these urges” [70], (p. 1367). For example, the drive to play, pushing the limits, and being innovative, appear to grow as the positive feeling of joy increases [75].

However, it has been widely acknowledged that emotions have psychophysiological consequences and adaptive roles that do not consistently appear the same. As such, Fredrickson [70] argued that while a wide range of thoughts and activities are encouraged by positive emotions (for example, play and exploration), a small range of thoughts and actions are triggered by negative emotions such as aggression and fleeing. Fredrickson [70] also contended that positive emotions foster healthy performance, not only in the immediate, pleasurable moment, but also over the long term, whereby this long-term experience of pleasant emotions builds psychological resilience rather than simply reproducing them. Positivity, she argues, expands a person’s thought–action repertoire, increasing the number of available options to them when confronted with adversity. She further claims that through adaptation, the individual can build a greater range of resources that foster resilience. As such, individual resilience can be enhanced through the ability to find meaning in adversity and to manage one’s negative emotions [57]. Measuring the role of positive emotions after a crisis, Fredrickson et al. [76] found that, according to the broaden-and-build theory, resilient people who experience pleasant feelings in the wake of a crisis are better able to avoid falling into depression and are more likely to experience growth.

To sum up, the broaden-and-build theory widens the attention and thinking of individuals, removing any remaining negative emotional arousal, fueling psychological resilience, and creating consequential personal resources, invoking upward spirals toward greater wellbeing in the future, and finally, fostering human flourishing [70]. More importantly, recent research that investigated the behavior of people during the lockdown found that people engaged in creative activities adapted better to the challenges posed by the pandemic. The discovery of novel solutions to everyday problems, the examination of prospective alternatives in the face of constraints, and the development of original items (e.g., recipes, gardens, arrangements, physical activities, games) are all examples of creative processes [77]. Research has also found that creative activities fostered individuals' resilience during the pandemic and triggered positive emotions [78]. Similarly, in France, a study found that individuals with lower baseline creativity before the lockdown may have utilized this situation as an opportunity to be more creative in their personal life, perhaps as a reaction to the unpleasant experiences that followed lockdown measures [79]. Accordingly, the disruption of daily life before the pandemic may have lowered the "ideal" conditions that previously existed for creative people [79]. In this study, we adopt the broaden-and-build theory to explore Saudi women's entrepreneurial journeys. This can offer novel analyses for explaining the resilience of these women's digital enterprises and how they can expand and grow their enterprises during adverse circumstances such as the COVID-19 pandemic, which intersected with the Kingdom's accelerated social, economic, and political changes arising from the transformation and reform measures encompassing gender equality being employed recently.

2.4. Digital Entrepreneurship

It is widely established that entrepreneurship plays a significant role in fostering economic prosperity [80], increasing personal wealth, and improving national wellbeing [81]. Indeed, numerous studies conducted in advanced economies have shown the importance of entrepreneurship in stimulating economic growth, expanding markets, encouraging innovation, and lowering unemployment [82]. The development of technology has opened up an array of opportunities for entrepreneurs to explore and expand their business operations [83]. Advancements in communication technology have led to the birth of social media networks, which enable entrepreneurs to innovate in marketing practices [84].

Furthermore, digitalization improves corporate success [85] and fosters business sustainability and resilience during disruptions [86]. Digital entrepreneurship means combining entrepreneurship with the new ways to start and run a business in the digital age [87]. Further, it refers to the type of entrepreneurship in which some or all of the endeavors take place digitally rather than in more traditional formats [88]. Additionally, in today's digital business ecosystem, sustainable digital entrepreneurship illustrates the modern meaning of a social, operational, and strategic influence on the value chain [89]. The constant and consistent rise in access to information, communication, and technology has coincided with a boom in entrepreneurial venturing. Entrepreneurs have been inspired and emboldened by the constant evolution of technical capabilities to start new businesses or drastically upgrade existing ones to compete successfully in the novel digital environment. The importance of digitalization in boosting creativity and productivity, promoting regional entrepreneurship, and expanding economic and social benefits has already been established in prior research [90,91].

More specifically, the growth of digital entrepreneurship has contributed to an expansion of the notions of liberal agency and the emancipation of enterprise from the constraints of societal systems [92]. Entrepreneurship has also been shown to have a liberating effect on underprivileged and marginalized people in many studies [93]. Entrepreneurship is a tool that gives people freedom, so everyone has the right to use it easily and equally [94]. However, a more critical viewpoint has emerged, questioning entrepreneurship's emancipatory role for the underprivileged, minority, and less powerful—particularly women [95,96]—though these critiques did not address digital entrepreneurship.

Indeed, Martinez Dy et al. [94] strongly argued that the internet does not provide all entrepreneurs with easy access to political, social, material, or cultural resources, and emphasized that greater structural, social, and, more specifically, gender equality are required to enable prospective digital entrepreneurs, who nevertheless require a significant investment in various resources, to establish their enterprises over time. In this study, we contend with digital entrepreneurship as digital technologies and capabilities that support Saudi women entrepreneurs to bounce back after being exposed to external shocks such as the COVID-19 pandemic. This new paradigm for understanding the role of digitalization in entrepreneurial activity and innovation has evolved, but the notion currently lacks a common analytical framework to precisely define the determinants and impacts of digitalization. In addition, although research on digital entrepreneurship is expanding rapidly, studies that investigate the influence of digitalization on the business resilience of women entrepreneurs located in the MENA region's economies remain limited.

2.5. Context of the Research

It is impossible to ignore the importance given by policy makers to the role of entrepreneurship in accelerating and underlying social and economic inclusion and progress in Saudi Arabia [9]. Following the recent gender reforms implemented in Saudi Arabia, the Kingdom improved its score on the World Bank report on women, business, and the law from 70.6 in 2020 to 80 in 2022 [4]. The report highlights 100% gender equality within the laws pertaining to mobility, pay, workplace, entrepreneurship, and pensions. The three areas where Saudi Arabia requires ongoing legal reform to achieve gender equality are marriage, assets, and parenthood [4]. When it comes to driving economic growth and creating new jobs, Saudi Arabia's policies focus on developing and investing in local startup entrepreneurs. Underpinning UN SDG 5 on gender equality, the Kingdom's Vision 2030 calls for Saudi women to play a significant role in the country's socioeconomic development, and has made substantial improvements since 2018 regarding the social, economic, and political engagement of women in Saudi Arabia [4], resulting in unprecedented engagement of women in entrepreneurship [97]. In particular, Saudi Arabia no longer permits women to be denied access to financial services because of their gender [3]. Additionally, women's labor force participation rose from 19% in 2016 to 26% in 2019 [12]. This was accompanied with a decline in the rate of women's unemployment for the Saudi female working-age population. This fell from 20.2% in the fourth quarter of 2020 to 16.1% in the first quarter of 2021. According to Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM), women accounted for around 45% of the entire population of entrepreneurs in Saudi Arabia in 2019 and were the primary owners of 31.6% of all registered business [97]. Perhaps surprisingly, women in Saudi Arabia are more likely than men to start a business [97], and are more likely than women in any other high-income country to start a business. Within the MENA region, only Qatar has female entrepreneurship rates as high as those in Saudi Arabia.

It will be necessary to monitor these women's advances in the Kingdom over the next few years to assess the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2030 deadline for the Kingdom's Vision 2030 strategy and the UN SDGs [98]. This is particularly important at this stage in the Kingdom's transformation and reform journey, as GEM also showed that the rate of women-owned established businesses in Saudi Arabia remains low, and therefore requires dedicated strategies to enable women entrepreneurs to sustain and grow their businesses into maturity and beyond the startup phase [97].

The COVID-19 pandemic stopped and shocked the world, disabling economies, communities, and entire business cycles. It has had a significant impact on small businesses with limited personnel and capital resources [17], and Saudi SMEs were not immune. During the pandemic, the Kingdom imposed very strict regulations curtailing movement and imposing lockdowns and curfews as measures to contain the COVID-19 pandemic. This resulted in the initial cancellation of all in-person business support programs, communications, and actions that did not reactivate until agencies were able to offer them online. The government of Saudi Arabia assisted women and men Saudi entrepreneurs throughout

the COVID-19 pandemic by implementing a multitude of support services to alleviate the negative effects of the pandemic on business in the Kingdom. These included furlough schemes, paying 50% of employees' salaries, delaying the payments of governmental fees, and so forth [99]. Despite such supportive procedures taken by the government of Saudi Arabia to foster entrepreneurial activities during the COVID-19 pandemic, Alessa et al. [18] found that the pandemic had a negative impact on entrepreneurs in the Saudi capital city of Riyadh. Alessa et al. [18] attributed this to the challenges faced by the entrepreneurs due to the lack of information and numerous sudden changes in policies and procedures taken by governments to decrease the spread of the disease. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, entrepreneurs are experiencing difficulties with the availability of certain products, and this, in turn, impairs their capacity to meet the demands of their consumers [17].

3. Materials and Methods

Qualitative research is well suited to investigating novel, largely unexplored, or challenging entrepreneurial phenomena [100,101]. Indeed, qualitative research has been critical in generating theories about newly discovered phenomena such as gendered digital entrepreneurship [91]. In particular, the qualitative approach works well when looking into new occurrences in business that happen in a new context [101,102].

A qualitative longitudinal approach is the best approach to obtain rich data to explore and study entrepreneur resilience, as it captures the processual nature of entrepreneurship and crises [95]. Given that individual resilience is a process that develops over time [49], longitudinal research was a useful method to employ [15]. Similar to other qualitative research on gender and entrepreneurship conducted in the Arab world (e.g., [7,22,96,103,104]), semi-structured face-to-face interviews were used in both phases of data collection to fully understand the phenomenon and discuss the research questions.

The primary purpose of interviewing the same participants twice, with an interval of four years, was to account for how they utilized digital entrepreneurship to foster business resilience during a period of social, economic, and political transformation and change that intersected with the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020–2021.

The study utilized a purposive sample of Saudi women digital entrepreneurs located in Saudi Arabia's western region. All participants were initially interviewed in 2018, and again in 2022 to capture the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on themselves and their businesses. Eight participants among those initially interviewed in 2018 agreed to follow-up interviews in 2022. Of the eight, two shut down their businesses, and six continue to operate. The study resulted in 16 interviews conducted in Arabic, as this was the preferred language by the participants, and a total of 32 h of interviewing.

The rationale for this purposive sample included exploring the growth of these entrepreneurial businesses and the role that digitalization has played in boosting these businesses, and homogeneity—the participants' digital enterprises were all established prior to 2018 when the bulk of the gender reforms were introduced in Saudi Arabia. The sample is diverse in terms of business age, size, and industry representation, which includes, for example, food, fashion, and handicrafts. As shown in Table 1, except for one business (Participant 1), which had been in existence for less than a year, most businesses were well established and between 6 and 10 years old.

In phase 1 of the study, Participant 1 ran a business in the handicrafts sector, and due to the pandemic, she diversified and started a new venture in the food and beverage sector. As such, she focused the phase 2 interview upon this new venture, which was one year old at the time of the interview. The majority of the participating businesses were micro digital enterprises with employees, with the exception of one sole trader. The vast majority of the participants are middle aged, married, and with children. Furthermore, all participants operate in two industries (i.e., food and beverages and fashion design). Given the extent to which these two sectors are feminized in Saudi Arabia, as they are elsewhere in the Arab world and beyond, it was important to ensure that the research sample reflected women's digital entrepreneurship in these sectors.

Table 1. Characteristics of the businesses in 2022.

Participant Number	Age Category	Marital Status	Children	Education Level	Business Sector	Age of Business in Years	Number of Employees
Participant 1	25–34	Married	2	Bachelor	Food and beverage	>1 year	3
Participant 2	35–44	Married	0	High school	Fashion design	10–20	2
Participant 3	35–44	Married	2	Bachelor	Food and beverages	10–20	3
Participant 4	45–54	Married	3	Bachelor	Fashion design	10–20	4
Participant 5	25–34	Married	3	Bachelor	Fashion products	6–10	0
Participant 6	45–54	Married	4	High school	Food and beverages	6–10	2
Participant 7	25–34	Married	1	Masters	Fashion design	6–10	2
Participant 8	Over 55	Widowed	0	Bachelor	Fashion design	6–10	2

All participants were assured of high standards of confidentiality and anonymity in analyzing and reporting the data, and they gave their consent for their anonymized quotes to be included in the paper. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed in Arabic, and only the quotes used in this paper were translated to English and back-translated to Arabic to ensure consistency in the translation [95]. Given the limited reliable qualitative analysis software for the Arabic language, the thematic analysis was performed manually.

Specifically, the thematic analysis was undertaken by the lead researcher and involved both within-case analysis and cross-case analysis [105]. The within-case analysis allowed for comparisons within the data obtained in 2018 and 2022 per participant, and the cross-case analysis allowed for comparisons between the participants in both phases of the data collection: 2018 and 2022, respectively.

The participants are numbered from 1 to 8, and the same number is given to each participant in both phases of data collection. Please see Appendix A for the interview guides utilized in phase 1 and phase 2 of this study. The results and discussion section below presents the relevant findings obtained and discusses them in relation to the literature.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Entrepreneurship Motivations Pre- and During COVID-19 Pandemic

The findings from the data collection in 2018, phase 1, provided insights into the motivations of the participating entrepreneurs for starting and growing their enterprises [94]. As shown in Table 2 below, the challenges experienced by the women entrepreneurs as reported in 2018 were encompassed within finances, competition, and suppliers [95]. When the participants were asked about the challenges they faced following the COVID-19 pandemic, the majority reported an increase in the prices of the raw materials. However, they were trying to look for suppliers with reasonable prices without jeopardizing the quality of their products.

The participants' motivations for sustaining their businesses were also focused on three overarching themes, as shown in Table 2; being passionate about their purpose, product or service, desire to be independent through self-employment, and for one participant (Participant 7), turning her hobby into a business.

The results of the within-case analysis show that the motivation of Participant 1 evolved from being motivated by self-employment/independence to passion. The participant emphasized that her passion for cooking with the free time she had during the lockdown urged her interest to experiment with new recipes: *"I was interested in learning new recipes and creating novel ones"*. It could be inferred that the entrepreneur's passion for cooking, combined with her desire to learn and discover, enabled her to create a totally new business. As shown in Table 2, only Participant 1 experienced a transformation in motivation. This resulted in changing her business model, as will be discussed later.

Table 2. Challenges and motivations pre- and during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Participant Number	Business Sector	Pre-COVID-19		During COVID-19
		Challenges	Motivation	Motivation
1	Handicrafts	Competition and financial	Self-employment	Passion
2	Fashion design	Financial, business skills challenges	Passion	Passion
3	Food and beverage	Customer satisfaction; Financial and supplier challenges	Passion	Passion
4	Fashion design	Financial and competition	Passion	Passion
5	Fashion design	Financial, business skills challenges	Passion and self-employment	Passion
6	Food and beverage	Family resistance and stress and demand fluctuations	Passion	Passion
7	Fashion design	Financial, competition, demand fluctuation and, supplier challenges	Self-employment	Self-employment
8	Fashion design	Business skills, financial challenges	Hobby	Hobby

These results confirm prior studies concerned with entrepreneurial passion [21,106–108]. Passion refers to a strong preference for an activity that individuals like, value, and devote time and effort to [106]. It also means a strongly pleasurable feeling toward tasks and activities related to the entrepreneur’s self-identity [107]. Furthermore, a lack of jobs and unemployment are another trigger for starting and growing entrepreneurial businesses. This result also corroborates with previous studies in which entrepreneurs are pushed to entrepreneurship out of necessity or lack of occupational choices [109]. The last motive is a triggering hobby that entrepreneurs use to satisfy their urges during their free time [110]. Table 3 below illustrates some examples of the thematic coding and proof quotes, explaining the participants’ motivations and their catalysts.

Table 3. Thematic coding and proof quotes.

Theme	Sub-Theme	Interview Excerpts
Motivations (Phases 1 and 2)	Passion	Participant 1: “I love cooking” Participant 2: “I am a passionate designer” Participant 3: “I love cooking” Participant 4: “I am a model who loves designing and fashion” Participant 5: “I am passionate about fashion” Participant 6: “I love cooking”
	Self-employment/independence	Participant 7: “It was convenient to run the business from home but now it is no longer worth investing”
	Hobby/lifestyle	Participant 8: “It was a hobby”
Catalysts (Phase 2)	Interest	Participant 1: “I am interested to discover new recipes” Participant 3: “I am eager to improve myself”
	Pride	Participant 5: “The business exists because of my name”
	Joy	Participant 2: “I enjoy playing with materials and always excited about the outcomes” Participant 4: “I enjoy playing with materials and designs”
	Gratitude	Participant 6: “The business enabled me to help others”
	Pessimism	Participant 7: “COVID killed my business”
	Frustration	Participant 8: “I am no longer interested”

4.2. Thoughts, Actions, and Building Resilience during the COVID-19 Pandemic

The thematic analysis of the data describing the entrepreneurial journeys of the participants, as shown in Table 4 below, illustrates the participants' thoughts, actions, and strategies for building resilience per motivation and catalyst. The elements of positive and negative emotions were salient in the data, and Table 4 below demonstrates the participants' catalysts, describing positive emotions and the subsequent impacts of these positive emotions on the participants' repertoires of thoughts, long-term business building, and business resilience [19].

Table 4. Motivations and emotions during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown.

Motivation	Catalyst	Thoughts and Actions Contributing to Broadening	Building Entrepreneur Resilience	Participant
Passion	Interest	Exploring new recipes Researching new information Attending entrepreneurship training Using social bonds to exploit opportunities Adopting a new business model	Creating innovative recipes Finding a niche in the market Starting new business during COVID-19	1
		Learning new recipes Joining online cooking courses	Diversifying her products to meet the fluctuation in demand	3
	Joy	Playing with materials and creating innovative designs	Handling stress and overcoming the pandemic Feeling positive for the future Creating novel designs	2
			Expanding design portfolio Planning her own brand	4
	Pride	Envisioning new achievements in the future Believing that her name is the brand	Planning to buy her own store Establishing her own brand	5
	Gratitude	Assisting others by taking part in a variety of charitable activities	Building, strengthening, and diversifying social bonds through volunteering	6
Self-employment/independence	Pessimism	Narrowing the self by believing that her products became obsolete Believing that she cannot compete with cheaper alternatives in the market	Having limited options for dealing with the situation	7
Hobby	Frustration	Narrowing the self by believing that customers do not appreciate her products Believing that she no longer wants her business		8

The findings collected during phase 2 of the study and presented in Table 4 support the broaden-and-build theoretical framework, where five updated catalysts were found salient in the data. In particular, five participants who were motivated by their passion in phase 1 of the data collection, that is, passion for the business idea, passion for their products, and passion for helping others [22], also reported passion in phase 2 of the study with a set of positive emotions, as described by Fredrickson [19]. This finding lends support to previous research on how motivation fosters positive emotions [63]. In particular, the results also show how passion for business fosters positive emotions such as interest, gratitude, happiness, and pride, supporting our assumption that the entrepreneur's passion sparks thoughts and actions such as "desire to explore", "interest in discovering and learning", and "feelings of happiness and joy" [19,111]. The participants reported that their passion helped them to be hopeful about the COVID-19 pandemic and to utilize the lockdown period for experimenting with materials and patterns, upgrading their skills, and innovating items.

These findings support previous studies in the context of sports, emphasizing the crucial role of passion as a stimulant for positive feelings such as happiness [112–114]. On the other hand, when the entrepreneurs were motivated by hobbies to spend free time and engage in self-employment, they were not able to fight for the business during adversities such as COVID-19. When compared to people who were driven by passion, the participants were filled with negative feelings such as anger and pessimism, which led to the closure of the businesses. To summarize, entrepreneurial passion stimulates all of the positive emotions described by Fredrickson [19,76], such as interest, joy, pride, and gratitude.

As shown in Table 4, even though Participant 1 reported that she closed down her initial home-based business, her positive emotions of interest enabled her to start up a completely new business, and she continues to grow this second entrepreneurial venture. In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, her positive emotions of interest to discover [74] expanded her thinking [19], and allowed her to take in new information and experiment with new recipes. *“I think the lockdown period was an opportunity for me. I started online cooking courses and spent the free time trying and inventing new recipes.”* This is demonstrated in her view of the lockdown as an opportunity to improve her skills. She also expanded her knowledge by enrolling in entrepreneurship courses, and took advantage of social bonds to exploit opportunities and develop a new business model:

“After I was successful with new recipes, I considered starting a new business that was completely different from the previous one; I discussed my business idea with a friend of mine, who advised me to present my business idea and model to a business incubator at the university where she worked; my business idea was successful, and I was able to get funds from the incubator to start my new business.”

Because of her positive emotions, Participant 3 also remained hopeful with a positive vision for the future despite the difficulties she faced. By taking online cooking classes, she was able to broaden her horizons and gain long-term benefits by learning how to change her dishes to meet the changing demands during the COVID-19 pandemic.

“Business-wise, the nature of my products were to be served during people’s gatherings and occasions. With the complete lockdown and the social distancing measures, my sales became zero”. She further affirms, “Despite that, to be honest, the lockdown was not a negative period for me. The spare time that we have gained due to the isolation encourages me to improve my learning skills. As a way of example, I have taken many online cooking courses to improve my cooking skills and to innovate on new recipes”.

These findings support the theory of broaden-and-build and the complementary impact that positive emotions have on individuals [74]. This is demonstrated in broadening the entrepreneurs’ thoughts to experiment with new recipes, learn new skills, and foster individual resilience to start a new business despite their previous negative business experience (Participant 1) or to innovate in different ways to keep their business going (Participant 3). Furthermore, these findings are also in accordance with previous studies that reported that people during lockdown were creating novel and creative activities at home [78]. Among the creative activities mentioned were: experimenting with new recipes; growing vegetables; taking care of children and devising games; rearranging the schedule and space at home; inventing new forms of remote work, fostering practices of solidarity; building exercise equipment; and coming up with new school activities for the children [77]. More importantly, Participant 2, a fashion designer, was motivated by her passion for the art of fashion designing. Her love for designing triggered feelings of joy and the sense of playfulness that is satisfied through designing throughout the entire COVID-19 pandemic lockdown and coming up with innovative creations: *“for me, the lockdown during COVID was a positive experience as the isolation from daily life enabled me to enjoy the creation of my designs”.* This finding supports the broaden-and-build theory in which happiness, considered a combination of feeling satisfied with one’s life, having access to healthy coping mechanisms, and experiencing happy emotions, is a good predictor of favorable life outcomes in a variety of areas. The broaden-and-build theory

proposes that this is due to the fact that pleasant emotions enable individuals to accumulate long-term resources [115]. Because she was optimistic about the future, she was able to deal with the stress she felt during the COVID-19 pandemic [57,76].

Moreover, a fashion designer and model, Participant 4, was inspired to establish her own fashion brand by the positive sentiments of love and joy she experienced from experimenting with designs. She agreed with Participants 1 and 3 that the COVID-19 lockdown period was helpful because it saved her time that she could use to become better at learning. More specifically, when asked about the COVID-19 pandemic, Participant 2 stated: “the lockdown during COVID allowed me to get away from the stresses of everyday life and concentrate entirely on producing innovative designs”. These results corroborate previous studies [57,76] in which resilient people discover positive meaning from disruptive and stressful situations through feeling positive. According to these participants, viewing the COVID-19 pandemic through a positive lens allowed them to focus more on self-improvement and creativity by staying at home and away from external noise and disruptions. The aforementioned findings are consistent with other research demonstrating how having positive emotions during the isolating pandemic lockdown enabled individuals to realize their latent creativity [78,79]. Participant 5 was very proud of her name and the success of her business, a new positive emotion. Because of her inflated sense of self-worth and inflated ego, she believes that her name is a brand unto itself, and a physical store and a personal brand are constantly on her mind these days. When asked about the factors behind her business’s existence despite the pandemic, she stated: “*my name, customers purchase my products because of my name*”. Like the other participants, Participant 5 was full of positive emotions triggered by her pride. Her sense of self-confidence and pride broadened her beliefs to include her family name as a brand and to withstand the stress of the pandemic in terms of the decline in sales. Her positive feelings also supported her bright future outlook. When asked about her aspirations, she stated: “*I am going to create a brand under my name and I am going to own a store*”.

These results also support the broaden-and-build theory in which the entrepreneur’s ability to feel positive emotions is a fundamental strength crucial to human thriving and flourishing [70]. Furthermore, as proposed by Fredrickson and Branigan [74], a person’s sense of self-worth may inspire them to strive for greater achievements and widen their horizons, and so offer the drive they need to achieve greater things in the future.

Another positive emotion was noticed in Participant 6, where she expressed gratitude for her business. This was due to her being able to help others through her business [22]. Moreover, she utilized her Instagram and Snapchat business accounts to teach others how to cook. Additionally, her feelings of gratitude prompted her to join a variety of philanthropic and volunteer organizations in order to fulfill her desire to help others: “*I feel happy when I serve the community and help others. I am an active member of the community center, through which I help people in need by cooking for them and organizing charity events*”. These findings illustrate how the positive emotion of gratitude broadens the cognitive repertoire of the individual by considering a variety of activities to benefit others [75]. According to Trivers [116], gratitude is the oxygen that nourishes reciprocal support, which is an indicator of long-lasting friendships and alliances, and Participant 6 had a large following on her social media accounts. These findings lend credence to the theory of broaden-and-build in which the participants’ positive feelings (interest, joy, pride, and gratitude) have a subsequent effect on their thoughts and actions, and hence on building their resilience, which is reflected in the progress of their businesses. Each of these pleasant emotions has the ability to boost the entrepreneur’s personal resources, from physical and intellectual ones to psychological and social ones [74].

Participants 7 and 8 reported experiencing frustration and pessimism as negative emotions. Angry with her entire business, the mental and behavioral options for Participant 7 were severely constrained due to her depressed state of mind. She believed that her products were obsolete, as she could no longer compete with the low-cost alternatives: “*the problem that I am facing is that Abayas (i.e., women gown) have become old*

fashion. Saudi women nowadays tend to wear more modern styles of Abayas, and competition is fierce as there are plenty of cheaper alternatives within a click online". Her statement "Corona killed my business" captured her outlook and showed how negative emotions also influence coping. Participant 8 echoed the negative feelings of Participant 7. Angry and disappointed, Participant 8 stated that "people nowadays do not appreciate the beauty of traditional dress". She was frustrated with her business, as the value of her products was no longer appreciated. These findings also support the broaden-and-build model, whereby individuals perceive hardship positively, experience pleasant emotions, and accumulate long-term resources, unlike those with a negative outlook and associated negative emotions [19,57].

4.3. Mechanisms for Business Resilience before and during COVID-19 Pandemic

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the participants took advantage of digital capabilities by utilizing several measures such as using their social media accounts to expand their customer base, promote their products and services, and interact with prospective customers [103]. These findings, as outlined in Table 5, are aligned with previous research where Alharthi and Alhothali [84] found similar trends adopted by owners of home-based enterprises in Saudi Arabia. However, when asked about the mechanisms used to sustain their businesses during the pandemic, the participants discussed several mechanisms (Table 5) that they used to adapt to the constraints and challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, Participants 2 and 4 (fashion designers) utilized technologies to maintain a virtual presence during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. Participant 4 described utilizing her social media business accounts to keep customers engaged with her business during the overall COVID-19 pandemic lockdown period. She did this very well by coming up with design contests to keep her customers engaged in a fun way.

When asked about the role of digitalization on business resilience, Participant 3 replied: "business still exists because I am still here. If I am not using technology, my business will not have a virtual space. I should show people that I am still existing online. Technology is a tool, but the resilience and persistence of the entrepreneur is the essence of business resilience". She also emphasized that digitalization and communication technologies have made our lives easier, stating: "Television and radio were the only forms of media available to us in the past; now, thanks to advances in technology, we are now able to reach a greater variety of customers in a shorter amount of time". In particular, Participant 3 enrolled support from the social media accounts of regional celebrities to endorse her business and hence increase her customer base by increasing her number of followers. She emphasized: "You have no idea how many new customers I have gained as a result of a social media female celebrity recommending my products to her large number of followers on Instagram". The impact of social media celebrity endorsement was also reported by Jin, Muqaddam, and Ryu [117], among others. These findings show that the rise of digitization has made it easier for women-owned businesses in Saudi Arabia to stave off the COVID-19 pandemic while also assuring their customers that they are, in fact, still in business and operating normally. For example, Participant 3 utilized her social media business accounts to engage customers by uploading new recipes to teach them how to cook during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. These results lend credence to other research on digital entrepreneurship, specifically in the form of social media during the pandemic, facilitating connection and interaction with customers [118]. To sum up, the participants were already digital entrepreneurs before the pandemic, and they continued to do what they were doing and replaced face-to-face activity with additional online activity. They were well prepared for the COVID-19 pandemic's challenges because they were already digitally capable.

Table 5. Mechanisms for business resilience before and during COVID-19.

Participant Number	Business Sector	Mechanisms for Business Growth before COVID-19	Mechanisms for Business Resilience during COVID-19
1	Handicrafts, then food and beverage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Using social media marketing • Social networking 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communicating with incubator to support her new business idea • Mentored by professionals
2	Fashion design	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attending bazaars • Social media marketing • Doing business from home to cut costs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creating a website to promote her designs • Finding a partner to support her business • Lowering the cost of her designs
3	Food and beverage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social media marketing • Attending bazaars • Enforcing social connections 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Decreasing the number of employees • Social media celebrity endorsement
4	Fashion design	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social media marketing • Attending bazaars • Enforcing social connections 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Customer engagement via social media • Creating a website to promote her business • Developing strategic partnership
5	Fashion design	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Following trends in fashion • Looking for new markets to serve 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Diversifying products • Identifying new niche markets
6	Food and beverage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social media business accounts • Social media marketing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Utilizing social media business accounts to help others
7	Fashion design	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attending bazaars • Social media marketing • Doing business from home to cut costs • Outsourcing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Entrepreneur shows no intention of further supporting the business
8	Fashion design	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attending bazaars • Social media marketing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Entrepreneur shows no intention of further supporting the business

5. Conclusions

This study found supporting evidence for the role of digitalization in fostering microbusiness resilience for women-owned enterprises in Saudi Arabia. The findings supported the broaden-and-build theory, demonstrating how lowering stress and negativity enhances individual resilience, which, in turn, increases business resilience. By showing how Saudi women entrepreneurs weathered the COVID-19 pandemic with their positive emotions of interest, joy, pride, and gratitude to sustain their businesses, this study provides important implications for achieving UN SDG 5 through wellbeing. The study provides evidence of the actions taken by Saudi women entrepreneurs when triggered by positive feelings such as interest, joy, pride, and gratitude. The study further states how these actions translated into long-term building effects and individual resilience actions. The study also demonstrates the leading role of feeling love in encapsulating other positive emotions such as joy, interest, pride, and contentment. It confirms that “love sparks a recurring cycle of each of these urges” [19], (p. 1367).

More specifically, the study explored the mechanisms used by women entrepreneurs to survive their businesses when facing adversity. This study expands the literature on the resilience of microbusinesses by exploring emotions and mechanisms (for example, broadening) that occur during hardship and adversities. Earlier studies have demonstrated that positive emotions broaden in a similar fashion, resulting in a larger range of attention, thoughts, and behaviors, in support of the broaden-and-build theoretical framework [119]. For example, the findings can be used as a basis for training programs that foster capabilities for women entrepreneurs to overcome disruptions and enhance their economic

empowerment. Finally, the limitations of our study need to be considered. That is, the study was limited to female microbusiness owners in a single city in Saudi Arabia. Future research can widen the geographical research context to include not only other cities in Saudi Arabia, but in the GCC region, too. Additionally, it will be interesting to include a sample of men and women entrepreneurs to explore any gender differences, especially as the role of women in Saudi Arabia and the wider region is changing. The themes in this study can also be explored through a quantitative survey throughout the Arab world to account for social, political, and economic instabilities and how these relate to entrepreneurs' resilience, positive outlooks, positive feelings such as passion, and variations in emotional states.

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Appendix A

Interview guide phase 1 and 2:

What motivates you to start a business from home?

What motivates you to stay in business?

What historical, family, or social factors could explain the entrepreneurs' interest in starting and owning a business?

Where does the entrepreneur see her business 10 years from now?

What are the challenges you face?

How does the entrepreneur reconcile business, family, and community affairs?

What is the family/friend support you get?

What is the governmental support you get?

How do you promote your products?

In 2018, these were the challenges (financial, family, competition, etc.) that you were facing. Which of those challenges are you still facing and why? Which of those have you overcome, and how?

To what extent has digital technology helped you overcome challenges?

What is the role of digital entrepreneurship in fostering SMEs' resilience?

What are the factors supporting the success of the business during the past four years?

From your point of view, what are the factors supporting the resilience of business during crises?

What mechanisms are needed to sustain business?

What is the highlight of your business in 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021, positive or negative?

What stays in your mind about that journey?

What are the most prominent reform measures that emerged at that time? How has it affected your business and you as an entrepreneur?

After the pandemic, what do you care about now?

Do you think digital entrepreneurship empowers women? Please give an example.
 What is the role of digital entrepreneurship in liberating marginalized individuals?
 In the wake of your recovery, what lessons learned about your business (in terms of
 skills and knowledge) will help you be better prepared for the next shock?

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