From E-commerce to She-commerce: The rise of She-era?
A small-scale case study on female entrepreneurs on Taobao in China

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Abstract

The study investigates female empowerment through online entrepreneurship on Taobao in Chinese society, from female entrepreneurs’ individual perspectives. Thus, the study is positioned in the dynamic e-commerce landscape of China.

This small-scale case study has been conducted, which involves 14 female online storeowners on Taobao. Online female entrepreneurs constitute the base of this study, and share their accounts of the dramatic changes in their lives after they initiated their online businesses. The entire study departs from their actual experiences and opinions, which provide multiple perspectives, so as to garner further insights into the dominant research of female empowerment within the context of e-commerce. Their actual experiences and accounts are interpreted and examined, based primarily on Sen’s capability approach, while their actual capabilities and functionings are evaluated, based on the selected aspects of their situations.

This study claims that even though the female online storeowners believe they have a higher autonomy in managing their time and household duties, and an ability to act according to their will to achieve what they desire, the female online storeowners still do not regard themselves as entrepreneurs. The enhancements in the capabilities of the female online storeowners and their achieved functionings do not necessarily go beyond the online environment. This study aims to provide a solid departure for any further investigations into women’s empowerment through e-commerce on a societal level.

Key Words: capabilities, capability approach, e-commerce, functionings, female empowerment, female entrepreneurs, China
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Chapter 1 Introduction

1.1 Introduction

The growth of e-commerce has become an ever expanding global phenomenon, and the influence of online business and e-commerce has been dramatic and wide-reaching (Pablos and Lytras 2009, 401). During the past decade, widely accessible mobile Internet, convenient and low-cost delivery systems, sophisticated online payment systems and unbranded products featuring low prices provide excellent conditions for e-commerce to significantly expand in China (Goldman Sachs 2016). The frenetic boost of e-commerce in China can hardly be overlooked, especially since the final gross merchandise value (GMV) of several Chinese e-commerce platforms reached over 14 billion US dollars on the 11th of November 2015 (Erickson 2015), which has certainly become a huge hit within the history of e-commerce in China. Furthermore, the 11th of November is known as Single’s Day in China, as the month and day are represented by ‘ones’ (11/11). Alibaba Group initiated the Single’s day online promotion in 2009 for the first time, and then its rivals quickly copied the promotional event. This day has now been established as the biggest e-commerce sales day in China during the past seven years. China’s e-commerce market is now considered as one of the largest in the world, especially in terms of Internet connectivity and usage (Pablos and Lytras 2009, 402). Alibaba Group -the most famous and the largest Chinese e-commerce company- was established in 1999. Now it is a global leader in online and mobile commerce. Shopping from e-commerce platforms owned by Alibaba Group including Taobao or Tmall has become a popular lifestyle in China, in particular among the young generation.

At the first Global Conference on Women and Entrepreneurship, themed as the ‘She-Era’, the founder and executive chairman of the Alibaba Group, Jack Ma, advocated creating more opportunities for female entrepreneurs through online retail platforms (Jones 2015). Jack Ma further pointed out that the e-commerce industry is experiencing a transition to a ‘She-era’ (Ibid.). An official report released by the Alibaba Group (AliResearch 2015) reflects that women are not only the primary customers on those e-commerce platforms; they are also the primary sellers. The report indicates that more than 50% of the owners of Taobao Marketplace’s (often known as Taobao) online shops are women (Ibid.). China has a strong, vibrant and
growing e-commerce market, and this market involves active female participants - as both owners of online stores and consumers of online stores (Michael, Nettesheim and Zhou 2012). It appears that through online economic activities, Chinese women, more than ever, endeavor to compete with their male counterparts in the online business industry and step further into the business world that has, for the most part, dominated by male. However, this relatively high percentage of female participation in the e-commerce industry does not necessarily indicate that female entrepreneurs are more empowered in terms of enhanced capabilities through their online economic experiences, as it still remains unclear whether women’s situations are still destined or driven by traditional sociocultural ideologies and gender relations in China.

In order to gain a better understanding of women’s empowerment, and to encourage women to empower themselves by resorting to the power of technology, based on their involvement in the e-commerce industry, is not sufficient. The affordances of technologies obviously vary from context to context (Hutchby 2001; Wajcman 2004). Although there are many studies exploring the development of e-commerce in China (Li and Buhalis 2006; Martinsons 2002), yet there are blank spots or gaps in the field: not many up-to-date studies integrating the crossroads of women’s studies and e-commerce studies are provided in the Chinese context. The development of e-commerce in China is quite different in many aspects, from that of the other Western and Asian countries (Pablos and Lytras 2009, 401). Thereby, this small-scale case study will focus on how the female entrepreneurs’ capabilities and functionings are enhanced -from their perspectives- through various online economic activities on Taobao, and how these activities are decided upon.

This case study is based on women’s own accounts and real life experiences. Various technological deployments of individuals and the distinct effects are considered, classified and analyzed. The overall purpose of conducting such a study is to accurately examine whether the active participation of female entrepreneurs in the e-commerce industry entails their empowerment in terms of enhanced capabilities and functionings within the current Chinese society, as perceived from their perspectives. The study relies on Sen’s capability approach, and aims to develop an analytical understanding of female empowerment through online entrepreneurship. Moreover, the study wishes to provide an appropriate departure and useful implications for
further investigations regarding women’s empowerment through e-commerce on a societal level.

1.2 Research Questions and Purposes
The research question for this thesis is ‘How are female online entrepreneurs’ self-perceived capabilities and functionings enhanced through their online economic activities on Taobao in Chinese society?’ The entire study departs from the actual experiences and opinions of female entrepreneurs, which are believed to provide multiple perspectives, so as to attain further and deeper insights into the dominant research of female empowerment in the context of e-commerce. To answer this question, previous empirical studies of women’s empowerment and e-commerce need to be evaluated and reviewed. As a small-scale case study that originates from the actual lives of the female online entrepreneurs is conducted, the research question tends to be divided several sub-questions, which are formulated as follows:

1. How are the capabilities of female entrepreneurs enhanced according to them after they commence their online business on Taobao?
2. How are the functionings of female entrepreneurs improved according to them after they initiate their online business on Taobao?

The first and second sub-questions accurately reflect the primary purpose of this thesis, which is to explore how the actual capabilities and the functionings of female entrepreneurs are improved or enhanced through their online economic activities on Taobao, from their individual perspective. The last sub-question intends to reveal how female entrepreneurs perceive their online economic activities on Taobao, and how they perceive Taobao as a platform that encourages them to participate in the e-commerce industry. This sub-question also attempts to disclose whether female online storeowners regard themselves as entrepreneurs. In order to adequately answer all the sub-questions, a small-scale case study involving 14 female entrepreneurs on Taobao is conducted. Moreover, new understandings and perceptions of the empowerment of Chinese women through their e-commerce activities in the current society are to be generated.
1.3 Thesis Structure

This master’s thesis includes seven chapters. This chapter serves as the general introduction to the whole study. The aim of the study is clarified, the significance and the contribution of the research are addressed, and the structure of the thesis is illustrated. The next section provides readers with the necessary background information on the topic of the study. It also aims to pave the way for developing related concepts in the following sections. How e-commerce has developed in China and how women’s status has been changed in the past decades are presented.

Chapter 3 is a literature view that focuses on how the previous studies examine and understand the empowerment of women through their utilization of information and communication technologies (ICTs). At the end of this section, the progress and the current gaps in the field are illustrated.

Chapter 4 provides a review from a theoretical perspective. This chapter starts with the definitions and the clarifications of the related concepts and theories such as empowerment and standpoint epistemology. Moreover, the analytical theory -Sen’s Capability Approach- that will be applied in analyzing the empirical materials is introduced.

Chapter 5 presents the method and the methodology of this study. The research design of the whole study is clarified here. The sampling technique and the reason of focusing on those certain samples are explained. Ethics, as well as the limitations of the research method, is discussed in this chapter.

Chapter 6 presents the analysis of the gathered data. The chapter is divided into two parts. The first section presents the general information of the interviewers. The following section relies on Sen’s capability approach, which is also built at the intersection of the concepts and theories presented in the theoretical framework and the empirical data collected from the interviews.

Chapter 7 gives conclusions of the study. In this chapter, I summarize the main arguments of the thesis and reflect upon my research questions. The limitations of the
study are also outlined. Last but not least, different directions of future investigations are provided for the future inquiries into the potential female empowerment related to ICTs.
Chapter 2 Background

In this chapter, the necessary information about the topic of study is presented so as to give the readers a general idea of the research. This chapter is divided into two parts. The first part discusses the development of e-commerce in China in the past two decades and the main driving forces behind this fast e-commerce growth. How Taobao functions as well as its key features are briefly introduced in this part. The second part is a general review of women’s situation in China in the past fifty years. The gender imbalance and the gender inequality in the current labor market in China are presented.

2.1 The development of E-commerce in China

In 2000, there were only 2.1 million Internet users in China (Wei 2013). Fourteen years later, by the end of 2014 the number of Internet users in China has surpassed 668 million (Meng 2015). Online shopping was hard to image two decades ago. Back at that time, the Internet penetration was low, and there were no successful e-commerce platforms nor sophisticated payment systems. With the quick development of the digital retailing, the shopping and purchasing habits of the Chinese people have been notably changed (Hoffmann and Lannes 2013, 1). The number of online shoppers in China increased to more than 361 million in 2014 (CIW 2015). China’s total e-commerce sales (excluding travel and events tickets) in 2015 reached $672 billion, which shares 40% of the global retail e-commerce sales (Ibid.).

The American companies -EBay and Amazon- were among the first to establish the prominent e-commerce brands. But now Alibaba Group becomes the one that dominates the market (The Economist 2013). The total revenue of all the portals of Alibaba Group in the year 2011 and 2012 reached $170 billion, more than eBay and Amazon combined (Ibid.). In the annual report of the securities exchange for the fiscal year ended March 31, 2015, Alibaba Group announced that their active buyers - user accounts that confirmed one or more orders on the relevant marketplace, regardless of whether the buyer or the seller settle the transaction- reached 350 million on all their e-commerce platforms. According to Jack Ma, founder of Alibaba group, one of the biggest differences between the e-commerce industry in China and the USA is that e-commerce in China has become a lifestyle while it still remains as
an online shopping behavior in the USA (He 2013). In the next section, the history of Taobao and Alibaba Group is briefly introduced to answer the questions above.

2.1.1 Alibaba Group and Taobao

Alibaba group was founded in 1999. The founders started the company to champion small businesses on the Internet and aimed to enable small enterprises to leverage technologies and innovation to compete against traditional companies more effectively in the domestic and global economies. Currently, the company, as the world largest online and mobile marketplace, is made up of several e-commerce companies including Alipay, Tmall, and Taobao, each of which has its own features.

In 2003, Taobao was established by Alibaba Group as a consumer e-commerce platform. At that time, Taobao covered both business-to-customer (B2C) and customer-to-customer (C2C) businesses. In 2011, Alibaba Group reorganized Taobao into three separate companies: Taobao Marketplace (known as Taobao) that only has C2C business, Tmall that provides B2C business to complement the C2C business on Taobao, and ETao that is a comparison-shopping website offering search results of various Chinese online shopping sites.

As the biggest e-commerce platform of Alibaba Group, Taobao runs a free-of-charge business strategy. It is free to use the website for both ends -buyer and seller. The primary revenue of the site is from advertising. Individual online shop owners can post both used and new goods for sale or resale at a fixed price or by auction. All the transactions are processed directly between individual sellers and customers through the third-party online payment service -Alipay. Alipay is the most widely used online and mobile payment system in China. After connecting the bank account to an Alipay account, one can simply transfer money to or receive money from a friend who also has an Alipay account. An integrated chat system named AliWangWang also plays a significant role on Taobao. It allows traders to understand the needs of their customers quickly and to manage the after-sale services efficiently. This embedded instant messenger enables buyers to communicate with sellers instantly whenever they have any questions relating to the products or the services.

As is already mentioned, it is entirely free for the potential merchants to set up a new
shop on Taobao. Nevertheless, one needs to complete the authentication process on Alipay as the first step to launch a new store on Taobao. The potential trader needs to do one remittance regardless of the amount to the Alipay account that will be used for the online shop. The second and also last step is to get authenticated on Taobao. The potential trader is required to upload one full-face picture taken with a Chinese ID holding in the hand together with the identifiable pictures of both the front and the back side of the ID. While requesting for opening a new store, neither commission fee nor initial capitals needs to be presented. All the authentications can be simply accomplished online, and there is no need for one to present physically to deal with the rigmaroles of starting a company as in the offline world. In addition, Taobao offers detailed guidance and Q&A service exclusively for potential shop owners on a separate website: sellerhelp.taobao.com. New online storeowners can get free access to the necessary tools and techniques of managing online stores.

Contrary of the advantages mentioned above, there are certain drawbacks associated with Taobao that should not be overlooked. China’s e-commerce appears to be flourishing; however, it faces many issues at the same time (Zhang et al. 2013, 299). One of the challenges is the trust fraud problem (Ibid.); similar to that of Amazon and eBay, Taobao considers customers’ feedback and reviews as the most excellent source of reference. Moreover, Taobao encourages all customers to give their evaluations and comments of the products, so that future customers may select a trustworthy and reliable online shop. Thus, the online storeowners strive to achieve a higher trust level as quickly as possible; however, some scammers began to provide services to artificially boost the reputation of the stores (Ibid., 300). Most of the trust fraud activities on Taobao are well organized by professional software engineers, who detect vulnerabilities within the system and develop brush diamond platforms to quickly boost the store reputation (Ibid., 302). Moreover, the immature tax policies and the imperfect policies of protecting the rights of shop owners and customers have led to numerous other controversies over the trust issues (Wang and Teng 2011). Since Taobao does not require any documents, other than a valid ID and an Alipay account to establish a shop, the quality of the goods cannot be guaranteed, which has also led to a significant trust crisis in recent years (Schuman 2015; Sauer 2016).

Trust and fraud are some of the issues on Taobao that many storeowners are trapped
in. Taobao has this specific rule that if the seller is not able to deliver the goods within 15 days, the buyer can receive the payment back plus an extra 10% of the payment. Some fraudsters take advantage of this flaw in the rules, and place orders one right after another, in order to receive compensation. For example, one fraudster received RMB160,000 (approximately $25,000) within a month. Chueng (2016, 412) demonstrated that in order to ensure a fair playing field for China’s new entrepreneurs, often known as ‘e-tailers’, it may require the government’s effective intervention or supervision, but still allow the virtual marketplace to take its own course.

2.1.2 Driving factors behind the development of e-commerce in China

China’s e-commerce market has grown speedily in the past fifteen years, and is now the No.1 digital retail market in terms of value and penetration (Hoffmann and Lannes 2013, 1). A number of issues relating to the penetration rate of Internet, the state of government, digital payment systems, unique aspects of Chinese culture and society have impacted upon the acceptance and usage of e-commerce in China (Pablos and Lytras 2009, 402).

The rising penetration rate of Internet in recent years is a vital key to the success of e-commerce and Taobao in China. The China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC) reports that by the end of June 2015, the Internet penetration rate in China reached 48.8% and the number of Internet users has reached 668 million. However, the Internet penetration rate continues to be relatively low in the rural areas, with an estimated gap of 34.1% lower than that of the urban areas (CNNIC 2015). Nevertheless, there is the potentiality that more rural people would become netizens, since the net increase is steady and very promising (Ibid.). In general, China could be viewed as two countries in one, at least in terms of Internet usage and the e-commerce market potential (Pablos and Lytras 2009, 403). The coastal provinces, the areas with larger populations, businesses and larger numbers of educated individuals comprise the more developed areas, while the interior regions represent people who have limited incomes, infrastructures and access to the Internet and e-commerce (Ibid., 403-404).
Among all the Internet users, the percentage of those who use mobile phones to access the Internet increased from 85.5% to 88.9% within the first six months of 2015, showing that smartphones are becoming a more convenient means and an important terminal to access the Internet (CNNIC 2015). The increasing coverage of the smartphones enables people to do online shopping much easier. People are not restricted by the time and space as long as they have access to the Internet via smartphones. Within a couple of clicks on the phone screen, orders are sent, and goods wait to be shipped.

The fast development of China’s logistic industry cannot be overlooked when discussing the e-commerce boom in China. In the past four years, the annual increase of the business volume in China’s logistic industry was over 50% (Xinhuanet 2015). In 2014, there have been express delivery stations and pick-up stations in the 48% of the villages and counties in China (Ibid.). The mature logistic system breaks the boundaries of different areas and regions and connects the whole country into a unified and efficient market, which plays a decisive role in the allocation of resources (Ibid.). If there were no logistic industry at this scale, Alibaba Group and the e-commerce wouldn’t have gained such success (Ibid.).

Furthermore, due to the absence of several western social media platforms including Facebook and Twitter, netizens in China turn to the Chinese equivalents such as Weibo and WeChat. Those alternative social media platforms become an important facilitator of e-commerce activity of Chinese netizens (Stanley and Ritacca 2014, 4). Chinese online costumers rely on those social media platforms for the instantaneous feedback and advices from key opinion leaders (Ibid.). For the potential customers, the social media platforms offer them diverse mediums to find out references regarding the stores, merchandise, and service. The emergence of Chinese social media networking also provides online entrepreneurs with more possibilities to promote their shops and merchandise. Many retailers develop a sophisticated social media presence through multiple social media channels to increase their revenue (Ibid.)

While Chinese government does not ban foreign e-commerce companies from operating in China, yet it does not make their development easier (Einhorn 2014). In
China, the business is greatly based on the relationship with the government officials, the personal connections and relationships (Yang 2011, 164). As a local company in China, Alibaba Group has the advantage of maintaining an amicable relationship with the local government and has the particular insights into the diverse customer behaviors. The netizen population in China is not only huge; it is also very diverse, in terms of consumer behavior and shopping patterns due to income, age and location (Stanley and Ritacca 2014, 5). For the Chinese customers, pricing is a sensitive issue and localization is essential (Ibid.). Apart from being popular among the white-collars in the big cities, Alibaba Group also cooperates with the local governments to build service centers in over 600 counties and 40,000 villages where a wide selection of goods and service with affordable prices for customers living in the rural areas is provided, and people can engage in purchasing and delivery services (Alibaba Group 2016).

All the factors mentioned above are key to the quick development of e-commerce and the success of Alibaba Group and Taobao in China, which include the steadily growing rate of Internet penetration, the widely accessible Internet via smartphones, the convenient and low-cost delivery system, the advantageous payment system Alipay, the close relationship with the local government and the emergence of Chinese social media platforms.

2.2 Women’s situation in China

In this section, a brief review of women’s traditional secondary status in China is presented. This part illustrates the Confucian and the communist ideals of the Chinese women’s status in the family and the society. It further discusses how Chinese women’s situation has changed over the years. The gender imbalance and the gender inequality in the current labor market in China are presented.

2.2.1 Women’s role and status in China

Even though China has gone through great economic and social modernizations in the past decades, it is still questionable to say that women’s status has changed significantly. Women from the urban and coastal areas in China have experienced great emancipation and liberation compare to those from the remote rural areas, who
still retain their ‘secondary’ status in many spheres of life (Attané 2013, 119; Luo and Hao 2007, 284). Several characteristics of traditional Chinese culture have been influencing the female’s status in Chinese society over the years.

One of the reasons that the thinking ‘men are superior to women’ (Attané 2013, 91) is still rooted firmly in Chinese society is that the traditional Chinese cultures including Confucianism and Daoism persist till today. Confucianism and Daoism have great influences on Chinese people’s lives and behavior from generation to generation. Confucian doctrine ‘uphold(s) the concept of women’s social inferiority to men’ (Attané 2013, 92). The doctrine elucidates that women’s first duty is to take care of the family and to give birth to male children (Ibid.). Daoism promotes a relatively favorable image of women stating that ‘woman as great mother is the beginning of all things’ (Ibid., 93). In other words, Confucianism governs the social relations of men and women while Daoism governs their intimate relations (Ibid.). Chinese women used to be bounded by the feudal ethics during the period of feudalism, which are known as ‘the three obediences’ -to father and brother before marriage, to husband after marriage, and to sons if she was widowed- and the ‘four virtues’ -fidelity, physical charm, good manners, and efficiency in housework (Su 2003, 46). In other words, the highest life value and lifelong goal of a woman were to be a filial woman taking care of the families, a dutiful and loyalty wife to the husband and a good mother to the sons. Those norms promoted a patrilocal marriage system and made women to be subordinate to men in the traditional Chinese society. Gender imbalance and inequality are part of the traditional system of norms and values in China (Attané 2013; West 1999).

New ideals such as ‘What men can do, women can also do’ and ‘Women hold up half of sky’ are promoted after the 1949 revolution (West 1999, 89). The government started to encourage women to enter the labor market and implemented specific measures to ensure female’s participation in the labor force (Dasgupta, Matsumoto and Xia 2015, 1). Post-Mao economic reforms from 1978 brought the establishment of the labor market as one of the substantial outcomes (West 1999, 90). The economic reforms leaded China to shift from state socialism to market socialism, and more women entered the labor market. With the social and economic modernizations, women in China started to join high social liberations such as going from stay-at-
home to office work. The corresponding changes of economic reforms in the late 1970s in the ideological, political and social structures of the society have great influence on Chinese women’s lives (Ibid.).

Despite the fact that many social and economic reforms have benefited the Chinese women after 1949, Social relations between men and women are still greatly influenced by the traditional Chinese ideologies. And a self-perpetuating process of stereotype and perception of women continues. The patriarchal clan system that used to be the foundation of traditional Chinese society is no longer the core of contemporary social organization, but the ideology has survived (Attané 2013, 95), so has the patrilocal marriage system. The abandon of female fetuses is also one of the stark manifestations of a clear preference for males. According to the statistic revealed by the United Nations and Nomura Global Economics (Badkar 2011), the number of male births per 100 female births in China is almost 120 in 2015. The gender ratio shows that there is still a strong preference for boys in the modern Chinese families. Family solidarity remains strong, marriage system benefits males and women still retain in a secondary status in many places in China especially in rural areas where traditional ideologies are prevalent (Attané 2013, 119-121).

When it comes to the women in the labor market in China, the data from a report of the International Labor Organization (ILO) show that female’s participation in the labor market in China is one of highest in all Asian countries (Dasgupta, Matsumoto and Xia 2015, 1). Nevertheless, in the traditional labor market in China, women and men of similar socioeconomic backgrounds would end up with different-wage occupations due to the gender discrimination and gender stereotypes (Ibid., ix). The traditional norm that women should be responsible for housework and should take good care of the family is still common in contemporary China. Women in China still encounter great disadvantages in terms of jobs and pay (Attané 2013, 95; Dasgupta, Matsumoto and Xia 2015). Women are more likely employed as business service personnel (Dasgupta, Matsumoto and Xia 2015). The share of women in related occupations reached over 50% in 2012 (Ibid., 11). However, when it comes to the profession as a unit head, the share of women is only 22 percent (Ibid.).
The wide gender pay gap, as well as the gender discrimination in employment, is even worse in the management levels (Ibid., 3). Women earn much less than men and encounter more obstacles when attempting to enter the company’s top management level. Typically, only 16.8% of senior managers are female in China (Ibid.). Traditional stereotypes are still very much valid; thus, leaders are predominantly masculine and, in general, people view leaders as being more relative to men than to women (Eagly and Sabine 2009, 25-26). This prejudice against female leaders has designated women to an unjust and inferior position (Ibid., 26). Considerable segregation still widely exists, especially within the occupational level of managers, and most female managers are still concentrated in the service sector, which culturally and traditionally evoke a softer and more amiable image (Ibid., 34). This phenomenon— that women remain largely underrepresented, while the wage gaps are even larger than average at the top management levels of the labor market and across different occupations— is referred to as the glass ceiling effect, which is also pervasive in China. This well-known metaphor is applied to describe ‘a barrier so subtle that it is transparent, yet so strong that it prevents women and minorities from moving up in the management hierarchy’ (Morrison and Von Glinow 1990, 200). In China, the gendered division of labor, the traditional patriarchal stereotyping of social roles of women, and the male-centered social practices create an artificial ceiling that restricts females’ professional development and advancement within the society.

2.2.2 Female entrepreneurs on Taobao
In the traditional labor market in China, women are found to be the inferiors, and the existed vast gender gap in labor force makes it difficult for them to break through the glass ceiling. However, it does not seem to be the same case in the e-commerce industry. According to the research report titled The Internet Age and She-Era (AliResearch 2015), female-owned online shops constituted more than 46 percent of online transaction in 2014. According to the report, there are in total 8.5 million active online shops on Taobao, more than 50% of whose owners are women (Ibid.). This figure becomes a sharp contrast with the ratio of female startups in traditional industries in 67 economy entities where women entrepreneurs only account for 3.6% of participants on average (Ibid.). Setting aside whether comparing the statistics of those economy entities with that of China alone is proper or not, the approaching balance of both genders on Taobao does imply that Chinese women are finding a path
to step further into business and to compete with their male counterparts in the online environment. It seems that female entrepreneurs in China are ‘edging out their male counterparts in the booming online shopping industry (Yan and Zhou 2015)’.

The average age of female entrepreneurs is 32.6 years old; women born in the 1980s and the 1990s constitute the main body of online entrepreneurs on Taobao (AliResearch 2015). The proportion of female entrepreneurs in three northeastern provinces of China is the highest -reached almost 60%- compared to other regions. The preferred sectors often chosen by female entrepreneurs include baby care and maternity products, garments, cosmetics and jewelry; however, those only cover slightly over half of all the sectors that women venture into. While some continuing to operate in female-dominated areas such as cosmetics and maternal supplies, more female traders start to move away from those industries traditionally associated with women; they start to turn to sectors that were previously dominated by the opposite gender, such as home appliance, digital products, furniture and sporting goods. For instance, over 35 percent of stores dealing with digital products and furniture are run by women in 2014 compared to less than 25 percent in 2005. It is also noticed that in the industries where there are fewer female traders, women’s advantages are salient. The average of annual turnover of shops owned by female entrepreneurs is higher that that of male-own shops in those sectors.

2.3 Summary
In the first part of this chapter, the history of Alibaba Group including its subsidiaries Taobao and Alipay is introduced. The key characteristic of Taobao is its free-of-charge business strategy. The increasing penetration rate of Internet in both urban and rural areas, the advantageous delivery system, the sophisticated payment system and the emergence of Chinese social media platforms impel e-commerce to take off and make online shopping become a lifestyle in China. The good relationship between Alibaba Group and the government officials also ensures the success of Taobao in China. Moreover, thousands of products of variable prices cater for people’s different demand in terms of the diverse consumes culture and the shopping patterns in relation to the income, age and location of the online shoppers. On the contrary to those strengths, Taobao is criticized for its insufficient supervision on the quality of the
In the second part, women’s situation in China over the years is presented and discussed. In general, women’s situations in Chinese society are largely improved after the economic and social modernizations. However, the traditional Chinese ideologies are still influential in the current society. In the labor market, the phenomenon of glass ceiling is still prevalent, and Chinese women still experience gender inequality in terms of profession and pay. In the next section, several empirical studies discussing the female empowerment through ICT practices are reviewed and the current progress and existing gaps in the related field are presented.
Chapter 3 Literature Review

In this chapter, several empirical studies relative to female empowerment through ICTs are presented and discussed. One of the key elements to the success of empowerment efforts, according to Narayan (2002, p.18), is the access to information, in which ICTs certainly play a pivotal role nowadays. There have been many studies claiming that ICTs have introduced enormous opportunities for women at different levels, and that ICTs have been endorsing multiple positive innovations, including empowering marginalized and minority groups, such as rural women (Rahman 2005; Khan and Ghadially 2010; Maier and Nair-Reichert 2008; Masika and Bailur 2015; UNDP 2012). In the first part of this chapter, the study presents and examines how the previous empirical researches perceived and examined women’s empowerment through their deployment of technologies. In the second part, several empirical studies conducted in the Chinese context are also introduced, while toward the end of the chapter, the current progress, as well as the existing gaps in the field are adequately summarized.

3.1 Previous related research

UNDP points out that technologies such as mobiles are empowering women in multiple ways, one of which is that the historically resistant barriers to the access of information are disintegrating (2012, 26-27). The development of ICTs has significant implications to the possibilities for empowering women through networking and information exchange in society. It seems to be overwhelmingly agreed that the omnipresence of ICTs provides more people with great potential of female empowerment (Huyer and Sikuska 2003; Wamala 2012, 11; Meera 2013; Maier and Nair-Reichert 2008). ICTs have been considered as one of the solutions for the comprehensive development, and they in general hold the empowerment potential for the marginalized and disempowered groups, and in particular an equalization potential for women (Khan and Ghadially 2010, 670; Maier and Nair-Reichert 2008, 43).

However, the assertion -ICTs result in great positive subsequences in female empowerment- often assumes that all the individuals would have the equal chances of accessing to technologies and would be able to utilize technologies strategically.
According to Buskens and Webb (2009, 206), it is the deployment of ICTs that can be empowering rather than the technology itself. Moreover, for there to be any substantial changes and improvement, women have to be the active agent. The worldwide inequality in access to ICTs suggests that many social groups including women are hindered from ICTs, which is referred to as gender digital divide (Wamala 2012, 3). This concept of gender digital divide implies that women all over the world (especially those in the less-developed areas) use ICTs to a lesser extent than men (Wamala 2012; Svensson 2014). Specifically, women still face many constraints than men in access and use of ICTs, usability and literacy of ICTs, development and design of digital technologies (Melhem et al. 2009, 12-13). With the existing gendered digital gap, policies need to be ratified to encourage technology use amongst the disadvantage groups (Khan and Ghadially 2010, 670).

The availability of technologies is only one aspect influencing the potential for empowering women; other sociocultural aspects such as ethnicity, region and education also have great effects (UNDAW 2005; Jejeebhoy and Sathar 2001; Kole 2001). Women’s empowerment through their deployment of ICTs is largely formed by special contextuality and specific circumstances (Masika and Bailur 2005). Women in contrasting sociocultural contexts develop different strategies, and their diverse experiences provides rich data to contextualize the patriarchal systems and the gendered ideologies (Ibid., 48). The rather new concept –situated empowerment-developed by Larsson and Svensson (2015) also reflects that the empowerment of women through their use of mobile phones in the street market in Uganda is in a dialectical way, which depends not only on the technology itself but also on the social relations around the contextual communication practices (Larsson and Svensson 2015, 217-218). Thus, the actual practices and implications of technologies are highly contextual and related to the situations of women under different circumstances. Jejeebhoy and Sathar (2001) also highlight the contextuality in studying women’s autonomy in terms of decision-making, mobility, freedom from husband, and access to and control over economic resources in South Asia. The two scholars (Jejeebhoy and Sathar 2001, 705) promote that the socio-cultural and regional contexts make great differences in determining women’s autonomy in South Asian. Therefore, both technological and social issues including gender and context need to be addressed when theorizing women’s Internet working (Kole 2001, 155). For instance, women
who work in NGOs in the different areas in Africa develop distinct Internet practices, and the interests and demands of those women are gendered and contextualized (Ibid.). They have distinct needs and problems in the specific areas where they live.

In many cases women decide the extent to which they adopt a particular technology based on their understanding of how the decision will affect the gender equilibrium (Masika and Bailur 2005, 43). For instance, the street market women in Uganda have various perceptions of whether there occur any substantial changes in their lives (Larsson and Svensson 2015). Not all of them have the same understanding of the role of mobile phones in their business and lives, which result from their diverse backgrounds. It is noticed that those market women are not using mobile phones in identical ways; for instance, some never use mobile phones at home so as to keep an amicable domestic relation with their husband in the patriarchal and gendered local environment (Ibid.). Some of the market women acknowledge that they feel themselves empowered through economic activities and less dependent on their husbands, yet the positive consequences hardly go beyond the economic field (Larsson and Svensson 2015). Their situation in domestic relation has not been improved, and they are still entangled in the patriarchal social system (Ibid.). Various consequences brought by ICTs occur due to the different contexts, so do individual understandings and standpoints of using technologies (Kole 2001). What entails empowering women under certain circumstances does not necessarily have same implications for those in other countries; likewise, what changes women’s situation in one area in Africa does not imply that it would bring the same subsequences to the lives of women in other regions; rather, it might even lead to divergent consequences.

Therefore, it is not enough for us to merely recognize the uneven physical access to technologies; we also need to address people’s ability to utilize the technology, the information and the resources provided at the same time (UNDAW 2005, 7). People with different educational levels, sociocultural backgrounds and capabilities such as digital literacy and technology literacy would deploy the information and the technology to various extents. It is worth noting that people from the same social context may not have equal access or competence to ICTs due to various constraints such as poverty and illiteracy (Ibid.). For instance, women in the global South face multiple more sociocultural barriers (Kole 2001).
3.2 In the context of China

Although there are numerous studies examining the e-commerce situation in China (Li & Buhalis 2006; Martinsons 2002), and most studies posit that e-commerce equals empowerment for companies or entails the economic empowerment of individuals; yet, not many up-to-date studies at the intersection of e-commerce and women’s studies in China can be found. According to the official statistics (CNNIC 2014, 31), by the end of 2014, the percentage of women using the Internet accounted for 43.6% of all Internet users. This number is certainly impressive, in terms of percentage; however, it remains unclear just how those female users make use of the Internet. The report also highlights that the lack of computer and Internet knowledge, as well as application skills are the primary causes of the big digital gap between netizens and non-netizens in China (Ibid., 26). Other undetected causes might include a person’s age (being too young or too old) and a lack of access to computers or Internet-access devices (Ibid.).

In a report by AliResearch (2015), it is mentioned that over 50% of the 8.5 million active online shops on Taobao are operated by females. The approaching balance of both genders on this e-commerce platform reflects that Chinese women are discovering a viable pathway to participate in the business world, an area where men used to dominate. However, there is a lack of any in-depth studies that adequately examine how women are deploying this e-commerce platform to achieve what they desire. Despite the fact that more than 50% of Taobao online shoppers are women (AliResearch 2015), it remains unclear, as to which ways and to what extent we can say that women are empowered through active participations in the e-commerce industry. All the figures mentioned in the report seem to merely describe an overall positive picture of women’s entrepreneurial situation in the era of e-commerce, which might be an overestimation.

China has experienced a unique economic transformation during the last few decades, and entrepreneurship has become a significant driver of economic growth (Hernandez et al. 2012, 426). Female entrepreneurship has been promoted, and female-run firms are fostered by the Chinese government and NGOs (Ibid., 427). However, the gender gap and inequality in entrepreneurial opportunities and success hinder Chinese females’ development (Ibid., 412). Furthermore, females in China often engage in
entrepreneurship in the informal sectors, but do not receive a high income (Ibid.). Additionally, Chinese female entrepreneurs do not exhibit a strong sense of self-efficacy and self-confidence, which are required to effectively engage in entrepreneurial opportunities (Arenius and Minniti 2005). This is because their self-efficacy and self-confidence are significantly influenced by traditional sociocultural norms regarding the social role and behavior of women in Chinese society (Hernandez et al. 2012, 423). Hence, in order to encourage female entrepreneurs in Chinese society, social and cultural barriers to women’s agency need to be deconstructed and alleviated (Ibid., 427). Targeted assistance from both governmental and non-governmental organizations are also required, so that the gender gap in entrepreneurship can be effectively reduced (Ibid., 411).

There are few up-to-date studies in China that explore how ICTs are deployed by people to empower themselves; however, several studies focus on how the minorities utilize ICTs and the online resources to search for help (Ding 2011; Chen 2005). Scholars posited that to study the social practices through ICTs would require specific comprehensions of the economic and social context in China (Ding 2011). Furthermore, the absence of the voices of the middle and lower classes within the system, inadequate justice policies, and the strict governmental surveillance on media, encourage people, especially those who are marginalized and powerless to satisfy their special needs through social networking sites (Ibid.).

3.3 Current progress and existing gaps
Beyond any doubt, ICTs provide more people with a wider access to technologies, including women; however, the improvements mostly occur under a variety of constraints. The previous empirical studies discussed here are in agreement that women’s empowerment through ICTs is never simple, straightforward and identical. First of all, the dynamic relationship between technologies and human beings is often ignored when discussing the consequences generated by ICTs in altering social relations and promoting female empowerment. In forming or changing any social relations, either the agency of human, and or that of technology has decisive effects; each underwrites the other. Ascribing the problem to the uneven access to technology alone tends to neglect the interactive relationship between technologies and human
beings.

Moreover, females’ practice of ICTs are significantly shaped by the gender-related structures’ constraint in the given context (Kabeer 2011, 500), and the implications may also vary among the societies where they take place. The previous studies in the field often adopt a situated theoretical perspective, and the assertion that ICTs result in positive consequences in women’s empowerment tends to overlook the specific contexts and distinctive standpoints of women. Even though ICTs provide women with tremendous resources and conveniences, there are still persistent traditional obstacles, as well as many new challenges for women. For instance, apart from receiving more opportunities and higher profits through ICTs, women running businesses in e-commerce continue to face the same obstacles that often occur within the traditional business environment, such as lacking sufficient and consistent funding (Maier and Naire-Reicher 2008, 46). The societal challenges, including the resistance to female empowerment, still exist in our present society (Ibid.).

When focusing on the Chinese context, few studies have been discovered in the field of female empowerment through ICTs. Most simply focus on the digital divide and lack the consideration of the other sociocultural influencing factors. To fully comprehend and examine female empowerment through ICTs, it requires careful and specific inquiry into women’s actual experiences and situations, their exact capabilities and the various social relations around the contextual technology practices. This study directs the focus on the online female entrepreneurs’ enhanced agency and autonomy, and is viewed merely as part of the dynamic e-commerce landscape from their individual perspective. Influential factors, including the specific Chinese context, various experiences and backgrounds need to be taken into account. In the following chapter, the related concepts and theories including ‘empowerment’ and ‘capability approach’ are reviewed and discussed, so as to provide a more theoretical knowledge base for investigating the emerging ‘she-commerce’ phenomena.
Chapter 4 Theoretical Framework

This chapter aims to give a comprehensive review of concepts and theories from a theoretical perspective. The analytical theory approach that will be applied in evaluating the empirical data collected from interviews is also presented.

First, based on the context of the study, I will introduce the history of feminist waves and the issues concerned briefly. The standpoint feminism by Sandra Harding (1991) is presented, as it emphasizes women’s real life experiences and their most distinctive prominent standpoints in investigating women’s issues. Second, the important aspects of female empowerment are summarized, so as to provide a systematic review of the concept. Third, Amartya Sen’s capability approach (1985; 1990), which focuses, to a large extent, on non-economic enabling factors, will be appropriately applied to analyze the empirical. It examines people’s real capabilities, as well as their effective freedoms, thereby allowing them to improve their well-being. Then the relationship between the digital and empowerment is discussed. The concept of female entrepreneurship is introduced in relation to empowerment.

4.1 Feminism

Based on the context of this study, I believe it is essential to introduce the history of feminist waves and the issues related with each wave briefly. Despite the fact that feminism is becoming an increasingly accepted part of ordinary social and political discourse (Beasley 1999, x), it is still considered a bit controversial by its nature and definition. It has been assigned different meanings throughout history, based primarily on the perspectives of the people who apply it (Easton 2012, 99). Feminism entails a variety of approaches; yet, it is often concerned with equality (Beasley 1999, x). It could be referred to as a movement that works to gain economic, political and social equality with men (Adhikari 2013, 276). Moreover, it is advocating for ‘women’s equal rights in the society politically, operationally, economically and socially without discrimination or reference against their sex (Ibid.).’ It also includes seeking to build and establish equal opportunities for women within the areas of education and employment.
4.1.1 Feminism and its waves
The history of modern feminism and its movements are defined by three ‘waves’, each of which manage different aspects of some feminist issues. The first wave of feminism was characterized with the women’s suffrage movements of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, where women fought to gain the right to vote and to enable them to attain equal power in political matters with men, thereby being able to bring about changes. The second wave, advocated for legal and social equality for women, which came about at the beginning of the 1960s and lasted through the 1970s (Easton 2012, 99). It aimed to provide or offer women ‘equality in education, the workplace, and the home (Ibid.)’. However, the second wave was often criticized for giving priority to the problems of middle-class white women. Hence, the issues and oppression of non-white women from other social classes and minorities, such as transgender women were often ruled out in the second wave of feminism. The upcoming third wave was initiated as a response to the various failures of the second wave, and absorbed previous criticisms about gender, race and class, and sought to negotiate space within feminist thoughts. Moreover, it challenges female heterosexuality, and takes race-related subjectivities into consideration (Heywood and Drake 1997).

There are different views regarding contemporary feminism and its movements. Some scholars argue that we are still experiencing the third wave of feminism, while others proffer that a fourth wave of feminist movements is emerging, because of the development and adaption of ICTs in feminist movements. According to Phillips and Cree (2014), social media create significant space and is giving birth to the fourth wave of feminism (938).

Feminism in China has been impacted by Western feminist theory, but also developed its own distinctions, due to various linguistic and cultural contexts (Spakowski 2001). According to Xiaojiang Li (cited in Spakowski 2001, 36-37), a truly local type of feminism reached its peak in the 1980s, which expressed a new subjectivity of Chinese women. However, it was interrupted toward the beginning of the 1990s, due to the huge influence of Western feminism (Ibid.). Nevertheless, feminism in China continued to develop within its own unique boundaries. For example, the different notions or translations of gender, produced different stories relating to the
characteristics of Chinese women’s studies (Spakowski 2001, 34-35). Chinese women’s studies are, therefore, characterized with “local research”, “localization” and “regionalization” (Spakowski 2001). The specific nature of certain women’s issues in China calls for specific solutions, and there is the necessity to produce feminist knowledge through considering local discursive contexts. More importantly, feminism in China cannot be discussed without remembering or reflecting on the tradition of the commitment to women’s issues and the use of Chinese history as a meaningful legacy and resource (Ibid., 48).

### 4.1.2 Standpoint Feminism

Standpoint theory is a feminist theoretical point of view, which addresses that certain socio-political positions occupied by women and marginalized groups can become productive starting points for enquiry into issues about both those who are socially and politically marginalized and those who are at the positions of oppressors (Kenney and Kinsella 1997). Sandra Harding (1991) develops the standpoint feminist and argues that the feminist standpoint epistemology provides a comprehensive and dynamic method in which to thoroughly examine implications of technologies, by departing from women’s actual experience. Many argue that ICTs or e-commerce offer more opportunities for women to become emancipated and empowered. However, the understandings of the potential empowerment of women, brought about by ICTs vary not only from country to country, but also from person to person with distinctive sociocultural backgrounds, such as social class, economic situations, residence and educational level (Ibid.). Therefore, it is more rational and accountable to conclude that women are empowered, by taking their experiences and feelings into consideration.

The feminist standpoint theory developed by Sandra Harding (1991) foregrounds the experiences of the objects, the situations and the standpoints from which objects of inquiry evolve. A standpoint, according to Harding (2004, 8), is occupied as one’s socio-historical position, which is earned through the experience of struggle. Standpoint feminism promotes the idea of examining actual women’s experiences as the departure of study. Harding (1991, 152) notes that women’s experiences and their different viewpoints were, for the most part, ruled out for a long time in scientific inquiries. A conceptual framework, generated from a patriarchal system, would fail to
enable the marginalized and those who are overlooked to make sense of their own experiences within society. For example, Harding (1991) emphasizes that ‘the distinctive features of women’s situation in a gender-stratified society (be) used as resources […] (119)’. She (Ibid.) furthermore suggests that women’s experiences should be understood as a significant indicator of reality, and as a vantage point to study gender relations. The word ‘experiences’ is used, instead of its singular form, because women should not be viewed as a fixed category; instead, they are a crosscutting category, which overlaps with other disempowered groups of society, such as the poor, the minorities, etc. (Malhotra, Schuler and Boender 2002, 5). Experiences would vary from one woman to another. Moreover, there never exists a simple dichotomy of men and women; there are culturally different men and women, and gender experiences tend to vary across cultures as well (Harding 1991, 7). Women’s experiences and their accounts are promoted to be the departure of the study, which can provide some deeper insights, new angles and possibilities for taking into account a variety of issues regarding diversity and actual experiences.

Feminist standpoint epistemology leads us to rethink and attach significant importance to the gender differences, as well as the differences between diverse kinds of women and men. In other words, gender differences are situated. Looking into women’s situations and their experiences, as well as taking them as the departure of the study rather than excessively relying on masculine lives or statistical concepts, it would construct a more solid foundation for any investigations in women’s studies.

4.2 Female empowerment

In recent years, female empowerment has become an increasingly salient buzzword in social studies and research. It has been interpreted in a number of ways, due to the different parameters of assessment used by scholars. I attempt to develop a shared definition of female empowerment; one that accommodates the commonalities, as well as the divergences given the fundamental diversity in conceptualizing the concept.

Empowerment is imbued with many possible definitions regarding various fields of study. However, it is most broadly perceived as the ‘expansion of freedom of choice
and action (Narayan 2002, 14). It can be relevant at both individual and collective levels as well as, national and local levels, which could be economic, social or political (Ibid.). It is worth noting that gender differences may also lead to different causes, forms and consequences of empowerment or disempowerment (Ibid.). Women are neither a fixed group nor among the subsets of society; instead, they represent a crosscutting category that overlaps with other disempowered groups within society such as the poor, the minorities, etc. (Malhotra, Schuler and Boender 2002, 5). Consequently, there is a need to cover some unique elements, so as to enhance the understanding of women’s empowerment, rather than empowerment, as a general concept, where women are not at a central place in much of the related literature.

Kabeer (1999) offers a useful and practical definition of empowerment:

‘The expansion in people’s ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them (473).’

This definition of empowerment captures the basic commonalities of various definitions, and serves as an appropriate reference point in this thesis for comprehending female empowerment. It is widely accepted, and could be effectively applied across the wide range of contexts (Malhotra, Schuler and Boender 2002, 5). Female empowerment, as Kabeer (2011, 499) further explains, is not a static condition or objective; thus, it describes multidimensional procedures of change and development from a condition of disempowerment. Therefore, it can be interpreted as a process of expanding human agency, which encompasses people’s willingness and ability to question their subordinate status within society, and their capacity to compete in reshaping society, so as to earn social justice from their own individual perspectives (Ibid.). For instance, people who are free to exercise a great deal of choice are viewed as powerful and with a high level of autonomy; however, they are not empowered, since they were never disempowered in the first place, and no significant changes have ever been brought about.

There are different definitions of female empowerment that vary in the extent to which the scholars conceptualize. Alcoff (1988) defines female empowerment as a process in which women come to recognize, accept and exert their ability ‘to construct, and take responsibility for, [their] gendered identity, politics and choices (432)’. Keller and Mbwewe (1991, 78) characterize female empowerment as “a
process whereby women become able to organize themselves to increase their self-reliance, to assert their independent right to make choices and to control resources which will assist in challenging and eliminating their own subordination”. It is a course through which women attain more power and control over their lives. Narayan (2005, 3) considers that female empowerment may also be applied to any process that would enable ‘self-direction, self-worth and autonomy’. Griffin (1987, 117-118) posits out that female empowerment is defined and created mainly from women’s perspectives. According to Griffin (Ibid.), female empowerment indicates the process during which women attain greater access and control over the available resources, acquire an independent agency, have expansion of choice, garner broader social recognition and raise self-awareness. Despite the diversity in the emphases and discussions centered on women’s empowerment, there appears to be a broad consensus in the literature, especially where women’s agency and autonomy and empowerment as an ongoing process, are the central focus (Kabeer 1999, 2011; Alcoff 1988; Keller and Mbwewe 1991; Narayan 2005; Sen 1985).

**Agency**

Agency probably comes the closest to what the vast majority of scholars consider as being the essence of empowerment among all the concepts and terms encountered in the literature (Malhotra and Schuler 2005, 75). According to Malhotra and Schuler (2005, 75), agency describes the ability to maintain control over resources and to make strategic choices that would effectively influence life outcomes. Kabeer (1999, 438) defines agency as being directly related to the ability of individuals to set their own goals and act upon them. According to Kabeer (2011, 499), human agency also encompasses the ability to earn social justice from his or her own individual perspective. Amartya Sen (1985) regards agency as ‘what a person is free to do and achieve in pursuit of whatever goals or values he or she regards as important (203)’. Thus, agency is considered as a process of acquiring freedom and generating changes. Griffin (1987, 117-118) argues that women would come to realize that they are entitled to express any thoughts and opinions from their perspectives and to maintain their right to speak.

The agency of people is also highlighted in Kabeer’s (1999, 473) conceptualization of empowerment. Women must be the significant actors in the process where changes
have been produced. This simply means that, even if there occurs any improvement in
the indicators of gender equality, unless women get involved and play the key actors,
otherwise it would not be considered as female empowerment. Kabeer (2011, 499)
emphasizes the process of engaging people rather than what is done for and with
them.

As Kabeer (cited in Kishor 2005, 56) noted, when individual women act in ways that
are inconsistent with social norms, the impact of these actions tend to be somewhat
limited. This reveals the tensions between agency and structure. Malhotra et al. (2002,
9) posited that a positive institutional environment could provide the preconditions for
empowerment, namely, opportunities and access to economic, political and social
resources. Social structures, according to Narayan (Ibid.,5), are one of the key factors
that can ‘facilitate or constrain people’s efforts to improve their well-being’ and
‘affect broader development outcomes’. In other words, a favorable social
environment can facilitate female empowerment, whereas a disadvantageous one
would impede it. Moreover, empowerment outcomes are also mediated by the nature
of social structures - ‘the extent to which they are open or closed, inclusive or
exclusionary’ (Ibid., 9). Therefore, though agency is the very essence of women’s
empowerment, it does not necessarily mean that all changes and improvements must
be, or could be generated exclusively through women’s actions only, or that it is only
the responsibility of women to empower themselves (Malhotra and Schuler 2005, 73).

Resources such as enabling conditions are also a necessity or prerequisite (Malhotra et
al. 2002, 9). Moreover, institutions such as governments and organizations have the
responsibilities of promoting policies that strengthen gender equality and offer women
opportunities to appropriately exert their agency. A positive institutional environment
provides what could be considered preconditions for effective agency – namely
opportunities and access to economic, political and social resources; however, it does
not always lead to the individual’s control over the resources (Ibid.). Fruitful
resources, by themselves, are not sufficient, and improvements cannot be achieved
simply by resources or without women’s individual or collective ability to recognize
and to deploy according to their specific interests (Ibid.).
Autonomy

The strategic life choices in Kabeer’s definition of empowerment, according to Malhotra and Schuler (2005), refer to the ‘decisions that influence a person’s life trajectory and subsequent ability to exercise autonomy (78)’. Autonomy is another key component of empowerment. Female autonomy was firstly introduced by Dyson and Moore (1983), and is defined in terms of freedom to be actively involved in various kinds of activities (45). By autonomy, they (1983) mean:

‘[T]he capacity to manipulate one’s personal environment and the capacity – technical, social, and psychological- to obtain information and to use it as the basis for making decisions about one’s private concerns and those of one’s intimates. (45)’

Rowland and Schwartz (1991) regard autonomy as ‘a process characterized by growth of an ability to respond to people and situations rather than to react (616).’ The scholars further explain the distinction between responding and reacting: reacting simply means that a woman’s choices are structured according to beliefs, perspectives and perceptions belonging to the others while responding allows women to act based on their own knowledge, values and priorities (Ibid.). Autonomy, as a struggle for choice of response, in Rowland and Schwartz’s accounts, is ‘the bridge between the powerlessness of dependency and the empowerment of self (Ibid., 617)’. Thus, autonomy is understood as the inviolable right, the free will and the independent ability of an individual to make decisions and govern personal activities. Physical mobility, self-sufficiency and autonomous control tend to shape the ability of decision making within and outside the home, and are all meaningful indicators of female autonomy (Basu and Koolwal, 17). In the process of empowerment, attentions need to be focused on whether the autonomy of an individual has or has not been enhanced. For instance, people who are free to exercise a significant amount of choices are powerful and have a high level of autonomy; however, they are not empowered as they were never disempowered in the first place and no changes have ever been produced.

Autonomy and empowerment is sometimes considered as interchangeable terms (Jejeebhoy and Zeba 2000). For example, Jejeebhoy and Zeba (2001) define both autonomy and empowerment as ‘the control women have over their own lives -the
extent to which they have an equal voice with their husbands in [...] families, control over material and other resources, access to knowledge and information, the authority to make independent decisions, freedom from constraints on physical mobility, and the ability to forge equitable power relationships within families (688)’. However, in contrast, other scholars argue that autonomy is not interchangeable with empowerment (Malhotra and Mather 1997; Kabeer 1998). The essential difference is that female empowerment is a dynamic process and is dependent on other factors and enabling conditions, while autonomy indicates the independent ability of women to dominate and change their situations, so as to pursue what they desire (Basu and Koolwal 2005, 15). Narayan (2005, 6) describes empowerment as a relational concept, which emerges out of the interaction between the disempowered and their surrounding environment. When there are deep and systemic social stratification and cleavages, opportunities and accesses to services are determined less by individuals than by a culture of inequality (Tilly 1999 cited in Narayan 2005, 9).

As is recited, empowerment is a dynamic process where each component (agency, autonomy and enabling factors that facilitate the empowerment outcomes) is separated, so as to identify, clarify and evaluate the concept. Each merely refers to one facet of the whole on-going process (Malhotra et al. 2002, 10). This implies another fundamental characteristic of female empowerment, which is contextually specific. Kabeer (2011, 500) posits that any empowerment of women is based on specific contexts, and that those changes are shaped by the gender-related structures of constraint within the given context. Her accounts tend to emphasize that empowerment is characterized by a certain degree of dependence of multiple other social factors. Any forms of empowerment occur within the specific contexts, and are shaped by them (Ibid.). Kabeer’s understanding of empowerment shows that the meanings and the occurrences of empowerment vary according to the society in which it takes place, and it is greatly restrained and shaped by different sociocultural norms and structures.

Female empowerment is a process in which women produce effective consequences in their lives, and where their choices and abilities were previously denied. It is a course where women seek to achieve positive and meaningful outcomes to promote equality. Moreover, it is not a simple goal or static status that can be achieved merely
by an individual’s independent actions; rather, it is a fluid process that is restrained and shaped by a variety of different sociocultural structures. Female empowerment is also contextually specific. The difficulty in conceptualizing empowerment, in the meanwhile, reflects the complexity of accurately measuring it.

4.2.1 Empowerment, capabilities and functionings
There are many possible methods of measuring female empowerment by considering various aspects. These would comprise of measuring women’s mobility and independent decision-making abilities, or their achievements, which include substantial changes that could result from female empowerment (Kabeer 2000, 31-35). Moreover, economic variables, such as financial resources and economic production, often dominate the measurement of development (Sen 1990, 41-42). Amartya Sen (1990) argues that a country can be rich in conventional economic terms, but remain poor in regard to the quality of human life (42). One can also have considerable economic autonomy, but continue to remain very restrained in other relative social aspects (Ibid.), such as social status or social recognition. For instance, despite the fact that the market women in Uganda possess significant economic independence and have provided substantial economic contributions to their families, by involving mobile phones in their informal street market businesses, there has yet to occur any fundamental changes, other than the economic enhancement relating to their situations within the family or in society (Larsson and Svensson 2015, 11). Mobile phones have even become a convenient tool for husbands to surveil their wives (Ibid.). This example not only reflects the fact that economic independence or enhancement does not necessarily equate that women are empowered; it also highlights the importance of looking beyond mere economic factors when assessing the situations of women.

Simply asserting that women are empowered through their practices of ICTs is not unproblematic, especially when individuals’ capabilities vary, and the outcomes are often limited under diverse sociocultural circumstances. Thereby, in order to adequately understand whether and how women are empowered through their online economic production, it is sufficient to apply the capability approach when analyzing their distinct capabilities and various achieved functionings through their online economic activities.
The capability approach focuses on non-economic variables to assess the process of development and empowerment (Robeyns 2003, 7). Sen (Robeyns 2003, 63) criticizes that by only focusing on resources or commodities a person has follows the wrong method in which to examine one’s agency and wellbeing, as such an evaluation might hide important dimensions and lead to misleading comparisons. For instance, the resource-based research does not acknowledge that people differ in their capabilities to effectively use the resources due to the personal, social and environmental factors (Ibid.). The approach method does not deny the importance of resources in the process of empowerment; rather, it considers the inequalities in making use of resources as the significant causes of inequalities in capabilities and achieved functionings. Thus, the approach method not only looks into the traditional economic measurement, it also considers human life as ‘a set of doings and beings - functionings- and relates evaluation of quality of human life to the assessment of the capability to function (Sen 1990, 43)’. It leads us to focus on more what people are effectively able to do and to be dependent upon their actual capabilities (Robeyns 2003, p.5). Regarding this, the capability approach is not an explanatory theory that would provide answers to inequality or social injustice (Robeyns 2011); instead, it guides us to understand and evaluate the process of female empowerment considering the variables other than income, material resources and commodities.

Two major constituents compose the capability approach: capabilities and functionings. An individual’s capabilities and his or her functionings are two related but yet distinct concepts. Sen’s explanation of the differences and connections of the two notions are presented as:

‘A functioning is an achievement, whereas a capability is the ability to achieve. Functionings are […] more directly related to living conditions […]. Capabilities, in contrast, are notions of freedom, in the positive sense: what real opportunities you have regarding the life you may lead’ (Sen 1987, 36).

Functioning is the achievement of wellbeing that includes an individual’s beings and doings (Sen 1985, 10). Therefore, it is in reference to what an individual manages to do or to be. Sen (1990, 44) points out that the constituent elements of life are seen as a
combination of different functionings that includes being nourished, achieving self-respect and etc. While an individual’s capability represents one’s opportunity and freedom of making choices. Moreover, it indicates one’s actual ability consisting of various conditions, such as being literate and being healthy, so as to enable various valuable functionings (Sen 1993, 30). It could also be understood as a set of vectors of functionings, which reflects the freedom of individuals to lead a certain type of life or lifestyle (Sen 1993; Robeyns 2011). According to Sen (1985), capability also relates to agency: one’s ability to pursue and realize the goals one cherishes and has reason to value. However, agency is discussed in relation to its tension with structure in the discourse of empowerment, while capabilities refer to both the notion of agency and structure.

The difference between a functioning and a capability is like the difference between an achievement and the freedom or the opportunity to achieve something. To achieve different functionings, it requires certain capabilities of the individual. Alkire and Deneulin (2009) illustrate how these concepts relate, by using a bicycle as an example. Only when a person is able to ride a bicycle and when there is path to ride on can he or she achieve the functioning of the bicycle, which is mobility. Moreover, even the outcomes of actions-functionings such as being healthy-would be identical; thus, the levels of freedom the two exhibit are far from being equal. For example, a person who is fasting and a person who might be in an impoverished area of Africa are both in state of being malnourished. However, in the first case, the person who is fasting could choose to eat, so as to achieve the functioning of being healthy, whereas the starving person in Africa would eat only when he or she can attain food (Dasuki, Abbott and Azerikatoa 2011, 323). In principle, the determinacy of different capabilities in achieving functionings could be categorized into the following three classifications (Narayan 2002, 14-15; Robeyns 2011, 12-13):

- Personal conversion factors: physical condition, education level, life-enhancing skills, intelligence and so forth
- Social conversion factors: institutional policies, gender roles, power relations access to resources, societal hierarchies and participation
- Environmental conversion factors: geographical location, climate, infrastructure
Whether one can effectively enable valuable functionings (such as being healthy) is largely constrained by the three categories of conversion factors that are listed above. For example, some of the street market women in Uganda do not use mobile phones when they return home from the street market, so as to maintain peaceful relationships with their husbands within their local patriarchal social environment (Larsson and Svensson 2015, 214-215). The social characteristics in Uganda give rise to other obstacles. The gendered social and political environment of Uganda, where women are held in a secondary status, also makes it much more challenging or even impossible for women to fully enable the functionings of being connected to anyone at any particular time and space. Hence, even though those women have the commodity, a mobile phone in this case, as a means to achieve functionings, their personal capabilities and social characteristic capabilities do not support them to achieve the desired functionings. Therefore, knowing what a person has, or can use, is not sufficient to determine which functionings could be achieved; thus, owing a mobile phone would not always result in the desired functionings of mobile such as being connected freely. The capability approach does not consider the functionings of commodities a person has facilitated as the ‘ultimate normative measure’ (Robeyns 2011, 13). It recognizes the significant influences of personal, social and environmental factors and; thus, considers the real capability of people to function, rather than only measuring the achieved functionings (Ibid.).

4.2.2 Empowerment and technology
The concept of affordance helps to explain and clarify the various deployments and functions of technologies. According to Gibson, affordances are the possibilities that one object offers for action (Hutchby 2001, 447). It is also worth noting that the affordances of technologies are not only enabling a particular activity, but they are also constraining certain actions. Hutchby explains that the interpretations of the affordances of one artifact are also the possibilities for the action that it offers (Ibid., 449). He refers to technology as a tabula rasa to foreground the idea that the meanings and actual functions of one technology are offered through actors’ (users’) interpretations and negotiations, and that the concept of affordances allows us to challenge it (Ibid.). Judy Wajcman (2004) further explores the contextualization of the various affordances of technologies. She (Ibid., 125) highlights ‘the need to contextualize the meaning, effects and perceived value of technologies, as they vary
by culture and country.’ Moreover, Wajcman (Ibid.) also emphasizes the mutual relationship between gender and technologies. A technological system and the process of technological development, where social conditions play key roles have never been merely technical, as it acknowledges variable meanings, in particular, local contexts of pragmatic activity (Ibid., 103). The affordances of one technology, therefore, are largely dependent upon the different users’ deployments and various contexts.

ICTs have brought unlimited opportunities for economic development and social engagement through new thinking and tools (Melhem et al. 2009, 11). However, they are also compared to a double-edged sword: ‘advancing the knowledge society on one hand, and deepening gender and social divides based on the pre-existing social divisions on the other (Ibid.).’ Despite the fact that ICTs provide a new model for knowledge dissemination and creation, which could enable women’s empowerment and their participation in different spheres of society and decision-making process, in order to be benefit from the development and adaption of ICTs, one must have the education and literacy needed to use ICTs, not to mention the full access (Ibid., 18-19).

Moreover, Wajcman (2004, 33-35) argues that different groups of people, while using the very same technology, can have different perceptions of the technology, as well as its functions, due to their different experiences and practices (Ibid., p.37). Wajcman (2007, p.293) elucidates that technologies should be considered as the source, as well as the consequence of alternations of gender relations and gendered identities. For example, during the implement and development of typewriter, there occurred significant changes in gender relation that women started to enter the labor market and their position in the society was gradually changed (2004, 51-52). By referring to this example, Wajcman (2004) emphasized that ‘technology and a new social order between the sexes are shaped (51)’. Gender relations are crucial to shaping of technology and in turn, are shaped by sociotechnical networks. As discussed in the previous chapter, the study of situated empowerment of market women in Uganda suggests that the market women are not using mobile phones in identical ways (Larsson and Svensson 2015). For instance, some never use mobile phones at home, so as to promote and maintain a good relationship with their husband (Ibid.). Furthermore, these women have a different understanding of the role played by
mobile phones in their businesses and lives, as well as different perceptions regarding the changes generated by involving mobiles in their business, which result from their diverse backgrounds. These practices and implications of technologies are contextual and closely related to the actual situations encountered by women in a specific context. Even though new technologies such as mobile phones have expanded women’s capacity of connecting to networks and have somehow enhanced their agency, still their conditions would hardly be improved in a corresponding and identical manner (Wajcman 2004, 120). The ‘enormous variability in gendering by place, nationality, class, race, sexuality and generation (Wajcman 2007, 294)’ once again reminds us that there does not exist any corresponding experiences of ICTs for all women.

To sum up, the development of ICTs coincides with social transformations associated with increasing emancipation of women world-wide, economically, culturally, and politically, however, any improvements require women’s full participation in terms of education, literacy and access to ICTs. Wajcman’s (2004; 2007) reviews further shed light on what specific factors need to be taken into consideration when examining female empowerment through their practices of ICTs, which, in my case, involves the operating of online shops through the platform of Taobao. Individual’s actual different experiences of deploying technologies need to be included so as to understand the contextuality of availability, the implications, and the affordances of technologies. Apart from acknowledging that technologies are improving women’s lives and their situations within society, it is vital to examine just how women enable the affordances of technologies differently in order to achieve any beneficial changes.

4.2.3 Empowerment and female entrepreneurship
Women’s entrepreneurship is not only regarding the role of entrepreneurship in society, but it also corresponds to women’s status within that society (Véras 2015, 59). Status is generally referred to as a socially defined position within a social system. Linton (1936) noted that two types of status, are ascribed to status and achieved status. Ascribe status, according to Linton (Ibid), is assigned to a person by the society and is determined by the cultural situation over which one is not in control. Achieved status is recognized as ‘any social position held by an individual as a result of his or her personal accomplishments in open formal or market competition with
others (Oxford Dictionary of Sociology, 1994).’ This type of status reflects a social position that a person attains through his or her own efforts and individual choices. Women, who have the status of a female entrepreneur, need to face the barriers, which include cultural traditions, lack of visibility, less access to technology and insufficient social support (Véras 2014, 59). All these could possibly hold them back or resist them from their full action (Ibid.). Therefore, female entrepreneurship could be one of the many indicators that could open doors for female empowerment (Ibid.).

Entrepreneurship is defined as a manifested capacity and desire of an individual or individuals to create new business opportunities, based on the utilization of available resources (Bahmani-Oskooee et al. 2012). It is also considered as ‘the resources and processes in which individuals utilize through opportunities in the market by the creation of new firms (Naudé 2010).’ Entrepreneurship, thus, can be understood as a means or opportunity for economic growth. Previous literature also distinguishes different fields in the study of entrepreneurial activity, one of which corresponds to the entrepreneur as an individual agent (Peris-Ortiz et al. 2012, 182). Individual action is an entrepreneurial implementation when one is able to discover new opportunities on the basis of personal traits or characteristics (Ibid.). In this particular definition of entrepreneurship, female entrepreneurs are just as important as men.

What establishes women’s situation as being special is that they are shaping new and unique models of leadership, and experiencing unique and innovative processes and values of both work and family (Fenwick 2000). Female entrepreneurs’ motivations are believed to mainly stem from ‘push’ factors that are related to survival instincts and pressures, economic downturn and discouraging situations, or experiences in previous jobs (Moore and Butter 1997). Teriesem and Elam (2012) also indicated that the particularity of women entrepreneurship is primarily due to their uneven access to resources, business credibility and family responsibilities; in conjunction with available opportunities. Women entrepreneurship is an important source of economic growth, which includes creating new jobs for women as well as others (Ibid., 26). However, women entrepreneurs do not only contribute to employment creation and economic growth, but they also contribute to the diversity of entrepreneurship and the business community (Nissan et al. 2011, 139).
According to Schumpeter (cited in Nissan et al. 2011), apart from being profit seeking, women entrepreneurship also ‘needs an adequate social environment to develop the activity (27).’ In other words, they need a favorable social environment, which includes cultural and political support that would facilitate the emergence of new female entrepreneurships (Ibid.). Narayan (2005, 5) shared a similar point of view and further argued that social structures can either facilitate or constrain an individual’s efforts to improve or enhance their situations; moreover, they also affect potential developmental outcomes. According to Zhao and Yang (2015, 96-97), the traditional IT industry has more male entrepreneurs; however, now female entrepreneurs are beginning to take advantage of their understanding of society and customers, and are discovering more opportunities. They (Ibid.) also point out that ICT industries are characterized as ‘low fixed cost, high value added’ and ‘technology-oriented’, since they are perceived as offering more opportunities for both men and women.

When it comes to the self-perception of women as female entrepreneurs, Kirkwood (cited in Espiritu-Olmos and Sastre-Castillo 2012, 112) ascertained that women tend to reflect a lack of confidence in their entrepreneurial abilities, as compared to their male counterparts. Women tend to interpret entrepreneurship as a means to accommodate their work and child-care responsibilities simultaneously (Cromie 1987). Moreover, the common stereotype of an entrepreneur is ‘still mainly associated with qualities traditionally associated with men while women are not seen as representing the image of an entrepreneur (Espiritu-Olmos and Sastre-Castillo 2012, 109-110).’ The different traditional social roles – where women are mainly performing the central role in the family - have a significant impact on the development of the role of women as entrepreneurs (Ibid, 110), as well as on their self-perception. This certainly explains why females tend to see themselves less likely as entrepreneurs (Nissan et al. 2012, 127), and women do not feel comfortable considering themselves as entrepreneurs (Galindo and Ribeiro ed. 2012, 112).

4.2.4 Making use of Sen’s Capability Approach
Sen’s (1985; 1990; 1993) capability approach is applied in this case study as the analytical framework utilized to evaluate how female entrepreneurs are empowered
by focusing on their real capabilities of people to enable their certain functionings, rather than exclusively relying on the outcomes of choices such as their enhanced or improved economic independence. It seems that Sen’s capability approach lacks a detailed list of relevant elements that could be used to assess gender inequality; however, Robeyns (2003, 68) states that there exists no definite or universal lists of capabilities for all inquiries, as the approach itself offers a general schema that could serve for various specified purposes (Ibid., 70). Nevertheless, certain key elements still need to be determined. In my case study, there is the need to determine which capabilities and functionings are important and meaningful to evaluate female’s agency and autonomy.

Several key capabilities and functionings are determined based on the criteria specified by Robeyns in her list of capabilities to access gender (in)equality at an ideal level (2003, 70-71). Robeyns’ list including life and physical health, safety, social relations, education, knowledge, paid work and mobility (Ibid., 71-72) helps to identify the key capabilities that I want to concentrate on when analyzing the empirical materials collected from interviews. Considering the specific social and economic situation in China, the social and personal capabilities of the female online storeowners including the institutional policies, the access to and control over the resources, education level and ICT literacy are evaluated. All those capabilities are included in the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, showing that these are the core capabilities that are often considered important (Robeyns 2003, 76). Moreover, these capabilities are the prerequisites for individuals to be benefit from the development of ICTs. Functionings including economic enhancement, self-realization, self-identification, social recognitions and time autonomy are considered. Women are systematically devalued in the society (Ibid., 83). Thus, the social recognitions of women as a female online entrepreneur would reveal whether women are able to change their situation and whether the general public accepts this social role of women. Self-realization intends to examine whether women have the ability to act upon their decisions and to fulfill what they desire to do through online business. Whether the women accept their social role as an entrepreneur intends to reflect how they perceive this profession from their individual perspective. Last but not the least, their own allocation of time would reflect to what extent the time of the female is
freed up from work or household. Women’s authority over household decision-making would reflect their access to resources and the power to use them.

4.3 Summary
In this chapter, theories including female empowerment, standpoint epistemology and the affordances of ICTs are reviewed and discussed. Related concepts such as capability, functioning and female entrepreneurship that are the key elements of understanding and assessing female empowerment are also illustrated.

The history of modern feminism and its movements are characterized by three ‘waves’, each of which focuses on different aspects of feminist issues. Feminism in China has been impacted by Western feminist ideology but also developed its own course that is featured with local research, localization and regionalization (Spakowski 2001). Sandra Harding’s (1991) standpoint feminism, as related to epistemology, outlines the importance of taking women’s experiences as the departure of women’s studies. It takes into account the diversity and real life experiences of women, which provide a culturally and temporally grounded understanding of women’s empowerment under diverse circumstances and life spheres. Kabeer’s (1999; 2011) definition of empowerment, in conjunction with other scholars’ interpretations, assist in constructing a practical understanding of female empowerment for my study, which includes the key components of –agency autonomy and enabling factors, and two fundamental characteristics of empowerment that are an on-going process and contextually specific. Sen’s (1985; 1990; 1993) capability approach serves as the general framework for the analysis in this study. Considering the unique economy system and social forms in China, three social and personal capabilities and five functionings are focused to understand how the female entrepreneurs are empowered through conducting online business. Numerous studies have examined female empowerment through ICTs, but fail to recognize the interactive and mutual relationship between technologies and gender relations. There exist neither corresponding experiences of women utilizing ICTs to conduct online businesses, nor any universal positive consequences brought about by their practices. The concept of affordance is introduced. It helps to explain and clarify the various deployments and functions of technologies. Wajcman (2004; 2007), in her theory of
technofeminism, further explores the contextualization of the various affordances of technologies, which assist in comprehending the potential empowerment of women through their practices of ICTs. Last but not the least, female entrepreneurship is presented in relation to female empowerment. Women’s entrepreneurship is not only about the role of entrepreneurship in the society, it also corresponds to female status in that society (Véras 2015, 59).
Chapter 5 Methodology

This section aims to explain the research design and the research method applied in this master’s thesis. To answer the research questions, a small-scale case study was conducted. Furthermore, the reasons why a case study was chosen for the study are provided. I will also explain which data were collected and how they were collected, in order to answer the research questions. More detailed information about how the case study has been accomplished is illustrated as well. Last but not least, the limitations and ethics of the study are described at the end of this chapter.

5.1 A Qualitative Research Method: Case study

The research question of this thesis is ‘How are female online entrepreneurs’ self-perceived capabilities and functionings enhanced through their online economic activities on Taobao in Chinese society?’ The entire study departs from the actual experiences and opinions of female entrepreneurs, and aims to provide unique perspectives to attain further insights into the dominant research of female empowerment in the context of e-commerce. To answer this question, a small-scale case study that originates from the actual lives of the female online entrepreneurs is carried out.

A case study is an empirical inquiry regarding a contemporary phenomenon set within its real-world context (Yin 2009, 18). The case study method not only enables researchers to develop in-depth understandings of the phenomenon or the case study that is associated with real-world contexts, but it also assists researchers in establishing insights into real-world behavior and its meanings. Yin gives case study a very broad definition by utilizing the term ‘contemporary phenomenon’. Hancké (2009, 62) posits that as long as a single instance or event ‘sheds light on a broader theory or argument as a result of how it is connected to that theory or argument’, it can be a case. Hence, a case can be a person, a city, a policy or anything as an object of research; however, it has to relate to the real-world context, to a certain theory, and to be bounded in a specific time and space (Ibid.). The goal of the case study is to demonstrate detailed and comprehensive descriptions or explanations of the case being studied (Lavrakas 2008, 730). In this master’s thesis, my case is about the female online entrepreneurs who operate individual shops on Taobao in China, and is
further related to the feminist theory of empowerment in a digital environment.

The case study was selected as the research method for my thesis for the following reasons. First and foremost, case studies are often used to explain, describe or explore events or phenomena, and possible causal relations in everyday contexts in which they occur (Yin 2009, 19). My thesis analyzes women’s emerging active participation in e-commerce, which has become an indispensable part of everyday life for Chinese people. Second, my research question is an explanatory one: ‘How are female online entrepreneurs’ self-perceived capabilities and functionings enhanced through their online economic activities on Taobao in Chinese society?’ Yin (Ibid.) demonstrates that when the research question is either descriptive or explanatory, the case study method becomes pertinent. Moreover, a case study would enable researchers to collect information on more ‘how’ and ‘why’ questions (Ibid.). Third, by engaging a case study, any causal or functional links would be revealed. Thus, after justifying why a case study is selected in this study, in the next section, I describe how my case study was conducted, how my samples were collected, what kind of interviews were applied and how the interviews were completed.

5.2 Research Design

5.2.1 Case study of female entrepreneurs on Taobao

In my study, women entrepreneurs on Taobao were selected instead of those from other e-commerce platforms for two reasons. First, Taobao is owned by the undisputed largest e-commerce leader, the Alibaba Group, in the Chinese market. The Alibaba Group dominates 80% of China’s online market, with a significantly high proportion belonging to Taobao. Second, it facilitates customer-to-customer retail and small online businesses where individuals are the key players. Moreover, since it only allows those who have a valid Chinese ID to register businesses, there are almost no foreign traders on the platforms. This means that the samples randomly collected from Taobao could reflect the population in my study, which is the Chinese female online entrepreneurs. Furthermore, as all the traders are (or at least are supposed to be according to the terms and regulations of Taobao) independent individuals, the agency and autonomy of those female online traders can be better focused and studied. It also contributes to better investigate what kind of obstacles individual female
entrepreneurs encounter, and to further explore how they understand the potential empowerment through e-commerce activities.

5.2.2 Sample Collection
A snowball sampling technique was employed to locate interviewees. Snowball or chain referral sampling is a method where study samples are collected through referrals made by people who know others that possess some characteristics that are relevant to the research interest (Biernacki and Waldorf 1981, 141). When the sampling process involves accessing informants through other samples, it could be defined as a snowball sampling. The process is repetitive, accumulative and dynamic (Noy 2008, 330). Snowball sampling is a beneficial tool to attain information when the study populations have low visibilities in society, because of social sensitivities around the behavior in question (Biernacki and Waldorf 1981, 144). In my case, even though those female online entrepreneurs are not a totally invisible social group in Chinese society, yet their identity as female entrepreneurs is greatly underestimated or is often taken for granted by people. Moreover, there still exist quite a few stereotypes and misunderstandings of this rather novel profession, which will be further discussed in the later sections.

In this case study, samplings were approached by referrals of acquaintances and advertisements on two Chinese social network platforms - WeChat and Weibo. Ellison and boyd (2007) define the social network service (SNS), which includes Facebook and WeChat, as ‘web-based services that allow individuals to construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and view […] (1)’. Given this definition, SNSs have become an efficient tool for snowball sampling. This was also established while I was searching for and attempting to reach potential respondents on WeChat and Weibo. The reason for focusing exclusively on Chinese SNS platforms is that my study population is Chinese female entrepreneurs, and they often use these two platforms to promote their products and shops. The first interviewees were secured through a couple of friends via WeChat; I also managed to locate a few respondents through my advertisement posts on Weibo. Through the first respondents, more than 20 interviewees were contacted; however, only 14 interviewees that have been operative for over one year were interviewed. Those who have been operating an online
business for less than one year were not included in this study, as the time length of operating an online store is a crucial influencing factor to examine whether any substantial changes in their lives have occurred after they started doing business online. Time span is important as operating an online store for a short time might not be relevant to any changes in those female entrepreneurs’ lives. The embedded instant messenger application of Taobao -AliWangWang- where Taobao customers can instantly communicate with the online shop owners, was also utilized to locate interviewees; however, the result was not satisfactory. I sent messages randomly to some online shop owners on AliWangWang to request whether they might have an interest in conducting an interview. Unfortunately, many of the shop owners gave negative responses.

5.2.3 Semi-Structured Interviews
To answer the research questions, 14 semi-structured interviews were conducted with female entrepreneurs who have operated businesses on Taobao for over a one-year period. All the interviews were conducted in Chinese, in consideration of the language difficulty for some female entrepreneurs, as some of them have not received a higher level of education. Translation from Chinese to English was completed, with particular attention on maintaining the original meaning the interviewees wanted to express.

In this case study, the interviews were designed as semi-structured. Hancké (2009, 101) stated that when interviewing respondents, one must ensure that the questions are understood as they mean to be. It seems obvious to guarantee that interviewees will understand the questions; however, this might be more difficult than imagined. People might also have various understandings of the very same term. In my study, one sample interview was conducted to determine whether the respondent understood the questions correctly and whether the expected feedback would be given. The interview guideline (see appendix I) - a list of themes and questions - was revised after the first sample interview, while the guideline ensured that all the interviewees were queried regarding all the topical questions.

Interviews were primarily conducted on WeChat (several via QQ), as those female entrepreneurs are located within different areas and regions in China. The time for
each interview was controlled within 15-minute periods, and all the interviews were conducted in Chinese and recorded for later translation and analysis. At the end, some interviews turned out to be quite short, as the interviewees did not have anything to reveal. At the beginning of the interview, questions regarding their basic information, such as age, educational level and years of operating online shops were presented. Other than those informative questions, open-ended questions, theory-driven and hypotheses-directed questions formulated the semi-structured interview (Flick 2002, 156-157). The questions were carefully designed, so that the interviewees were able to respond comfortably on the basis of their knowledge at hand. The interviews proceeded as ‘conversations with a purpose (Burgess 1990, 102)’ that focus on the experiences of the respondents in an informal manner. The relations formulated in the questions intend to make the implicit knowledge of the interviewee more explicit (Ibid.). Moreover, a few supplementary questions were asked spontaneously during the interviews, regarding the experiences and accounts of the respondents.

In total, 14 interviews were faithfully transcribed for further analysis. The interpretation of data is at the core of qualitative research (Flicker 2002, 177). All the interviews were conducted in Chinese, in consideration of the potential language difficulty, while the translation from Chinese to English was executed with particular attention. The material was repeatedly compared with the original interview material during the process of transcription, so as to ensure there were no misinterpretations. However, there still exist some nuances when being translated into English, as it is not always possible to thoroughly present some implicit meanings in Chinese.

5.3 Content Analysis
A content analysis was applied to analyze the interview material. First, the advantages of this research method are described. Second, the analytical framework -Sen’s capability approach- is introduced, followed by an illustration of the procedure of the analysis.

In this case study, the content analysis is as an interpretation method for the qualitative interviews. This case study is positioned in a dynamic e-commerce landscape in China, where the traditional systems of norms and values are still
prevalent, and while more females are stepping into the booming e-commerce industry. The study departs from the actual experiences of female entrepreneurs and takes into consideration their individual perspectives. The content analysis is thus believed to be one of the ideal and classical procedures for analyzing textual material, as it could also be used to analyze subjective viewpoints, collected with semi-structured interviews (Flick 2002, 323).

Klaus Krippendorff (2004) characterizes content analysis as ‘a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use (18).’ Moreover, Krippendorff (2004) posits that the content analysis method is used to investigate the content for the primary purpose of comprehending ‘what they mean to people, what they enable or prevent, and what the information conveyed by them does (xviii).’ It is important to highlight that this research method provides the researcher with the possibility of garnering new insights, so as to develop new understandings of a specific phenomenon, which further ‘informs practical actions’ (Krippendorff 2004, 18). The conceptual framework for content analysis offered by Krippendorff (2004, 29-34) employs the following key components: a body of text allowing the analyst to begin an analytical effort; a chosen context by the analyst within which to comprehend the text body; an analytical construct that explains the network of available texts and conditions; inferences that are intended to answer the research question; and the validating of evidence that justifies the content analysis.

In order for the content analysis method to be replicable and valid, a detailed explication of the process is presented subsequently. One of the essential features of content analysis is utilizing categories, which are derived from theoretical framework (Flick 2002, 323). Sen’s (1985; 1990; 1993) capability approach serves as the analytical construct in which transcribed interview material is analyzed systematically according to the categories: different capabilities and functionings. The most relevant and important aspects were selected, so as to better comprehend how female entrepreneurs are empowered through their online economic production. These aspects include: institutional policies, access to and control over the resources, educational levels, ICT literacy, social recognition, the personal understandings of the profession as an online entrepreneur, and the substantial changes in different life
spheres. The transcribed interview data constitute the main body of the text. Moreover, redundant paraphrases that convey the same meaning were eliminated, and paragraphs with similar or identical issues were summarized into one, so as to foreground the key concern of each category (Flick 2002, 325), which relates to the selected capabilities and functionings in Sen’s capability approach. The interview material is further discussed in relation to the theoretical framework introduced in Chapter 4. Through classifying the empirical data into different categories, as related to the capabilities and functionings, new understandings of female empowerment through e-commerce activities intend to be generated by taking into consideration the contextual practices, the social environment, the interplay between gender relation and technologies, and the women’s actual different experiences.

5.4 Data saturation, Validity and Limitations
Failure to reach data saturation would have a substantial negative impact on the quality of this research (Bowen 2008 cited in Fusch and Ness 2015, 1408). Data saturation is reached when ‘there is enough information to replicate the study; there are no new data, no new themes, and no new coding (Fusch and Ness 2015, 1409)’. Thus, it is not about the number of the sample per se; instead, it is about the depth of the data (Burmeister and Aitken 2012 cited in Fusch and Ness 2015, 1409). Interviews are also one method, whereby one can reach data saturation in the research. Burmeister and Aitken (2012) proffered that it is more important to think of data in terms of being rich and thick, rather than in terms of the size of the sample (cited in Fusch and Ness 2015, 1409).

In this study, a snowball sampling technique was applied, with the risk of snowball sampling being the homogeneity of the samples (Bhopal 2015, 48). However, since it involves an online environment, people who are referred by one interviewee or friend are not always in a close relationship or similar background with his or her referee. In some cases, the referral and the referee know each other through online experiences, or in a group chat that is constituted of Taobao shop owners. The interviewees located through connections on Weibo are believed to be even more diverse. On Weibo, individuals follow each other, because they may have similar personal interests, or because one likes the posts and pictures the other one shares on his or her Weibo. Therefore, the samples are believed to be multifarious, which provide multilayered
and intricate data for the research, even though they are approached via a chain referral sampling technique. In order for one to achieve data saturation through the method of interview, interview questions need to be structured to be the same to all the participants (Fusch and Ness 2015, 1409). Otherwise, it would be a ‘constantly moving target’, which would fail to achieve data saturation. Even though most of the interviews lasted only for 15 minutes (with several around 20 minutes), there were no new information or themes emerging out of the conversation. In this case, data saturation is believed to be reached.

One important related point to consider the validity of the study is that concentrating on one case often leads to the problem of generalization (Flick 2002, 30-31). Qualitative research findings are often criticized and questioned by a quantitative logic, as the number of the collected samples or the cases is not large or sufficient enough to make a scientific statement (Ibid.). Flick (2002, 31) argues that in most qualitative studies, conclusions are reached, based on a limited number of interviews in a representative survey, and this is one form of generalization. The question of generalization in qualitative research is not closely related to the quantification (Ibid.). Researchers aim to reveal new insights and to build or refine theories through qualitative studies. It is, therefore, more important to examine the quality of the collected samples. Flick (Ibid.) lists the relevant questions, such as ‘why the samples are selected’ and ‘what do they represent’, and states that these are the ones that need to be addressed. In this case study, the questions noted by Flick are cautiously concerned. Even though only 14 interviews were analyzed, the respondents were carefully selected. More than 20 online storeowners were approached; however, those who have been operating an online business for less than one year were not included in this study, as the time length of operating an online store is a crucial influencing factor to examine whether any substantial changes in their lives have occurred after they started doing business online. Furthermore, this thesis wishes to provide new insights into female empowerment through e-commerce practices on an individual level, which is expected to provide solid ground for future research on a societal level.

All the interviews were conducted in Chinese, in consideration of the potential language difficulty, while the translation from Chinese to English was executed with particular attention. However, there still exist some nuances when being translated
into English, as it is not always possible to thoroughly present some implicit meanings in Chinese. Women’s accounts and experiences were interpreted in a manner that ensures their ideas were fully expressed, as their actual experiences constitute the basis of the whole study. It is also essential to note that the study is limited to a time scope and within the context of China where the traditional Chinese ideologies of females are still prevalent in Chinese society.

5.5 Ethical Considerations

Research ethics is one of the key issues in planning and conducting research, especially in qualitative studies as they often deal with reflection and sensitiveness (Flicker 2002, 43). Researchers always need to ask for participants’ consent and guarantee participants’ confidentiality (Ibid., 40). The principles of informed consent and of voluntary participation are carefully followed in my case study.

Before conducting the interview, all the informants were adequately informed by detailed information regarding the goals and method of the study. No information of the participants would be revealed for any interests. The interviewees were not forced to talk about anything they did not feel comfortable and they were ensured anonymity. The names of their online shops were indicated by pseudonyms not only to protect their rights but also due to the concern of any possible profits. Furthermore, while analyzing the data, particular attention was given to make sure the interpretations are grounded in the data (Ibid., 41). As is reiterated, women’s accounts and actual experience constitute the main body of text. I was particularly aware of not crossing personal and private boundaries. It is their voice that is to be heard and analyzed. Neither personal judgment nor diagnostic assessment of the personality or opinion of the participants are allowed (Ibid.).
Chapter 6 Analysis

The research question of this thesis is ‘How are female online entrepreneurs’ self-perceived capabilities and functionings enhanced through their online economic activities on Taobao in Chinese society?’ The sub-questions formulated to assist in answering the research question are as follows:

1. How are the capabilities of female entrepreneurs enhanced according to them after they commence their online business on Taobao?
2. How are the functionings of female entrepreneurs improved according to them after they initiate their online business on Taobao?

The interview data are interpreted and examined based on Sen’s capability approach, while their agency and autonomy are evaluated, based on the selected capabilities and functionings. This chapter is sectioned into two parts. In the first part, the demographic information of the interviewees is introduced, while the chapter continues with applying Sen’s capability approach to attempt to understand what the female entrepreneur is effectively able to achieve, and to be dependent on the enabling conditions and their capabilities (Robeyns 2003, 5). The analysis is built upon the intersection of the concepts and theories presented in the theoretical framework and the interview data.

6.1 Basic information of the interviewees

In total, over 20 female entrepreneurs that operate an online store on Taobao were contacted. However, only 14 interviewees that have been operating an online shop for over one year were interviewed, and the interview materials were analyzed. The reason to interview those who have been running online business over one year was due to the concern that operating an online store for only a short period of time may not be able to reflect or determine the relevant substantial changes in the lives of those female entrepreneurs.

The time length of operating the online store is quite different among the 14 interviewees. The shortest operating time is around one year while the longest is over ten years. Among all the respondents, only 6 interviewees have been operating the
online store for over a three-year period, among which 5 are operating the online store as a full-time profession. The other 8 respondents have been running the online stores for approximately one to three years. The data shows that among the online shop owners that have been operating the store for more than three years, the number of the people who are doing online business as a full-time profession is double than that of those who take it as a part-time job.

The average age of the 14 interviewees is 28.9 years old. 6 respondents are doing online business as a part-time job. All these 6 respondents have a relatively low-stress full-time job. For instance, two interviewees are university students that have plenty of leisure time. One interviewee is a kindergarten teacher that has three-months’ vacations per year; another interviewee is a social worker in the neighborhood that only needs to work from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m., with a two-hour break in between. Among the other 8 interviewees who are operating online store as a full-time profession, 4 people used to have a full-time job such as PR and office clerk in the company, and then they quit the previous jobs due to a variety of reasons. Almost half of the respondents are from big cities such as Shanghai and Beijing, and the others are from smaller cities in the central regions of China.

Almost four-fifths of the interviewees are operating the online stores in the sectors of garments, luxury goods, accessories and cosmetic products, which are mostly associated with women. Only three are doing businesses in the industries relating to the furniture and digital products. And those sectors are often dominated by male (AliResearch 2015). The interview data is in line with the result of the She-era report (Ibid.) that the preferred sectors chosen mostly by female entrepreneurs are garments, cosmetics and jewelry, but women start to turn to the previous male-dominated sectors such as home appliances and furniture.

6.2 Applying Sen’s Capability Approach
Sen’s capability approach serves as the general framework for the analysis. Having access to one thing or certain technologies, being an online store in this case study, does not necessarily indicate that the person is empowered; it requires a detailed inquiry into the enabling factors that are potentially critical to foster a process of
empowerment (Malhotra et al. 2002, 8). The social and personal conversion factors, such as institutional policies of Taobao, access to and control over the resources, educational level and ICT literacy, as well as the functionings and achievements including the self-realization, self-identification, social recognition, time autonomy and economic enhancement, guide the analysis to examine what people are effectively able to do, and to be dependent on the enabling conditions, their actual capabilities and achieved functionings (Robeyns 2003, 5).

6.2.1 Personal and Social Capabilities

1. Institutional Policies: Taobao as an enabling factor

Resources are considered as one of the conditions under which empowerment is likely to occur, and they are regarded as enabling factors in the context of policy and evaluation (Malhotra et al. 2002, 8). Whether one can enable the functionings is greatly influenced by the institutional environment that can provide what could be the preconditions for a female to improve her situation (Robeyns 2011; Narayan 2002; Malhotra et al. 2002). A positive institutional environment can facilitate women’s efforts to improve their well-being and further affect broader development outcomes (Narayan 2005, 5).

Even though the interviewees were not asked explicitly how they perceived the regulations and policies of Taobao, all of them mentioned that it was rather easy and simple to launch an online store on Taobao. According to one interviewee:

‘[…]I know that it is completely free to set up an online store on Taobao. I feel that I can do whatever I want with the online store, as I am not restrained by the insufficient funding. I don’t have to worry about the cost of managing an entity store. […] (Appendix 6)’

All almost all the respondents point out that it is easy and simple to launch an online store on Taobao. Moreover, the process of setting up an online store is manageable in terms of cost and time according to the interviewees. There is no need to present themselves physically with different authorities, having to deal with these rigmaroles or hurdles, and there is no minimum requirement of initial capital and funds. In total, more than half of the respondents mention the free-of-charge advantage Taobao
presents, and believe that this is one of the primary reasons for them to initiate their online business. This free-of-charge experience not only attracts individuals to establish online stores on Taobao, but it also appeals to millions of online shoppers. A large number of Internet users and young generation’s purchasing power on Taobao appears to be a promise of generous profits according to one interviewee that is selling customized accessories online. She mentions that Taobao offers a great platform and millions of customers:

‘I chose to sell customized products like cushions, phone cases and other accessories like pendants on Taobao. The customized products are very popular among the young generation. And young people are the main customers on Taobao [...]. (Appendix 8)’

Nevertheless, several interviewees, especially those who have been operating their online business for more than three years, mentioned that even though it is easy to set up an online store, it does not mean that it is simple to conduct online business on Taobao. The same respondent further tells:

‘[...] Actually when I start doing online business with clients, I realize that it is actually very challenging. Though setting up an online store is easy and free of charge on Taobao, how to manage the business and get profits still depend on the quality of the products, the delivery time and many other facts. What’s more, now there are more and more competitions, how to attract customers and have returning customers become much more different than before. (Appendix 8)’

According to the interviewees, the free-of-charge policy ensures Taobao a low barrier business environment; however, at the same time new challenges appear. There have emerged thousands of online stores selling similar products that generate fierce competition. Moreover, as is mentioned in Chapter 2, the immature policies of Taobao fail to protect the rights of sellers. For instance, counterfeit products have become a huge threat to some online storeowners. Three interviewees, selling luxury goods in their online stores, admit that the cheap counterfeit products dramatically reduced the revenue of their stores, because the customers constantly question the quality of their products. One of the two interviewees recounts:

‘I am really pissed off by those who sell fake products on Taobao. They would post pictures of authentic goods, but send the fake one to their customers. The
prices they offer are tempting -usually ten to twenty per cent cheaper than those of the authentic products. But when the customers figure out that the products they get are fake, they become more skeptical and would probably stop purchasing anything from the same kind of products online. And the worst part is that Taobao does not have a mature legislation system and it rarely takes effective actions. (Appendix 11)’

It is worth noting that the interviewees have developed a general perception of the affordance of Taobao, in that it has a supporting facilitating structure with low barriers for both male and female traders to initiate their online business. The interviewees acknowledge that Taobao creates a platform that offers more possibilities and opportunities for women to participate in the e-commerce industry. As is pointed out by Melhem et al. (2009, 11), ICTs can bring unlimited opportunities for economic development and social engagement of women. According to the interviewees’ accounts, the obstacles in the traditional business environment, such as the minimum funding requirements and the complicated procedures of starting a company are significantly reduced in the online environment. The low costs and risks, as well as the simplified procedures for managing an online store on Taobao, enable more females to step into the online business and facilitate the development of new women entrepreneurship. However, the new challenges emerging in the online environment become the current obstacles for some women entrepreneurs to further develop their business.

In general, based on the interviewees’ accounts, Taobao provides a good institutional environment that is a positive enabling factor, where female online stores have the same opportunities and rights to compete with their male counterparts. Setting aside the fact that the low thresholds have produced new challenges, such as the fierce competition and the weak supervision of quality that have led to the trust crisis; the interviewees, in general, believe that Taobao is, at least, an open environment for both men and women when first stepping into the e-commerce industry.

2. Access to and control over the resources

As is mentioned above, a good institutional environment is only one enabling factor in
the process of empowerment; both the agency of women and a favorable environment including opportunities and access to economical, political and social resources (Malhotra et al. 2002, 8-9). Kabeer (2001, 500) proffers that, in order to assess empowerment, we need to take into consideration a certain degree of dependence of different social and personal factors. Despite the fact that the interviewees acknowledge the great advantage of the low-barriers of Taobao and its free-of-charge experience, as is presented above, some interviewees feel that managing their online business is still challenging, and at times it constitutes the same as being in the traditional business market. In other words, while Taobao is contributing to being a less-restraining and liberal platform that grants equal opportunities to those who wish to conduct online business, some persistent, as well as new challenges, have developed along with the e-commercialization of the Chinese market: one needs to ensure continuous funds, a sufficient supply of goods, and to have a strong inbound base in the online environment.

**The Initial Capital**

When being asked how they got their initial capital, some interviewees told that they used their credit cards to replenish their first stock, and others use their savings. Only one respondent (see Appendix 9) mortgaged her apartment to get the initial capital of approximately 80,000 dollars (around 500,000rmb). All the interviewees tell that they have never considered the initial capital as a big obstacle in their way of doing online business. Most of them started their business at a small scale, and then developed gradually.

As is presented in the preceding section, Taobao’s low thresholds provide the individuals with great possibilities and opportunities to step into the online business. The interviewees’ accounts confirm that the procedure of launching a new online store is simple and maneuverable for them. There is no need to provide any proof of finance, which -according to all respondents- is one important support-facilitating factor.

**Channel for replenishing stock**

Five interviewees admitted that they started the online store to sell certain products, because their friends can provide the supply of goods directly. When asked whether
they have encountered any problems while they firstly started their business, like when attempting to locate suitable and stable channels of replenishing their stock as a female online shop owner, all the respondents stated that they had not encountered any problems due to their gender. One interviewee that is selling customized accessories tells that:

‘My online store is selling customized products like cushions, phone cases and other accessories like pendants. Before starting this online business, I did some search work on what products to sell. The main reason I decided to sell customized accessories is that it is easy to stock the merchandise, and the material and production costs are rather low. I have never encountered any problems as a female online storeowner when I replenish the stock. The only problem is the amount of the products. Some suppliers are not willing to do business with individual buyers that only ask for a small purchase amount. (Appendix 8)’

For those five respondents, having already a stable supply of goods is one of their primary reasons of launching an online store. For other interviewees, the replenishing of stock from the suppliers, as a female entrepreneur, does not cause them any hindrances nor obstacles in particular. Nevertheless, as mentioned by all the interviewees, the suppliers are usually concerned about the purchase price and the purchase amount, which is usually the case in the offline business environment. Moreover, in general, the interviewees do not think that they venture into certain industries is due to the lack of resources of other products.

A strong inbound base

As is introduced and discussed in the previous sections, keen competition has emerged, due to the low thresholds of launching a new shop on Taobao. Having access to and taking effective control over the fruitful resources, which include building a stable client base, are therefore other vital aspects for the online storeowners to effectively manage their online business. According to most of the interviewees, the biggest obstacles are how to draw customers and to encourage return customers, even though Taobao offers them a platform where there are millions of regular online shoppers. One interview that has a carpet online store tells:

‘[…] If I search for a carpet on Taobao, there would show thousands of products
from different online stores. Some of them offer very good prices and the products seem to be nice. At the beginning, it was tough for me to develop my own customers. (Appendix 4)

When asked if there were any difficulties when she was attempting to locate and communicate with the customers as a female online storeowner, this interviewee explained:

‘[Yes.] The clients sometimes do not really trust what I say, especially the male customers. They would prefer a male to introduce the products, which would feel more professional and authorized. Probably because I am selling carpets, and this industry is often dominated by men. So I put lot of effort in presenting and promoting my products to show that I am no less professional than men. (Appendix 4)

Other interviewees selling products, such as cosmetics, accessories, luxury goods and garments, do not encounter the difficulty mentioned above, since most of their clients are female. However, how to draw potential customers to their shops and products among millions of similar goods, has become the most challenging issue.

Several respondents mention the difficulty of maintaining the good reputation of the online store. Taobao considers customers’ feedback and reviews as the main source of reference, and it encourages the customers to give their feedback of the products and the service for the future customers to choose a trustworthy online shop. The feedback of the customers is therefore critical to the success of an online store. To get only positive reviews from the customers, there would be malignant competitions among the sellers. There is also a serious trust fraud problem on Taobao that some scammers provide services to artificially increase the reputations of the stores (Zhang et al. 2012, 299). Nevertheless, the interviewees point out that the clients would not judge based on the gender of the storeowner, but on the reviews. One interview that has been operating an online store for then years tells:

‘The reviews of customers are super important for one online store, as the potential clients mostly judge a store on the basis of these comments. It is difficult to have only positive reviews. Some clients are captious and people would have complaints regarding the delayed delivery time. Some storeowners would hire
people to post and top good comments that are beneficial for the store so as to push the negative reviews down. (Appendix 9)

By viewing the access and control over the necessary resources of managing an online business, the female online entrepreneurs, in general, do not feel that they encounter interference such as gender discrimination, which is something that often occurs in the offline business world. One interviewee operating an online furniture store points out that as a female online storeowner, she sometimes faces the distrust from male customers. According to the interviewees, the poor surveillance on the quality of goods, the low thresholds and immature legal system of protecting the rights of traders and customers generate new challenges for the online storeowners, such as the emergence of thousands, if not millions, of similar online stores in the same industry. The difficulties often encountered in the traditional business environment, such as not having sufficient and continuous funding, and the societal challenges, which include the resistance to female’s engagement in certain industries or positions (Maier and Naire-Reicher 2008, 46) were not mentioned by the interviewees. Yet, the female entrepreneurs stated that they still needed to face fierce competition in the same industry, which is also an inevitable issue in the offline business environment; however, the online world requires further attention. They have to present their online stores as being unique and attractive among the other similar stores, so as to ensure the good reviews of customers.

Women’s agency, which refers to access to resources and effectively making use of them, is significant to the role ICTs play in cultivating new social gender relations (Kabeer 2001). Whether a female can enable effective functionings, such as being able to make independent decisions and to do what she desires to do, is constrained by the resources she has access to and hold control over (Ibid.). When individual women act in ways that are inconsistent with social norms, the impacts of these actions tend to be limited (Ibid.). However, the fruitful resources or a positive institutional environment cannot lead to empowerment per se, they are the catalysts that can foster the empowerment process (Malhotra et al. 2002, 8). In general, most of the interviewees believe that they are able to attain access and control over the necessary resources, and make appropriate use of them to pursue what they desire. For the female entrepreneurs, the challenges encountered in the traditional business
environment may also exist in the e-commerce industry; however, gender discrimination and social resistance have been dramatically reduced, so that they are capable of making independent choices that may lead to positive and effective outcomes. Most of the respondents do not think there are obstacles when they select which industries to venture into and feel they do not encounter gender bias when they try to replenish their stock. Still, based on the accounts of some interviewees, in certain male-dominated industries, such as furniture, females are still in a vulnerable or passive position as compared to males. For instance, according to the respondent, some of the customers would prefer a male to introduce the products. In the report titled, *The Internet Age and She-Era* (AliResearch 2015), it is asserted that when female traders turn to previously male-dominated sectors, they would have certain salient advantages, as the average annual turnover of their stores are higher than those of their male counterparts. However, from the interview, it is evident that in certain sectors, female entrepreneurs still cannot avoid facing different levels of gender discrimination or stereotypes that are deeply rooted in Chinese society.

3. *Education and ICT Literacy*

Despite the fact that Taobao commits to constructing a liberal platform for both male and female entrepreneurs, which could enable women’s empowerment and their participation in the e-commerce industry; still, in order to be benefit from the development and implement of ICTs, one must have the education and literacy (Melhem et al. 2009,11). Furthermore, whether the online shop can make success also depends on the real capabilities of the storeowners: what they are free to do and achieve that they regard as important. That is to say, for there to be any sustainable changes and ‘real empowerment’, women have to the ‘agents of their own processes, in charge and in control of their process of change and empowerment (Buskens and Webb 2009, 207).’ As Malhotra and Schuler (2005, 73) argue, any substantial improvements cannot be simply achieved without women’s individual or collective ability to deploy the resources they have in their interests.

The educational level and ICT literacy of the female entrepreneurs are two factors that would not only contextualize the affordances of technologies, but also constrain the freedom and opportunities of one person to establish his or her goals and act upon
them. Among all the respondents, 5 people hold a junior college diploma, 7 have a bachelor’s degree, and 2 are postgraduate students. Four interviewees, who hold degrees higher than a junior college degree, are conducting online business as their full-time professions, while four out of five respondents, who hold a junior college diploma, are operating the online store as a proper career. From the interview, it appears that those who have completed a higher education are less likely to operate an online store as their full-time profession. According to one interviewee who is a currently a master student:

‘If I take the online business as the full-time profession, what I have learnt in the college would become a waste, as operating an online store does not require any advanced skills. As long as one knows how to use computer and mobile phones, anyone can set up an online store easily. And I could not realize my personal value in the society or to expand my social networks. (Appendix 10)’

Most of the respondents believed that as long as a person has fundamental knowledge of the Internet, as well as basic computer or mobile phone skills, then she is capable of starting an online store. All the interviewees were asked to what extent they think they are good at IT, social media and mobile skills, with only one considering herself as an expert in IT skills, such as coding and programming, while all the other thirteen respondents explained that they are only good at social media and mobile phone application skills. However, none of the interviewees feel that managing an online business requires professional IT skills. Nevertheless, one respondent, who has been operating her online store, pointed out that one can successfully manage an online store depending on how well one knows the market, the products and the potential customers. Efficacious promotion of products on different social media platforms is important as well. According to her:

‘[…] How to build a good customer relationship and to ensure your online store unique is challenging. But knowing how to promote your products on the social media platforms especially Weibo and WeChat is crucial. I realize that it is important to promote my products on different social media platforms. So now I am working hard on it. I was not good at social media at the beginning, but then I realize that I have to learn all the tricks and skills. (Appendix 5)’
The interviewees were also asked if they use computer or the mobile phone to manage their businesses. The same interviewee says:

‘I almost only use my mobile phone to manage my online. It saves lot of time. In nowadays, who would still stick to the computers? Mobile phones are of course more convenient and more efficient. [...] (Appendix 5)’

More than half of the respondents stated that they use both the computer and mobile phone, while the other three respondents expressed that they mostly utilize their mobile phones. More than half of the interviewees remark that they start to make transactions with their familiar or return customers on WeChat after the application starts to provide its own payment service. One respondent that has been operating an online branded garments store recounts:

‘ [...] I add quite a few familiar clients on my WeChat. When I have new supplies of products, I would inform those customers via WeChat immediately. Sometimes we even make transactions through WeChat directly, as the payment service of WeChat is more convenient than Alipay (the payment service of Taobao). Now I start to have more and more transactions done on WeChat. My clients also feel it more intimate and instant. (Appendix 15)’

Thus, it appears that more Taobao storeowners are turning to use mobile applications, which would include WeChat, to manage their business. More online storeowners voiced that they can develop a closer relationship with their familiar clients via WeChat, so as to manage their online business in a more instant, personal and convenient manner. This reflects that it does not require sophisticated knowledge to operate an online business. Therefore, one’s educational level, in this case, does not seem to be an obstacle for female entrepreneurs to implement their online business plan. Whether they could succeed on Taobao is not relevant to how much education they have received. Instead, compared to the traditional business environment, the female online storeowners have more opportunities to acquire the skills to operate a business on the e-commerce platform, since Taobao offers the new online storeowners the basic knowledge of e-commerce and the skills to establish an online business. It is worth noting that women with a higher education are more likely to have a full-time profession and only manage their online store part-time, as they do not think this profession is presentable for several reasons, which will be further discussed in the
According to the interviewees, professional computer knowledge is not necessarily required in conducting online business; however, should one want to make success of it, that individual needs to understand social media very well. It is worth noting that even though none of the respondents think that managing an online business has any relevance to a specific educational level, yet all of them exhibit adequate computer and mobile literacy, which enable them to operate their online stores and promote their products through a multi-channel social media strategy.

6.2.2 Functionings

Functionings constitute the other component of the capability approach, which refers to the achievements an individual manages to do (Sen 1985, 10). Functionings in this case study are regarded as the effective outcomes of the choices made by the female entrepreneurs, which include the economic autonomy, self-realization, self-identification and time-autonomy. Moreover, social recognition, as one of the functionings, is also considered.

1. Economic enhancement

‘I am always curious to know how e-commerce works. When I realized that it costs nothing to set up a seller account [an online store], I just decided to do it [online business].’

-Respondent 8

Economic variables such as economic independence and enhancement often dominate the measurement of development and are the focus of the research (Sen 1990, 41-42). When being asked for what reason they start an online shop, it is surprising that only few respondents bring up the economic reason. Only three interviewees that are managing the online store during their part time bring up the economic reason as their first concern. They admit that they wish to have a higher income or compensation besides the regular income through doing online business.
Almost all the interviewees -no matter they are doing online business as a part-time job or a full-time career- mention that they start the online store because of the low cost and the convenience. An online store can provide them with opportunities and availabilities to try what they are interested in. One respondent that is working as a social worker and is operating an online store of graphic design in her part time tells:

‘I always have a strong interest in creative designing of images and posters. I learn how to use the image manipulation and editing software by myself. Then I start to consider to design images for more people; instead of earning money, I am more eager to get my interests and skills recognized. [...] Since the online business is about the graphic design, there is almost no cost or risk. There is no logistic fee, as all the designs and products could be sent online. [...] (Appendix 7)’

One interview that is doing full-time online business of natural health products tells:

‘Some people say that operating an online store would earn a lot of money; however, it is not like this all the time. For example, there would be the peak season and the off-season. [...] During the off-season, there might not even be one transaction per week. [...]. But I do not mind how much money I can earn. It is more about learning how to do the business. (Appendix 14)’

Another interviewee launched her online store after quitting her job. According to her, she was just curious about the e-commerce at the beginning:

‘ [...] At that time, I just quit my PR job that was boring and exhausting. I had nothing to do and was not anxious to look for a new job. Then I was thinking why not to do online business. I have always been curious about how Taobao works and how people could actually earn money from it. Also, it is completely free to set up a store on Taobao, so I just started it. [...] Surprisingly, I earned approximately 2000 dollars (14000 RMB) in the first month. Honestly, I wouldn’t have continued if I hadn’t earned money or kept a good balance of revenue and expenditure. (Appendix 5)’

Almost all of the interviewees point out that they choose the industry due to their personal interests. Several respondents also mention that their friends start the online business first. Seeing that the friends’ business go well, they decide to join the e-
commerce industry as well. Two respondents (see appendix 10 and 13) further remark that it is the age of the Internet, they feel the necessity and the urgency to know the emerging e-commerce industry and want to know how this novel industry functions.

It is worth noting that the economic enhancement is not always the major concern of all the respondents, though several of them (see appendix 11 and 16) are curious about how doing online business would bring economic benefits. The interviewees think more about what they want and what they can do when they consider launching an online store. Even though a higher economic income is not the most important concern for most of the respondents when they set up online stores; still, most of them point out that in retrospect, their economic situation are improved than before. When being asked the positive changes in different life spheres, economic enhancement actually comes to be the most mentioned one.

2. Self-realization

‘If there were not e-commerce, I wouldn’t have decided to leave university. It makes me see more possibilities.’

-Respondent 4

Three respondents (see Appendix 4, 6 and 15) tell that e-commerce provides them with other possibilities in their lives. For instance, one interviewee who decides to suspend her master study tells:

‘If there were not e-commerce, I wouldn’t have decided to leave university. [...] Taobao gives people more opportunities. It brings more possibilities in my life. Thanks to the convenience of the e-commerce platforms, now I choose to start a new journey in my life. (Appendix 6)’

Another interviewee remarks that she feels the fulfillment of her potential after she starts her online business. She recounts:

‘It [managing online store] is more about enjoying the process of designing and drawing for other people. I feel a sense of achievement when I complete the products for the customers. It requires a lot of commitment, but I never
consider it as a job or a task. It is one way to keep my personal interests, to learn the design software and to get my skills recognized. (Appendix 7)’

Several respondents confirm that they see other possibilities in their lives through doing online business. Almost all the interviewees tell that they feel a sense of achievement or fulfillment during the process of managing the online business. Most of the interviewees believe that it is a big step in their lives to launch an online store, especially those who quite their jobs to manage their online stores as a full-time profession. For most of the respondents –regardless of whether or not operating the online store in the part time, they are able to develop personal interests and make use of them as well as the resources they get access to. Female autonomy, according to Dyson and Moore (1983, 45), refers to the freedom of women to be actively involved in various kinds of activities, and the freedom of women to make decisions that influence their lives (Malhotra and Schuler 2005, 78). The interviewees tell that they are able to pursue their personal interests and make use of them more freely on Taobao compare to in the offline world. The female online storeowners’ accounts reflect that they possess the capability to manipulate their personal environment and to use the obtained information as the basis for making meaningful decisions about their own concerns. In regard of this, the autonomy of female entrepreneurs is believed to be improved.

3. Self-identification

‘I would never introduce myself as an online storeowner.’

-Respondent 1

Most of the interviewees acknowledge their economic enhancement after starting their online businesses regardless a higher economic income being their first concern. Amartya Sen (1990) argues that economic enhancement or autonomy does not necessarily lead to improvement in other social aspects such as social status or recognitions and empowerment. All the respondents are asked about their own perception of the profession as online female entrepreneurs to understand how they recognize their online economic activities. The female online stores’ actual accounts reflect whether they self-identified themselves as entrepreneurs and how they perceive this role in their lives. According to the interviewee who has a full-time profession as
a kindergarten teacher:

‘I would never introduce myself as an online storeowner when I meet new people. I would not even mention that I have an online store. I don’t think it worth mentioning. And I don’t think that I am an entrepreneur. First, I don’t think I would ever quit my job as a kindergarten teacher; otherwise I will not have the social insurances. Second, I do not think operating an online store is that serious; at least it is not serious enough for me to consider it as a proper career. So I would never entitle myself to entrepreneur. (Appendix 3)’

All the respondents’ accounts are more or less in line with the phrases quoted above. According to another interviewees:

‘Sometimes, I do. Some of my friends also call me a female entrepreneur. But when I meet new people, I would rather introduce myself as a vendor on the Internet. I think managing an online store is still different from an actual business in the offline world. (Appendix 11)’

As a result, none of the interviewees consider themselves as a female entrepreneur even if they start the business by themselves. Three of them (see Appendix 10, 11 and 15) tell that they would regard themselves as a vendor on the Internet. For those who are operating the online store during their part-time, some of them tell that they would not even mention their role as an online storeowner when introducing themselves to new friends. They only mention their full-time profession. According to several interviewees, they are just pursing their interests through online business. For them, it is more like a personal hobby than doing proper business. According to those who operate their online business as the full-time profession, they do not think that they deserve to be called as entrepreneurs as they are just doing small and non-serious business regardless of the turnover of their online stores. The accounts of female online storeowners lie in line with what Kirkwood (Galindo and Ribeiro ed. 2012, 12) argues that women often lack confidence in their entrepreneurial abilities, and they tend to see themselves less as entreprenuerers (Nissan et al. 2012, 127). According to Espiritu-Olmos and Sastre-Castillo (2012, 109-110), this perception could be caused by women’s traditional social roles in the society. The traditional cultural ideology that encourages women to take good care of families and to be a dutiful wife is still prevalent in the current Chinese society. Therefore, the self-efficacy and self-
confidence are significantly by those traditional sociocultural norms regarding the social role of women in Chinese society (Arenius and Minniti 2015, 423).

4. Social recognition

The opinions and the attitudes of the parents toward doing online business help to reflect how the general public perceives this profession and reveal whether female online storeowners feel being constrained by the social perception when making the decision regarding their online business.

Most of the interviewees tell that their parents hold a relatively positive attitude toward doing online business. According to the interviewees, even though most of their parents do not show a strong support, they are at least not against the idea of being an online entrepreneur. However, it is brought by all the six interviewees -those who are managing their online stores as a part-time profession- that if they choose to operate the online store as their full-time profession, their parents would be against.

One interview recounts:

‘My parents and close relatives just do not think it is a decent profession. Though my time management could be quite flexible, and I might earn more money, still they believe that girls should have a regular office job, like working from 9 a.m. till 5 p.m., getting enough paid and having a fancy job title. They believe doing online business is the choice for those who are not willing to work diligently but want to earn quick money, and the income is not guaranteed. (Appendix 12)’

As mentioned by another interviewee that is still a master student but is currently considering dropping her study to operate her online store as a full-time profession, her parents don’t expect her to do so. In consideration of her parents’ opinion, she is now planning to suspend her master study for a certain period of time. She recounts:

‘My parents still want me to finish the study and hope that I could manage the online store during my spare time. They wouldn’t like to see me as an online storeowner. Even though they know that operating an online store can guarantee a basic life, still they wish me to be a decent white-collar worker that would enjoy a higher social status. […] (Appendix 6)’
When asked whether their parents’ attitude has been changed, one interviewee (R9) that used to be a clerk in a foreign trading company but quit the job to be a full-time online storeowner 10 years ago tells:

‘[…] At that time (10 years ago), my relatives and parents thought that being a clerk in a big company would definitely be promising and more dignified. […] Now my online store has been established for 10 years, they changed their attitude. Online shopping has become part of everyone’s lives. And in nowadays, it is almost impossible to find one family that has never purchased anything online. (Appendix 9) ’

One interviewee tells that her parent were very against the idea when she told them that she wanted to operate an online store. Even though her parents and relatives did not stop her from doing online business, still she only operates her online store in her part time. However, her parents and relatives now have a totally different opinion on doing online business now. She tells:

‘They did not consider that doing online business could bring high profits. And operating an online store cannot be a proper career. It cannot expand one’s social networks. […] But after I have been operating the online store for three years, they change their minds a lot. Now they see the profits and recognize this business model. But still, they don’t think the revenue or income is stable. (Appendix 15)’

According to the interviewees, the families do not oppose the idea of operating an online store in general. However, this positive attitude is premised only on the basis of taking online business as a part-time profession. The parents support them in doing online business as a way of getting extra income other than the regular income or developing hobbies in the leisure time. Almost all the respondents tell that their parents and relatives do not regard doing online business as a good idea, not to mention to consider it as a serious and proper profession. Two interviewees that are operating their online stores in their part time admit that because of this attitude of the families, they give up the idea of quitting the full-time job to become a full-time online storeowner.

From the interviewees that have been doing online business for a rather long time
period and did not concern their families’ attitude, there seem to be evidence showing that the parents and the relatives start to accept this novel profession as a proper job with the fast development of the e-commerce industry in the era of the Internet. One respondent (see Appendix 12) mention that some of the relatives even start to admire the profession as online storeowners for having a more flexible working schedule and the relatively high income. However, the achieved status as female entrepreneurs is still not widely accepted by families and relatives. Achieved status refers to a social position that person attains through his or her own efforts and individual choices. Women who have an achieved status of female entrepreneurs need to face cultural traditions and insufficient social support (Véras 2014, 59). All the interviewees admit that their families still do not consider that being an online storeowner is presentable and can earn a good social status.

5. Time autonomy

When asked what substantial changes other than economic enhancement have occurred after they start their online business, one improvement mentioned by most of the interviewees who manage online business as their full-time profession is the great time autonomy. According to the respondents, even though the working time can sometimes be over ten hours per day during the peak season, the working schedule is quite flexible. For instance, one respondent tells that she does not get enough rest time and has to stay at home most of the time:

‘Managing an online store is nothing like having a regular job. From one side, the working time is flexible, and I can manage my own time. From the other side, if I receive questions or complaints from the customers, I need to respond immediately. Sometimes I need to get up at 6 in the morning and have to make the transaction at midnight. (Appendix 9)’

According to those interviewees, they have higher autonomy in managing their own time. Since the traditional ideology that women should be responsible for housework and take good care of family is still prevalent in China (Attané 2013). In this regard, some of the interviewees are further asked weather they are taking more or less housework after they start their online store, as women’s authority over household decision-making would reflect their access to resources and the power to use them. Five respondents tell that they never do any housework. Most of the others believe
that they do less housework after they start the online business, as their families would help with doing it when they need to take care of their online business.

6.3 Summary

Women’s experiences, as resources, are mostly absent or limited in social studies (Harding 1991, 119). However, their experiences and different viewpoints would be a significant indicator of reality to study gender relations, and to comprehend their own experiences in society (Ibid.) On one hand, it is crucial to take into consideration the actual women’s experiences as the departure of study to examine the implications of ICTs for female’s empowerment (Ibid.). On the other hand, female empowerment is a process where females are the key agent to recognize and utilize the resources to achieve empowerment (Malhotra et al. 2002, 8). In this regard, the assessment of the process, in this study is both qualitative and subjective. It is always kept in mind that the process of empowerment should be judged as having occurred only if it is self-assessed and validated by women themselves (Malhotra et al. 2002, 20). The analysis is based on the actual experiences and opinions of female entrepreneurs. Their actual experiences and accounts are interpreted and examined based on Sen’s capability approach, while their agency and autonomy are evaluated, based on the selected capabilities and functionings.

While Wajcman (2007) illustrates that the affordances of technologies are shaped and promoted by social forms, such as Taobao functioning as a rather newly emerged e-commerce platform, its affordances have come to be recognized differently and are significantly dependent on the various users’ deployments. The accounts of the interviewees reveal that they have different understandings of what managing an online business means to them. Some do not consider an online entrepreneur as a serious profession; thus, they would only manage their online stores as a part-time profession, while some believe that Taobao provides them with tremendous possibilities and opportunities to achieve what they desire, without having to incur high costs and risks. As is recited, empowerment is a dynamic process depends on the specific context and the outcomes of interest (Malhotra et al. 2002, 10). Nevertheless, all those female entrepreneurs have developed a shared perception of the main affordances of Taobao, which include developing a personal interest and attaining additional income in a rather liberal environment. The e-commerce platform also
becomes a venue where female entrepreneurs have the feeling that they are able to exert their agency more freely and to have autonomous decision-making abilities when operating their online businesses.

From the interview, it could be ascertained and concluded that the main reason to sell certain products online, is so that the individual’s personal interests could be reached. Though most of the interviewees are still involved with products that are associated with women, the reason why they stepped into these particular industries was not due to gender segregation nor the lack of resources, as is usually the case in the offline business environment; instead, it was because of the high maneuverability and their own interests and choices. According to the report of ILO (Dasgupta, Matsumoto and Xia 2015, 11), in the traditional Chinese labor market, women are more associated and involved in service occupations, and there still exists persistent gender discrimination and gender segregation. However, in the e-commerce industry, women relatively have the opportunity to decide freely what industry to venture into, as the obstacles are substantially reduced. All the resources are relatively equally approachable, according the interviewees; therefore, the female entrepreneurs have equal access to and are able to hold control of the resources they have - which the precondition for a female to foster a process of empowerment (Robeyns 2011; Narayan 2002), so as to make strategic choices. They are not limited to certain industries or positions, which shows that they are rather ‘free to do and achieve in pursuit of whatever goals or values he or she regards as important (Sen 1985, 203)’. Those who display a passion in digital-related products or services do not experience the gender bias, as in the case of the traditional offline labor market, while commencing and managing the online store.

The largest positive change that almost all the respondents mentioned is the economic enhancement their online business provides, though to different extents. From the interview data, the female entrepreneurs feel empowered through their online economic activities, especially in terms of their economic situation. Apart from that, some improvements occur, however, with significant limitations. This finding is in line with Sen’s arguments that an individual can have considerable economic autonomy, but still continue to remain very restrained in other relative social aspects (Sen 1990, 40).
All the interviewees were asked whether any substantial changes or improvements occurred, other than the economic enhancement in their lives after they started their online stores. One important change voiced by several respondents is a higher level of autonomy. The interviewees explained that they have sufficient autonomy in managing their own time. Several mentioned that they do much less housework than before, as they are contributing to the economic enhancement of their families. Some respondents also mentioned the transformation of the working environment. According to the respondents, who quit their full-time jobs to operate their online stores, their present work environment is completely different from that in companies. Most of them work from home and relate that they now have a rather simple and relaxing work environment. Furthermore, there are no complicated work relationships.

From the interview data, it appears that families and relatives of the female online storeowners still consider the entrepreneurial aspect of Taobao as non-serious, and they are doubtful about the status of female entrepreneurship. Several respondents revealed the attitudes of their families and relatives were somewhat reserved towards their online businesses. Furthermore, the interviewees do not consider themselves as proper entrepreneurs, as they regard their online business operations as being rather insignificant. Entrepreneurship refers to the capacity and desire of the individuals to create new business opportunities based on the use of resources (Bahmani-Oskooee et al. 2013). In this definition, those female online storeowners can be regarded as entrepreneurs. Their unconfident self-perception has roots in the traditional Chinese ideology that encourages women to be caretaker of the family. The traditional social roles with women mainly performing the central role in the family lead women feel not comfortable considering themselves as entrepreneurs.
Chapter 7 Final Thoughts and Future Research

7.1 Research Question Revisited

The study aims to investigate female empowerment through their online entrepreneurship on Taobao in Chinese society from their individual perspective. Online female entrepreneurs’ own accounts of the changes in their lives after they initiated their online businesses constitute the base of my study. The entire study departs from their actual experiences and opinions, which provide multiple perspectives to attain further insights into the dominant research of female empowerment in the context of e-commerce. Their actual experiences and accounts are interpreted and examined based on Sen’s (1985; 1990; 1993) capability approach, while selected capabilities and functionings are evaluated to understand how they are empowered through their online economic activities.

The research questions that are presented in the first chapter are as following:

1. How are the capabilities of female entrepreneurs enhanced according to them after they commence their online business on Taobao?
2. How are the functionings of female entrepreneurs enhanced according to them after they commence their online business on Taobao?

After applying Sen’s capability approach to analyze the empirical data, I would argue that the research questions have been answered. Through analyzing the fourteen interviewees and examining the capabilities and the functionings of the female entrepreneurs, the research questions were answered and the following results are revealed:

1. How are the capabilities of female entrepreneurs enhanced according to them after they commence their online business on Taobao?

Through examining four social and personal capabilities of female entrepreneurs, I believe this research question is answered. The interviewees do not consider their online activities as being impeded by restricted access to resources or the gender bias. In general, the female entrepreneurs share the perception that the institutional policies (as the social capability) provide a positive enabling environment, where they can easily venture into the online business world, and have the same opportunities and
right to compete with their male counterparts when first stepping into the online market. In the online environment, they do no encounter the difficulties often confronted in the traditional business environment, such as not having sufficient and continuous funding, and the societal challenges, which include the resistance to female’s engagement in certain industries or positions (Maier and Naire-Reicher 2008, 46). Thus, they are freer to make independent choices that would lead to positive and effective outcomes. However, despite the fact that the female online storeowners feel that they are not restricted by the resources, some still face the stereotypical and inevitable gender prejudices that are still prevalent in Chinese society. Within the male-dominated sectors, females find it difficult to gain trust, which tends to constrain them in making autonomous decisions. Moreover, even though operating online business does not require a sophisticated level education and ICT literacy, still basic knowledge is require. Advance knowledge of social media would also greatly help the online business. Meanwhile, some persistent challenges including fierce competition, as well as new challenges require female entrepreneurs’ further attention in the online environment. In other words, in order to be successful in the e-commerce industry, women need to adequately master the resources they have and utilize their knowledge and experiences. The disparities in women’s capabilities would also result different outcomes.

2. How are the functionings of female entrepreneurs enhanced according to them after they commence their online business on Taobao?

In general, the female entrepreneurs feel empowered through their economic activities, especially in terms of their economic situation. Economic enhancement comes to be the most mentioned achieved functioning according to the interviewees’ accounts, though to different extents. A higher economic income is not the most important concern for most of the respondents when they set up online stores; still, most of them point out that in retrospect, their economic situation are improved than before. They also feel that they are able to gain access to and make use of the resources, so as to make independent decisions, and to implement self-realization when they are conducting their online businesses through Taobao. The interviewees acknowledged that they have a higher autonomy in managing their time and household abilities, and an ability to act upon their will to achieve what they desire. However, most of the interviewees still do not consider themselves as female
entrepreneurs. Moreover, the entrepreneurial aspects of Taobao are not considered as serious, and conducting business online is hardly regarded as a serious endeavor. This effectively means that being a female online entrepreneur is not regarded as a presentable or decent profession.

In conclusion, women enjoy a higher level of autonomy and are able to exercise their capabilities more freely in the e-commerce environment, as compared to the traditional labor market. It is important to remember that despite having a good enabling environment, women must be the significant actors in the process where changes have been produced (Kabeer 1999, 473). From the interview, the female entrepreneurs are believed to have the independent ability of dominating the situation and pursuing what they desire when deciding what kind of products they want to engage in. They have the autonomous decision-making ability and independent capacity for individualized actions and choices in the process of replenishing stock and targeting potential customers. In other words, the interviewees believe that, as women, they have a rather high autonomy to control the situation and make decisions within the e-commerce environment.

However, as is reflected in the interview material, gender bias still exists in certain sectors, especially in those male-dominated sectors. This reflects that even though women have ventured into the sectors that were previously dominated by males, their advantages are not salient in those sectors as according to the report of the Internet Age and She-era report (AliResearch 2015). However, during the process of managing the online store, there still exist certain impediments for women when having to compete with their male counterparts. Moreover, the enhancements in the capabilities and functionings of the female online storeowners do not necessarily go beyond the online environment. In the offline world, most of the female online storeowners would not identify themselves as entrepreneur and would not even mention it.

7.2 Limitations and Future Research
I argue that Sen’s capability approach serves well as a general framework to assess the process of empowerment of individuals. Instead of merely focusing on the
outcomes of choices, the capability approach leads us to pay attention to the capabilities and achievements during the process of empowerment, which allows us to attain a holistic and analytical understanding of how the individual’s agency and autonomy are enhanced. Due to the short nature of the master’s thesis, only the core capabilities and functionings were determined to evaluate female entrepreneurs’ agency and autonomy. It is crucial to point out that the collection of samples is still rather limited, considering the total population of China, and the scope of study and the research result are limited to the context of China, with its unique social and economic forms. The result of this study attempts to provide a solid groundwork for future investigations of women’s empowerment through online business on a broader societal level.

Last but not least, I suggest for prospective studies to look into the emerging ‘she-commerce’ phenomenon by including the perspectives of the female online storeowners with a lower educational background, those from the remote areas and those who fail their online business. It would be further of great interest to examine the capabilities and functionings other than the core selected ones in this study. Follow-up studies could be well suited and a survey could also be used to measure the general public’s perception of the ‘she-commerce’ phenomenon quantitatively and on a societal level. The results could complement the findings on an individual level in this thesis.
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Appendix 1 - Interview Guideline

This appendix shows the set of questions created for the interview. During the interviews, some supplementary questions are asked, and some questions are omitted based on the accounts of the interviewee.

How old are you?

Where is your current residence?

What is your highest education level?

Are you doing online business as a full-time profession?

How long have you been operating your online store on Taobao?

For what reasons did you commence your online store on Taobao?

What kind of products are you selling on Taobao? And why?

Are you using computer or mobile phone to manage your online store?

Have you met any problems or difficulties when starting to operate and managing your online store as a female online storeowner?

What did your family think when you started your Taobao shop? Were they for or against your decision?

What do your family think now about your Taobao shop? Do they change their thoughts?
What do you think personally about opening an online shop?

What changes have been made to your life after opening your online shop? Did anything change out of your expectation?

Do you consider yourself a female entrepreneur after opening the online shop?
## Appendix 2 - General Information of the Interviewees

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondent</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Education Level (^1)</th>
<th>Profession</th>
<th>Years (^2)</th>
<th>Sector of Products</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>Kindergarten teacher</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Garments and Accessories</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>Online storeowner</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Furniture/Carpets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>Online storeowner</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Luxury goods</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Master student</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Environmental-friendly accessories</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>Social Worker</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Graphic Design</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>Office Clerk</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Customized Accessories</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>Online storeowner</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Imported Cosmetics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Master student</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Intimate wear</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>B-</td>
<td>Online storeowner</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Luxury goods</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>B-</td>
<td>Online storeowner</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Imported Foods and Snacks; Dietary Supplements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>B-</td>
<td>Office clerk</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Furniture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>Online storeowner</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Natural Health Products</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>B-</td>
<td>Online storeowner</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Branded garments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>B-</td>
<td>Online storeowner</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Small Accessories</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^1\) B stands for Bachelor’s Degree, M stands for Postgraduate Degree, B- stands for Junior College Diploma which is granted after three-year study in a college

\(^2\) Years stands for the total years of operating the online store