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# Qualitative exploration of strategic imperatives: Integrating TQM for social impact and organizational sustainability in the realm of social enterprises

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**Abstract:** How can social enterprises implement Total Quality Management (TQM) to tackle urgent social issues within their organizational framework while also ensuring their continued viability? To address this question, this study aims to explore the organizational approach to the adoption and implementation of TQM practices and their efficacy in mitigating pressing social challenges and maintaining financial sustainability. It adopts a qualitative multiple-case research design involving 3 social enterprises to explore the research phenomenon. Following qualitative research analysis process using NVivo, our findings highlight a prevalent, short-term outlook in managing TQM, hindering the full potential of TQM to achieve both social impact and organizational sustainability. More specifically, they expose a significant dissonance within the case organizations' TQM implementations: the contrast between the current state, indicative of what it is, and the ideal state, indicative of what it should be. Altogether, the study advocates leveraging TQM for long-term excellence and alignment in social enterprises (as opposed to short-term mediocrity and disarray), thereby facilitating the achievement of both social impact and financial sustainability.

**Keywords:** TQM; social enterprises; organizational approaches

## 1. Introduction

The proliferation of social enterprises is evident both in research and in operational contexts, indicating a notable increase in their expansion worldwide (Bretos et al., 2020; Gupta et al., 2020). These organizations place a strong emphasis on their mission of social impact rather than financial gains, resulting in significant influence across multiple sectors (Doherty et al., 2014). Recent data reveals that an astounding number of social enterprises, surpassing 10 million, are accountable for a remarkable \$2 trillion in annual revenues globally (World Economic Forum, 2024). This impressive figure exceeds the earnings of major industries like apparel and telecommunications (Ploeg et al., 2024). Such success highlights the potential for social enterprises to drive positive change and reshape traditional notions of business success with a balanced focus on both societal impact and financial metrics (Emmanuel et al., 2024).

In line with developments seen in both regional and global economies, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) has exhibited significant advancements in economic growth and the cultivation of a flourishing environment for social enterprises and entrepreneurship over the past decade. Notwithstanding the difficulties in the regulatory environment, the UAE is positioned for favourable transformation through social entrepreneurship, which prioritizes societal influence above financial profits (Hamouda and Wood, 2023a). Under the guidance of effective leadership and robust support, social

enterprises have significant potential to flourish and make substantial contributions towards the attainment of the Sustainable Development Goals (UAE, 2020). However, ensuring the sustained viability of social enterprises in achieving dual goals of social impact and financial sustainability, particularly in the context of the UAE, necessitates the adoption, implementation, and optimization of organization-wide strategic and operational programs like Total Quality Management (TQM) and other continuous improvement initiatives. These programs play a pivotal role, as they not only enhance internal operational efficiency, quality, and innovation (Chen et al., 2018; Jiménez-Jiménez et al., 2019; Soares et al., 2024) but also integrate efficiency and quality improvement across the entire supply chain in delivering products and services. Consequently, they enable social enterprises to maximize their positive impact while ensuring long-term financial viability.

Social enterprises are driven by clearly stated goals for the community. In contrast to charity groups and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) which rely on financial assistance in the form of donations, grants, and government financing (Tzenios et al., 2022), social enterprises pursue different business activities (including fundraising endeavours) to create financial resources for the causes they support (Calo et al., 2024; Lyon and Owen, 2019; Teck, 2023). However, despite these efforts, the sustainability of social enterprises is challenged by the inherent difficulties involved in guaranteeing broad availability of quality goods and services to a broad range of people or communities. For example, existing research revealed that 38.3% of social enterprises survived less than a year, while 45.2% maintained operations for one to three years and 5.2% for over 10 years—an indication of the imperative for long-term sustainability (Gasca, 2017). While reasons for failure may vary across organizations and countries (Cornforth, 2014; Smollan and Singh, 2024), there is a consensus among both academics and practitioners that operations improvement initiatives such as TQM and its variants could play a crucial role in addressing the risk of discontinuity in social enterprises. This is particularly relevant given the imperative for long-term sustainability highlighted by existing research (Gasca, 2017). Enhancing organizational resilience and prosperity through initiatives like TQM has been emphasized by scholars and practitioners alike (Long et al., 2013; Melão et al., 2016; Signoretti and Sacchetti, 2020).

TQM is a holistic approach to improving business efficiency by involving all personnel in addressing customer needs (Chen et al., 2021). It has gained acclaim in various industries and organisational scales. Effectively leveraging the advantages of TQM and its variants demands a strategic managerial approach that positions TQM as a fundamental element of long-term organizational strategy, refraining from short-term (Beer, 2003; Liao et al., 2024; Rashidirad et al., 2013a). This requires the establishment of robust strategic quality planning and the implementation of a comprehensive framework of quality standards and policies aligned with long-term objectives to attain sustainable competitive advantage (Kumar and Sharma, 2017; Wiedenegger et al., 2012). Such a strategic approach not only enables TQM to effectively contribute to the dual goals of social impact and financial viability of social enterprises but also serves as a conduit for competitive advantage itself. Conversely, a myopic perspective on TQM can lead to a detrimental spiral, resulting in the erosion

of product and service quality, diminished productivity, and ultimately, compromised long-term performance and viability (Fuentes et al., 2006; Silva et al., 2021).

The current study is motivated by a dearth in academic inquiry into TQM practices within social enterprises, particularly within the under-researched context of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region (Hamouda and Wood, 2023b; Paris and Abdo, 2017), with a specific focus on the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Exploring the adoption and implementation of TQM within social enterprises in the MENA region, with a focused examination on the UAE, carries substantial significance for several compelling reasons. Firstly, the region's pressing need for strategies to enhance social impact, elevate quality of life, and drive comprehensive development underscores the urgency of such exploration. Secondly, the effective implementation of TQM practices is pivotal for bolstering organizational efficacy and proactively addressing prevalent social challenges. Furthermore, TQM serves as a catalyst for innovation and acts as a catalyst for socioeconomic advancement across the region. Using a qualitative multiple-case research design, our aim is to explore how contemporary social enterprises undertake the adoption and implementation of TQM practices and evaluate their impact on addressing immediate social challenges while ensuring organizational viability and sustainability. From a theoretical perspective and contribution to knowledge, our study provides valuable insights by elucidating the organizational approaches to TQM adoption and implementation and deepening our understanding of their ramifications. In terms of practical significance, the robust support from UAE leadership and the nation's dedication to sustainable development goals underscore the critical importance of investigating TQM adoption and implementation approaches within social enterprises and assessing their impact on addressing pressing social issues while ensuring their sustained viability. Altogether, our study assists social entrepreneurs in achieving their goals of social impact and securing financial viability and sustainability through TQM.

Our paper is structured as follows: In Section 1, we introduce the topic, focusing on the motivations behind studying social enterprises and their adoption of TQM. Moving on to Section 2, we delve into the context of the study, emphasizing the support of social entrepreneurship to address pressing issues, particularly in the under-researched context of the Middle East region. In Section 3, we present a review of literature pertinent to TQM adoption approaches, followed by an assessment of their performance impact. Section 4 details our research design and methodology, providing insight into our approach. Following this, Section 5 offers a qualitative analysis of the data collected. In Section 6, we synthesize findings and outline paths for TQM implementation based on our analysis. Finally, in Section 7, we offer concise conclusions on practical implications and future research directions.

## **2. Research context**

Entrepreneurs are distinguished from others by their willingness to take risks, their thirst for innovation, and their unwavering desire to grasp every opportunity that presents themselves (Sotiropoulou et al., 2021). Together with those traits, social entrepreneurs also have a concern for people and the environment. To put it simply, social entrepreneurship is impact-driven enterprise (Kickul and Lyons, 2020). It

involves launching a company with the intention of benefiting society and resolving environmental problems, such as raising social equity, protecting natural areas, and conserving biodiversity (Hossain et al., 2021). Social entrepreneurs employ business as a tool for improving growth and social change. These qualities are epitomized by the entrepreneurial spirit thriving in the UAE, which stands at the forefront regionally and globally in fostering entrepreneurship and innovation (Jeong and Alhanaee, 2020).

The UAE was ranked 19th out of the countries in a 2016 Thomson Reuters Foundation survey report titled “The best places to be a social entrepreneur.” According to the report, social entrepreneurs are welcomed by the UAE society and social entrepreneurship is growing in popularity in the country. As opportunities in traditional employment sectors become scarcer, university students are choosing entrepreneurship as their preferred career path more and more. The importance of social entrepreneurship for the UAE’s future growth is highlighted in the 2019 GEM UAE Special Report, which was produced in collaboration with HSBC (Gem UAE Social Entrepreneurship Report, 2019/2020). Social entrepreneurship becomes increasingly important in the future as efforts to bring about environmental and social change progress (Heucher et al., 2024). The pivotal issue about social entrepreneurship is that its success is measured not in financial metrics but rather by the impact it has on the lives of individuals and communities (Gupta et al., 2020). Hamouda and Wood (2023a) argue that in the coming decade, as efforts to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) intensify, the prominence of social entrepreneurship is expected to significantly increase. This shift towards mainstream acceptance is poised to have a positive impact on the UAE.

Due to its simultaneous emphasis on social and economic prosperity, it has garnered considerable interest from both the local government and enterprises (Ploeg et al., 2024). The UAE government has made great efforts to encourage entrepreneurship among Emirati nationals as well as the local populace (Sikdar and Vel, 2011). As to Reuters’s 2016 report, social entrepreneurship in the UAE is considered a noteworthy contribution to the community, in line with Islamic values (Thomson Reuters Foundation, 2016). Dutt D’Cunha (2016) reports that the support systems offered by local government and private investors are becoming more and more prominent in Forbes. These efforts aim to motivate business owners to actively advance societal progress, aligning with the overarching goal of fostering sustainable development and prosperity in the region.

Formulating a comprehensive definition of social entrepreneurship poses challenges, as there exist some distinct traits that are frequently linked to this concept (Falahat et al., 2024). The characteristics of social entrepreneurs were examined in the GEM UAE Social Entrepreneurship Report. Social entrepreneurship is a business model that successfully balances social impact and financial profitability. In the United Arab Emirates (UAE), around 7.9% of social entrepreneurs possess a robust social goal, while 12.2% exhibit a certain degree of social mission. Moreover, social entrepreneurship is crucial in addressing social issues and promoting economic development. In the UAE, 79.9% of social entrepreneurs exhibit both moderate and high levels of market participation, with 52.5% demonstrating a high level of market involvement. They have a heightened awareness of social issues and actively seek financial backing from many avenues, employing tactics such as impact investing and

crowdfunding. It is notable that 96.2% of social entrepreneurs in the United Arab Emirates require supplementary capital to sustain their operations. These findings underscore the importance of supporting and investing in social entrepreneurship to address pressing social issues and foster sustainable economic growth in the region. Studies endorse the UAE's active promotion of social entrepreneurs' participation in important events like the Dubai Business Excellence Awards and comparable recognitions (Jayakar Pai and More, 2018; Rowland-Jones, 2013).

Despite the significant contribution of social enterprises to the advancement of sustainable development (Calo et al., 2024; Ploeg et al., 2024), their financial viability has been found to be unsustainable, resulting in their classification as 'by charity/for charity' ventures (Gasca, 2017), similar to their operations in developing nations (Pinto et al., 2019). Consequently, social companies face ongoing difficulties due to their limited financial and technical resources. It is recommended that high-quality practices and programs must be included in the operational and service activities of these social enterprises – if social enterprises are to succeed in achieving the dual goals of social impact and financial sustainability (Paris and Abdo, 2017).

The preceding discussion underscores the importance of supporting and investing in social entrepreneurship to address pressing social issues and foster sustainable economic growth in the region. In a similar vein, they highlight the need for social enterprises to adopt operations improvements initiatives (e.g., TQM and its variants), to maximize their impact on sustainable economic growth locally and regionally. Recent research underscores the pivotal role of a TQM-oriented management approach, emphasizing HRM, process management, customer focus, and continuous improvement, in ensuring sustained impact and growth (Silvestri et al., 2024). This highlights the necessity of aligning organizational decisions and approaches with TQM, emphasizing a long-term perspective on its adoption, implementation and performance impact (Choi and Behling, 1997; Liao et al., 2023; Soltani et al., 2012).

Given that social enterprises heavily rely on sponsors and face significant challenges in securing sponsorship (Peredo and Mclean, 2005), it becomes imperative to choose the appropriate approach for adopting and implementing TQM and its variants to overcome the financial constraints faced by numerous social enterprises. The judicious choice of strategy or approach for TQM adoption and implementation yields dual benefits for these organizations: fostering sponsor trust and enabling social enterprises to compete effectively in their respective markets (Dahlgaard and Anninos, 2022; Permana et al., 2021). Accordingly, the central emphasis on optimizing financial gains while simultaneously maximizing societal and environmental advantages implies that the appropriate adoption and implementation of organization-wide operations improvement initiatives such as TQM could facilitate the simultaneous attainment of these diverse and frequently intertwined objectives (Li, 2017; Santos-Vijande and Álvarez-González, 2009; Talukder and Lakner, 2023). The seamless integration of TQM into social enterprises relies on properly aligning its planning and implementation with its guiding principles (Fuentes et al., 2006; Liu et al., 2012). To accomplish this, it is essential to harmonize quality planning with the tenets of quality management and infuse quality principles into organizational objectives of social enterprises.

Moreover, in line with the growing recognition of qualitative metrics in performance assessment, social enterprises are increasingly incorporating non-financial criteria to evaluate their effectiveness. Research indicates that alongside financial considerations, factors such as customer loyalty, product excellence, market dominance, and employee efficiency are vital for assessing organizational performance (Dobrovic et al., 2018). These qualitative dimensions provide a holistic perspective on a social enterprise's impact and effectiveness, complementing financial metrics and enhancing overall performance evaluation. This perspective aligns with the idea of emphasizing that optimizing financial gains should be accompanied by the consideration of societal and environmental benefits (de Villiers, 2022; Tarquinio and Posadas, 2020).

### **3. Theoretical background: Approaches to TQM adoption and implementation**

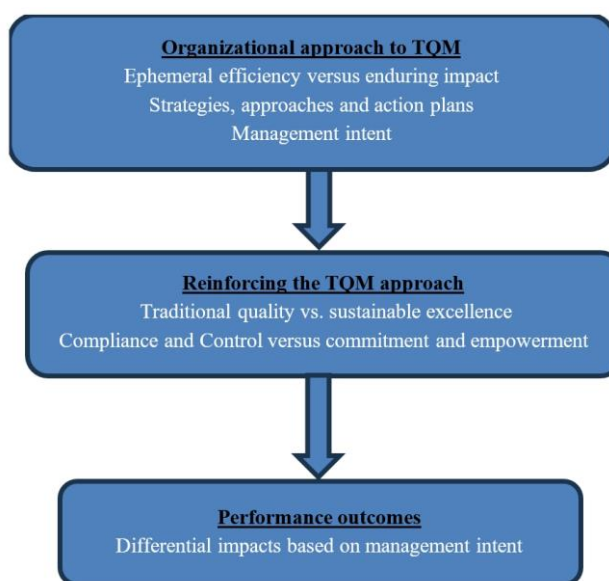
TQM is a holistic methodology for enhancing competitiveness, efficiency, and adaptability by means of strategic planning, and thorough comprehension of all activities, while actively engaging individuals at every level (Oakland et al., 2021). It possesses utility across many organizational contexts. Strategic adoption of TQM ensures that management prioritizes a proactive approach to quality, emphasizing the prevention of issues rather than their mere detection (Deming, 2018). TQM should start at the highest level, where managerial dedication and effective leadership (Alnuaimi and Yaakub, 2020) or as Beer (2003) put it succinctly “quality of management” are paramount. A vision framework is essential for any organization, since it encompasses its guiding philosophy, core values, beliefs, and purpose, thereby fostering a culture of leadership and direction. The foundation of effective leadership is in the vision of the top management, which then evolves into the strategic quality planning. For effective leadership of TQM, it is imperative for top management to cultivate the following qualities: well-defined values and objectives presented as a vision, strategies and plans that are both clear and effective, crucial success factors and core processes, an appropriate management structure, and employee engagement through empowerment (Bouranta, 2020; Soltani, 2005). In short, TQM can be viewed as a pathway to achieving excellence in leadership (Lakshman, 2006).

The critical role of unwavering dedication to quality and robust leadership, where managerial commitment and effective guidance are indispensable, underscores the importance of reinforcing the TQM approach. This entails assuming responsibility for upholding a comprehensive quality policy that encompasses a wide array of crucial aspects, including organizational standards, alignment with customer requirements, optimization of operational capabilities, provision of materials and services, facilitation of educational provisions, and perpetual enhancement of management systems (Helmold, 2023; Sousa and Voss, 2002; Yadav et al., 2020). Effective communication of these policies and standards by management enhances message credibility and fosters a culture of quality within the organization, ultimately contributing to the success of TQM initiatives.

The holistic nature of TQM also highlights the importance of a customer-centric approach. TQM lays stress on meeting the specific needs of the customer to improve

the quality of desired products and services. It emphasizes the importance of implementing a continuous improvement process to consistently deliver the desired goods and services to customers (Ali and Johl, 2021; Deming, 1986). In a similar vein, employee participation in TQM provides workers with a variety of discretionary decision-making abilities to address workplace problems. This aligns with TQM's philosophy of maximizing the potential of employees in the workplace (Coyle-Shapiro, 1999; Saffar and Obeidat, 2020). To augment its holistic approach, TQM also underscores Continuous Improvement. This involves continuously adapting to ensure sustained competitiveness in the market (Oakland, 2011). The principle of continuous improvement in TQM resonates with Albert Einstein's insight: "Without changing our patterns of thought, we will not be able to solve the problems we created with our current patterns of thought." This emphasizes the need for perpetual adaptation and innovation in addressing evolving challenges and ensuring sustained organizational success. Drawing from Einstein's insight, continuous improvement, underscores the need to adapt our perspectives to address challenges effectively. This principle aligns with other key elements of TQM. For example, process improvement seeks to improve goods and services beyond consumers' expectations, as well as to achieve zero waste in manufacturing (Permana et al., 2021; Wiedenegger et al., 2012), while benchmarking facilitates systematic learning from industry best practices (Junior et al., 2021; Lema and Price, 1995). Furthermore, a mutually beneficial supplier relationship ensures long-term collaboration with the supplier and a few rivals, while the seller meets the buyer's quality and continual improvement objectives—thereby emphasizing the interconnectedness inherent in TQM's holistic approach (Oakland et al., 2021).

To further clarify the importance of approaches to TQM adoption and implementation, we summarize the above discussion into a framework (see **Figure 1**) to illustrate these elements comprehensively.



**Figure 1.** Evaluating the impact of approaches to TQM adoption and implementation.

As depicted in **Figure 1**, the initial strategic planning for quality can vary significantly in its underlying rationale and temporal perspective. While certain

managerial approaches to TQM prioritize short-term gains and operational efficiency through a focus on compliance and control, others emphasize the importance of long-term societal impact and sustainability by prioritizing continuous learning and improvement (Choi and Behling, 1997; Soltani et al., 2008). This dichotomy results in diverse reinforcements of TQM practices, ranging from a reliance on quick fixes, which may perpetuate a culture of mediocrity, to an emphasis on enduring organizational learning and continuous improvement, which can foster sustainability and societal resonance by nurturing a culture of excellence (Chen et al., 2021; Soltani and Wilkinson, 2010). Therefore, the choice between these paths for social enterprises largely depends on the capacity and preference of managerial approaches to the adoption and implementation of TQM (Ali et al., 2020). It involves deciding whether to emphasize control more on regulatory and industry compliance or “to develop a commitment to the new TQM direction and make decisions consistent with it (Beer, 2003).

#### **4. Research design and methods**

To delve into the organizational approach to TQM adoption and implementation, we opted for a qualitative multiple-case study design. This choice was made to enable an in-depth exploration of the perspectives of key informants involved in the adoption and implementation of TQM (Clarke, 2022; Khushi et al., 2021). Specifically, the adopted qualitative case study design is deemed appropriate for several reasons: to address the scarcity of previous studies and their mixed findings on TQM adoption and implementation (Yangailo et al., 2023), to provide a holistic view of TQM implementation, and to allow for detailed insights from participants (Yin and Li, 2017).

Social enterprises in the UAE face unique challenges due to their ambiguous legal status, as they don't fit neatly into existing business or charity categories (Talib, 2015). Despite their importance, social enterprises represent a small fraction, comprising just 2.2% of all businesses in the UAE (Lowe et al., 2020; UAE, 2020). This rarity poses challenges for tracking their activities, as traditional metrics like firm registrations or tax filings may not accurately capture their presence. Consequently, this study relies on self-reported data to gain insights into entrepreneurial activities, providing a window into informal entrepreneurial endeavours. For the purpose of this study, “social entrepreneurs” are defined as individuals or partnerships actively engaged in social entrepreneurship and who have initiated concrete business actions within the past three years (Gupta et al., 2020; Chourasia et al., 2021).

In response to the unique landscape of social enterprises across the UAE, we made every effort to inclusively capture their diverse presence. Our study strategically focused on the vibrant communities of Ajman, Dubai, and Fujairah, which actively embrace and support social entrepreneurship initiatives. At the outset, our research involved identifying ten potential social enterprises through a comprehensive Google search. Following initial contact and exchange of information with these organizations, we selected three of them based on the extent of their quality management practices and policies, as well as their willingness to participate in our study. Although only three organizations agreed to take part, we found that they had experience with various aspects of TQM and its variants (e.g., ISO 9000 family of standards). In line with the



focus our study, our aim was to provide a nuanced and insightful exploration of the adoption, implementation, and performance impact of TQM within these selected social enterprises. It's noteworthy that research on TQM adoption within not-for-profit sectors, especially social enterprises, remains sparse despite extensive studies within for-profit industries (Dezi et al., 2022; Guzmán et al., 2024). Hence our qualitative study helps fill the gap in the limited research on social enterprises in the country and the broader context of the developing Middle East region (Al-Dhaafri and Alosani, 2020).

To maintain confidentiality, the three cases were presented under the pseudonyms Natural, Mastery, and Nurturing. Natural Social Enterprise offers eco-friendly car wash solutions to reduce water waste and enhance the longevity of the vehicle's appearance. The Mastery Social Enterprise empowers numerous female entrepreneurs by enhancing their skills and providing them with a platform to showcase and market their products and services. In the Nurturing Social Enterprise training, financial aid, and management assistance are offered to women in the emirates who produce and market traditional and cultural goods and services to both local and international customers.

According to the scholars in multiple case study design, latent aspects of the subjects can be revealed by conducting detailed individual face-to-face interviews (Hancock et al., 2021; Yin and Li, 2017), followed by focus groups (Morgan, 1997). Following this methodology, Jelinek et al.'s (1983) recommendations were adopted so that responses were probed, evidence were requested, and reasons and justifications were asked so that researchers could better understand the values and assumptions following specific perceptions. After intriguing findings regarding the role of TQM, individual face-to-face interviews and three focus group interviews (one focus group per case organization) were conducted. While forming a single group for all three social enterprises was not feasible due to geographical constraints, thematic analysis of these group discussions was carefully carried out to capture the perspectives of all managers from each organization. This approach facilitated the derivation of comprehensive conclusions pertinent to the social enterprise community regarding their stance on TQM adoption, its implementation, and resulting performance outcomes.

Managers of various ranks and roles participated in focus group discussions and individual interviews. The participants' positions and functional responsibilities were instrumental in gathering comprehensive data on TQM adoption, implementation and outcomes. The interview questions were tailored to the analysis of the impact of organisational approaches to TQM adoption and implementation, covering areas such as quality planning (e.g., the composition of the TQM planning team, establishment of policies and guidelines for quality initiatives), quality control and assurance (e.g., actual TQM practices observed in daily operations), and performance outcomes resulting from TQM implementation (e.g., improvements in product/service quality, customer satisfaction, and operational efficiency). **Table 1** provides an overview of the interviewees' profiles.

**Table 1.** Respondents profile.

Details	Natural social enterprise	Mastery social enterprise	Nurturing social enterprise social enterprise
Year of Establishment	2012	2018	2002
Size	150+	200+	700+
Ownership	Private social enterprise	Public social enterprise	Public sector
Activity	Offers auto care solutions	Empowers women entrepreneurs	Offers various social services and products
Year of adopting TQM initiatives	2013	2019	2005
No. of informants	7	12	13
Managerial position of the informants Senior (middle) and first level	1 (3) 3	3 (4) 5	3 (4) 6
Education secondary/ higher school/ college/ university	20% College 80% University	30% College 70% University	30% Secondary 40% Higher School 20% College 10% University
Type of TQM initiatives/ quality practices	UAE Government Excellence System (GEM based on EFQM model)	Regulated under Municipality (quality standard based on ISO standards)	Regulated under Municipality (quality standard based on ISO standards)
The rationale for the adoption of TQM	Customer satisfaction and higher market share	Compliance with government regulations	Dealing with customer complaints due to poor service/products
Status of TQM programs	Satisfactory	Satisfactory	Unsatisfactory

To complement the insights gained from face-to-face interviews and focus group discussions, the researchers turned to social enterprise records and reports to delve deeper into their quality strategies (O.Nyumba et al., 2018). Subsequently, direct observations of operations at the social entrepreneurs’ workplaces provided further valuable data. Each case organization’s workplace was visited for a day, affording access to various operational areas, including display sections, workspaces, storage facilities for finished products, and key customer service locations. While formal interviews with participants were limited due to agreements with the organisations, informal conversations with managers were conducted, and their interactions with each other and their personnel were observed. **Table 2** provides a summary of focus group discussions.

**Table 2.** Focus group discussions.

Group	Gender: male (M), female (F)	Additional formal and informal discussion	Additional information/material provided
Group A (Natural)	M 0 F 6	Yes	Yes
Group B (Mastery)	M1 F7	Yes	Yes
Group C (Nurturing)	M2 F 6	Yes	Yes

Notebooks were used to record the data from informal discussions and extensive observations. At the end of each research day, researchers reflected on observations

and notes, which enabled a tentative understanding of the emerging data patterns and helped to direct attention to issues to explore further in the following days. The Data gathered from these sources and verbatim transcripts of the interviews (audio-recorded data) were combined to support the analysis process. Corbin and Strauss' (1990) data coding approach was adapted for open coding by grouping the initial identification of themes into categories. Special attention was paid to the interviewee evidence that corroborated directly or indirectly to data gathered using other methods or interviews. To enhance the data quality, field notes were also incorporated into the data analysis process. This process was complemented by axial coding, which was employed to examine, integrate, and reduce the categories into fewer but more robust ones. This iterative approach continued until researchers were confident that no new insights would emerge – an indication of theoretical saturation (Low, 2019). Triangulation of interviews, observation, focus groups, and document study yielded well-grounded findings. To validate the emerged themes, researchers utilized NVivo software and conducted text analysis to identify data themes and sub-themes. By combining these themes and sub-themes in NVivo (Edlund and McDougall, 2019), codes were grouped into three main themes and several sub-themes. Thematic analysis was then employed to fortify the findings (Castleberry and Nolen, 2018). Overall, our research design, which included triangulation techniques and interviews with managers across different hierarchical levels, aligns with Weber (1990), recommendation and significantly bolsters the robustness of our findings. **Table 3** provides additional support for the identified themes in our findings.

In total, 32 individual interviews and three focus groups were conducted at different managerial levels. The time taken for each interview was in a range from 30 minutes to 40 minutes. In contrast, the time for each focus group was about one to two hours. **Table 4** presents a summary of themes and categories based on the initial three main topics of the study. Further qualitative discussion of each of these themes is presented below.

In essence, **Table 4** underscores a predominant tendency towards TQM adoption within the case organizations, which leans heavily towards short-term process enhancement and cost efficiency, coupled with an emphasis on compliance and control. Additionally, there is a noteworthy concentration on workforce control and individual accountability when addressing quality issues or operational inefficiencies. This emphasis on individual responsibility aligns with the overarching organizational goals, particularly focused on maximizing profits, containing costs, and enhancing productivity and customer satisfaction metrics. Consequently, the attribution of blame tends to fall on individual employees rather than placing significant emphasis on management responsibility for quality outcomes.

**Table 3.** Supporting evidence for themes in findings.

Main themes	Semi-structured interviews	Informal discussions and non-participant observations	Archival data	Focus group meetings
Organizational approach to TQM adoption and implementation	<p>“We are committed to producing excellence in all our offerings”. (Senior Manager- Nurturing Social Enterprise)</p> <p>“Quality is our main concern and priority, and we abide by it. We have no time for fancy quality standards right now” (CEO, Natural Social Enterprise)</p> <p>“We consider quality as a way to excel” (Senior Manager - Mastery Social Enterprise)</p>	<p>One of the CEOs mentioned that the organization is trying to expand its customer base and that this is closely tied to the quality embedded in all their work. Once they make enough profit, they aim to adopt a more upscale standard.</p> <p>We observed in two of the cases that top management considered the quality checks performed by regulators to be adequate for ensuring the quality of the products or processes.</p>	<p>There was no evidence of written quality policy or long-term plan in the provided documents.</p>	<p>Senior Members were committed to the quality. There was a perception that the day-to-day responsibility for quality assurance falls on middle and front-line managers rather than senior leadership.</p>
Reinforcement of TQM implementation	<p>“We learned new techniques to store the raw items of food, and we also learned how to reuse the waste material for creative items.” (First line manager- Nurturing social enterprise)</p> <p>“We primarily focus on the quality of products during manufacturing” Senior Manager- Nurturing Social Enterprise)</p> <p>“Process quality, customer care and supply chain practices are routine aspects of our work”. (CEO of Mastery)</p>	<p>Front-line managers’ limited understanding of quality strategies – an indication of the need for quality training and education. Concerns expressed by female managers about their lack of promotion—an indication of a gap in understanding quality management through its emphasis on empowerment as well as the recognition and utilization of diverse perspectives, skills, and experiences.</p> <p>Customer complaints about high pricing signal a potential issue in quality management related to pricing strategies and value perception – an indication of a preference for cost over quality mentality within the case organizations.</p>	<p>The archival data (e.g., quality audits and production logs), revealed specific quality practices focused on enhancing materials, packaging, and manufacturing processes. However, there was no promotion policy, and no contextually appropriate performance management system in place, as well as inadequate mechanisms existed for addressing customer feedback - an indication of undermining soft quality or people-based issues related to quality management.</p>	<p>Strong evidence of quality practices such as benchmarking, supply chain management relationship, and process improvement was expressed – an indication of the prevalence of quality tools and techniques (hard TQM) as mere means of creating a culture of quality rather than instilling a quality mindset among employees.</p> <p>Front-line managers expressed loyalty to their team during the focus group discussions rather than to the administration – an indication of the prioritization of team dynamics over hierarchical loyalty – an indication of the reluctance of employees to openly express their opinions or concerns in front of their managers or peers due to the prevailing top-down organizational control and blame culture.</p>
Performance outcomes	<p>“We have expanded our market across the UAE”. (Middle Manager- Nurturing social enterprise)</p> <p>“Significant improvement in our line of products and services over the past five years”. (Manager, Natural Social Enterprise)</p> <p>“We are not selling even outside of UAE” (Senior Manager of Mastery social enterprise)</p>	<p>During informal discussions, managers from Nurturing and Mastery case organizations highlighted a transition from their previous products, termed ‘Ator and Bakhor,’ to newer offerings—owing to the implementation of KPIs and deadlines for employees, emphasizing efficiency and productivity at the expense of long-term viability and system improvement.</p> <p>Collaborations with other organizations contributed to improvements in production processes.</p> <p>The Natural social enterprise successfully penetrated the markets of Oman and Qatar by capitalizing on the superior quality of its organic wash products – an indication of generating more projects and expanding its portfolio over investing in its people -i.e., neglecting the human aspect of quality management.</p>	<p>The archival data showed 507 social enterprises in 2019, (with only 4 in 2004) as well as more market capturing (LULU, Fujairah Mall). Documents showed expansion in product line and outside of UAE.</p> <p>1046 dresses sold in one year – an indication of high demand or successful marketing strategies for the products.</p>	<p>During group discussions, management team and administrative staff provided evidence that they were strongly satisfied with their enterprises’ progress and future outcomes.</p> <p>During group discussions, the management team expressed strong satisfaction with their enterprises’ progress and future prospects - But these sentiments may be influenced by managers’ hopes for advancement through the use of modern technology and initiatives, rather than representing a general consensus.</p>

**Table 4.** Specified features of the responses: categories and themes of data.

Main theme	Semi-structured interviews	Non-participant observations and informal discussion	Archival data	Focus group meetings
Approaches to TQM implementation	Visionary quality focus	Limited tactical guidance	Undefined long-term targets	Implicit quality policy
-	Vague strategic direction	-	Inspection-based quality policies	TQM reinforcement
Reinforcement of TQM	Operational process enhancement	Inadequate customer feedback management	Employee participation	Absence of quality team
-	Token efforts to embrace TQM principles	-	Cost-efficient practices	Organizational structure (Hierarchical: superficial top-down actions)
-	-	-	Lack of clear tactical strategies (strategic direction opacity)	Absence of performance appraisal system (Subjective evaluations, blame on employees)
Resulting outcomes	Profit maximization	Cost reduction priority	Enhanced customer perception: immediate satisfaction boost	Streamlined productivity and processes: quick-fix efficiency gains

## 5. Qualitative analysis of the findings

### 5.1. Approaches to TQM implementation

Monitoring the entire quality management process (planning, implementation, outcomes), from the top to bottom level, proved challenging. In the Natural Social Enterprise, quality entailed certain standards and a specific documented quality policy, yet its management was absent. As one senior manager succinctly put it, the value and planning of quality by top management were questioned.

*My organization is committed to quality and work standards. We are offering a quality alternative of water wash, and we have the policy to spread this quality, but I have not documented the quality policy. (Owner—Natural social enterprise, experience 20 years, age 55).*

Likewise, a senior manager in the Nurturing Social Enterprise case talked about the non-existence of quality planning. According to the manager:

*Cost-driven quality standards often don't align with customer preferences. While we prioritize quality, we don't have a specific documented plan. (Senior manager—Nurturing social enterprise, experience 13 years, age 50).*

In the Mastery case organization, deficiencies in quality planning and guidelines and implementation policies gave rise to two significant issues. Firstly, although top management professed a commitment to quality, it was often treated more as an abstract concept than a well-documented standard. Nonetheless, effective quality management demands comprehensive documentation of policies, plans, and procedures, with the goal of further aligning them with the organization's requirements in response to customer needs and market demands, while also providing an opportunity for the company to learn from past experiences. Secondly, the quality activities employed by these social enterprises often seemed ad-hoc and lacking in deliberate planning, resulting in quality management being viewed merely as a functional tool for superficial consumer appeal. Moving forward, addressing these

issues will require a concerted effort to establish clear quality standards and strategic planning processes that align with the organization's objectives.

Our analysis of data reveals a notable operational dynamic within the case organisations. In the Nurturing and Mastery social enterprises, frontline managers predominantly assumed responsibility for quality control, indicating a limited engagement of top-level management in the quality implementation process. Furthermore, despite the observed deficiency in internal adoption of quality plans among senior executives, there was a strong adherence to externally mandated standards in both cases. Adherence to these standards was considered emblematic of excellence, thus serving as a pivotal marker of thorough quality oversight. As articulated by a senior executive from the Nurturing social enterprise case:

*We are strictly monitored by the Municipality and HR department, which makes us vigilant for meeting their standards to avoid fines and closures of our processes (Top executive Nurturing social enterprise, experience 10 years, age 40).*

In the same vein, senior managers at Mastery Enterprise shared similar perspectives on quality. They viewed quality more as a regulatory requirement rather than an independent, long-term strategic plan. As expressed by one senior manager:

*Quality is the top priority, and we are always committed to the quality standards of the Municipality. It's something we must do, though we don't have a strategic plan of quality, we follow municipality quality standards. (Senior Manager—Mastery social enterprise, experience 15 years, age 45)*

In the case of the Natural social enterprise, being a private entity, resulted in minimal emphasis on regulatory compliance. Consequently, the owner focused efforts on enhancing the quality mechanism through the implementation of relevant quality standards. Although a formalized quality strategic plan was lacking, executives expressed quality principles and perspectives through various agendas and brochures. Intriguingly, these values closely aligned with the successful history of the enterprise, emphasizing the significance of 'improvement', 'hard work', 'creativity', 'teamwork', 'motivation', 'respect', and 'profit'.

Overall, the research findings across the three enterprises indicate that compliance-driven pressures from both external and internal sources have influenced the adoption of TQM practices. However, this adoption appeared to stem more from the necessity to meet regulatory or contractual obligations rather than a genuine commitment to fully integrate quality practices. As a result, the implementation of TQM lacked a clear overarching vision and enduring objectives, often leaving management practices without comprehensive guidelines for meeting quality requirements. Despite this, initiatives within all three social enterprises suggested a gradual shift toward a more holistic approach to quality management. Nevertheless, it is evident that there is still a long way to go, and the journey remains challenging and arduous. In formal terms:

**Proposition 1:** The efficacy of TQM in facilitating the achievement of growth and social impact objectives within social enterprises is contingent upon the depth and duration of top management's engagement in quality management practices.

## **5.2. Reinforcement of the TQM approach**

Despite having recognized the critical significance of quality practices in ensuring enterprise success and sustainability, the analysis of managerial feedback revealed an existing gap between recognition and effective implementation. Moreover, insufficient commitment from top management hindered the progress of quality enhancement initiatives. The investigation into quality practices aimed to shed light on how these enterprises developed, reviewed, and executed their quality plans, as well as the pivotal factors driving quality implementation. In the cases of Mastery and Nurturing social enterprises, a notable reliance on regulatory frameworks for quality assurance was observed. For instance, findings from archival research and on-site observations underscored the substantial influence exerted by regulatory authorities in shaping and enforcing quality standards.

*The Ministry of Human Resources will be visiting us tomorrow to inspect our products and to buy and promote our products on a bigger scale. (Middle Manager—Mastery Social Enterprise, experience 7 years, aged 38).*

Given the emphasis on regulatory compliance as the primary reinforcer of TQM, it was unsurprising to find that regulatory authorities also provided quality training sessions for Mastery and Nurturing social enterprises. Our review of documentary evidence revealed recent training sessions conducted by the HR ministry and that future offerings of high-quality training for social entrepreneurs were scheduled by the ministry as per their plans. Another challenge highlighted by front-line managers of Nurturing and Mastery social enterprises was the approval process for product customization based on customer feedback. According to a middle manager:

*We have a system in place to gather customer feedback for product improvement. However, the approval process for incorporating changes into our products is lengthy. (Middle Manager—Nurturing Social Enterprise, experience 11 years, aged 45).*

Insights from informants at Nurturing and Mastery social enterprises indicated that their pricing policy was based on reasonable pricing methods. For example, the profit margin objective aimed for survival rather than profit maximization, given that the end users were orphans and economically disadvantaged students from underdeveloped countries like Somalia and Sudan. However, the pursuit of cost minimization led to compromises in quality, as reported by middle managers.

*We try to make quality products, but meeting the quality expectation is far from an area to reach. (Informal discussion with Nurturing social enterprise and Mastery social enterprise)*

However, the Natural social enterprise had its quality mechanisms in place. Our examination of the documentary evidence (such as work instructions) indicated significant involvement of top management in quality control activities. Front-line managers and employees demonstrated prompt compliance with quality issues, having been trained according to the enterprise's quality requirements. Informal discussions and observations uncovered sentiments related to specific recurring issues within the organization. In comparison to the other two cases, the Natural social enterprise appeared to better reinforce Total Quality Management (TQM) practices. The enterprise maintained a robust quality mechanism, ensuring adherence to standards without compromise. Documentary evidence, such as work instructions, illustrated

significant top management involvement in continuous quality monitoring. Middle managers and front-line employees exhibited heightened responsiveness to quality issues, given their awareness and training aligned with the enterprise's quality requirements. A middle manager articulated this stance during a formal interview.

Likewise, documentary evidence (supplier agreements) from the Natural social enterprise revealed their reliance on imported organic ingredients from Europe, resulting in high-cost products. However, informal discussions unveiled that the utilization of locally available, less costly alternatives were hindered by the absence of internal quality check mechanisms for ingredients. The owner remarked,

*We didn't have internal quality labs to ensure the quality of ingredients. To source high-quality ingredients, we entered contracts abroad; however, this resulted in significantly higher costs for us.*

Furthermore, middle managers in the Nurturing and Mastery cases emphasized the importance of customer feedback for improving quality and satisfaction. However, they often struggled to meet customer demand due to approval and cost issues. Conversely, in the case of Natural social enterprise, the primary challenge was the dependence on imported ingredients, leading to higher costs and hindrances in satisfying customer demands.

In the realm of supply chain management, significant advancements were unveiled through our data analysis in both the Natural and Nurturing social enterprises, driving them towards higher performance. In a similar vein, a manager from the Natural Social Enterprise affirmed during an interview,

*"To ensure the quality of our product, we have integrated contracts with our European suppliers."*

In contrast, documentary evidence (purchase journals) from the Nurturing social enterprise indicated their utilization of materials from available suppliers, while the Mastery enterprise lacked aligned contracts with quality suppliers. A respondent from the Mastery Social Enterprise noted,

*"Potential entrepreneurs have to procure the material themselves to make the product. We do not engage in contacting and verifying the quality of raw material suppliers."*

Benchmarking emerged as a proven quality strategy commonly practiced by these case organizations, enabling them to aspire to higher standards. A manager from the Natural Social Enterprise expressed during an informal discussion,

*"We aim to attain the quality of our product on par with advanced countries like the US and EU."*

The interviews and focus groups of Nurturing and Mastery social enterprises depicted ongoing efforts to continuously improve products. However, it was observed that the performance appraisal system was absent in these organizations. Conversely, in the Natural social enterprise, interviews revealed the presence of an appraisal system based on performance and tenure, with a manager stating,

*"My efforts have always been noticed and encouraged."*

A competent team to prevent errors was also lacking. In Nurturing and Mastery, the social enterprise regulator checked quality, and focus groups mentioned that the Municipality inspected their products. However, archived data from the Natural Social



Enterprise indicated that while senior management cared about quality, only supervisors examined it.

Overall, the comments suggest that while these companies have quality initiatives encompassing process improvement, customer focus, supply chain management, and benchmarking, they lack well-defined strategies and structures. Thus, significant improvements are needed in practices such as valuing customer feedback, implementing performance appraisal systems for employee satisfaction, refining supply chain mechanisms, and enhancing organizational structures for quality management.

**Proposition 2:** TQM effectiveness in social enterprises relies on robust reinforcement of internal quality mechanisms, strategic supplier partnerships, and a culture of continuous improvement driven by customer feedback and performance appraisal systems.

### 5.3. Performance outcomes

The adoption and implementation of TQM within social enterprises resulted in various performance outcomes, as evidenced by the experiences and perspectives shared by the respondents. The synthesis of interviews, documentary evidence, and observational data from Nurturing, Mastery, and Natural Social Enterprises shed light on both progress made and challenges encountered in their quality management endeavors over time.

In the Nurturing social enterprise case, the interview and documentary evidence analysis revealed significant growth in the organization. For instance, there were only two trainee social entrepreneurs initially, but now they have more than 507. The analysis of provided archival data, interview discussions and observational data showed that Nurturing enterprises expanded across and outside the UAE. For example, social enterprise now has outlets in Dubai, Abu Dhabi and many other African countries and sold 1046 dresses in one year outside the UAE. A participant responded in the interview,

*We are currently growing with our regulator helps for the quality check; however, promoting our quality certified staff and structuring our own quality assurance mechanism would multiply our performance. (Senior Manager—Nurturing social enterprise, experience 14 years, age 55)*

The informal discussion and provided customer feedback revealed that previously delivered defective quality products had impacted customer trust. Moreover, it was found that customer feedback was not properly taken into consideration due to a lack of a smooth mechanism of inhouse quality approval mechanism (First line manager—Nurturing social enterprise, experience: 9 years, age: 45 years)

*I am head of a manufacturing division. Though we put in our best efforts, the senior management's approach to managing quality at different divisions is very uneven. As we do not have quality checks at every step of manufacturing, our division is considered an insignificant part of the organization. The cost of our unit is also high due to high wastage and a higher rate of defective items. (First-line manager—Nurturing social enterprise, experience 9 years, age 45)*

According to archival documents, Mastery Social Enterprise, which previously lacked outlets, had established presence in LULU Mall, Emarat Mall, and Fujiara Mall. It had initially started with only two products (Attar perfume and Bakhor scents) but had since expanded its offerings to include a series of new products and services. During a focus group discussion, participants disclosed that within less than two years, the enterprise had expanded its operations to two Emirates in the UAE and had experienced significant growth in its product lines. However, data analysis from interviews and focus groups revealed that despite the extensive product diversification and market expansion, the customer base did not grow as anticipated. This was attributed to the absence of supply chain management, the lack of a performance appraisal approach, and an ineffective customer feedback mechanism, all of which contributed to low levels of customer and employee satisfaction, significantly impacting organizational outcomes. While it made strides in growth through adherence to government regulations, recent archival data indicated the receipt of ten return orders last month due to substandard packaging material. This underscores customer dissatisfaction with the quality, revealing a deficiency in supplier quality management and internal quality assurance mechanisms. Consequently, their products face challenges in competing with higher-quality alternatives in the market.

*In my department (packing the customer food items), it takes up to 35 minutes to serve a customer – e.g., taking orders, customizing preparation, and handing over the items. Due to a lack of properly trained staff, quality material and absence of predefined quality-based steps of packing, we do not contribute significantly to the overall efficiency, and the enterprise has been at risk of losing customers (Middle manager—Mastery social enterprise, experience 13 years, age 52)*

In contrast, in the case of the Natural social enterprise, it was noted in the analysis of interview data and documents that the enterprise was attempting to expand its business across the Gulf. However, up to that point, no effective plans had been formulated to invest in an in-house quality mechanism to test less expensive or local alternative ingredients for production. A middle manager of Natural Social Enterprise said,

*Our product is high quality, and our elite customers are satisfied, enabling us to meet our financial goals, but high pricing is a hurdle to expand our business across the gulf. (Middle manager—Natural social enterprise, experience 12 years, age 50)*

The observational and informal data gathered from the Natural Social Enterprise clearly indicated that they embarked on an innovative business venture five years ago and achieved significant profitability and customer satisfaction goals. However, they currently face challenges in reaching their market share target due to the high price of their product, which caters to a specific community.

Certain quality measures have resulted in enhanced production, quality, promotion, and market share. However, the outcomes did not align with TQM's objectives, such as compliance with government regulations (Mastery social enterprise), addressing customer complaints arising from poor service or products (Nurturing social enterprise), and achieving customer satisfaction and higher market share (Natural social enterprise). The prevailing approach to TQM emphasized strategic quality programs aimed at improving tactical and organizational outcomes.

Upon examining the performance impact of Total Quality Management (TQM) adoption and implementation within social enterprises, a critical perspective emerged. While short-term growth was apparent, the long-term sustainability of these enterprises remained uncertain, suggesting a lack of strategic foresight in TQM application.

Across the cases of Nurturing, Mastery, and Natural Social Enterprises, initial analysis revealed impressive growth metrics, including an increase in trainee social entrepreneurs and geographic expansion. However, a closer examination revealed systemic deficiencies that posed risks to long-term viability.

In Nurturing Social Enterprise, growth was supported by regulatory compliance, but the absence of internal quality assurance mechanisms undermined performance. As a senior manager states,

*Promoting our quality-certified staff and structuring our own quality assurance mechanism would multiply our performance. (Senior Manager—Nurturing social enterprise, experience 14 years, age 55)*

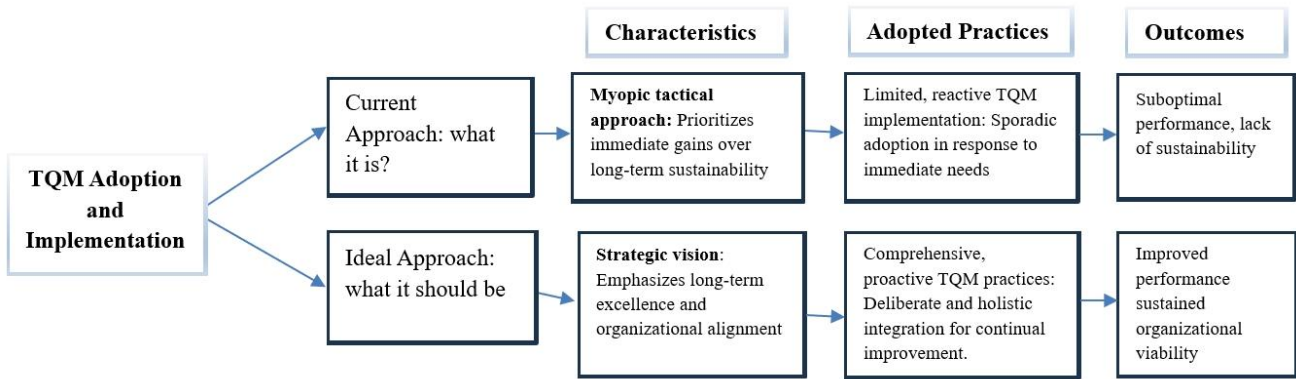
Similarly, Mastery Social Enterprise faced challenges in sustaining growth due to quality lapses, which led to customer dissatisfaction and inefficiencies in operations, as noted by a middle manager during a focus group discussion. The recurrence of return orders and the inability to sustain customer base growth across all cases underscored the fragility of short-term growth trajectories. In each instance, deficiencies in quality management practices hindered long-term sustainability, highlighting the need for a strategic overhaul of TQM strategies to foster enduring organizational excellence and market competitiveness. Meanwhile, in Natural Social Enterprise, high pricing inhibited broader market penetration despite profitability, reflecting a shortsighted approach to TQM.

Overall, while the initial growth spurts might have been impressive, the absence of a strategic, long-term approach to TQM adoption and implementation undermined the sustainability and resilience of these enterprises, calling for urgent recalibration of TQM strategies. In short, we propose that:

**Proposition 3:** By fostering a culture of continuous improvement and adaptability, social enterprises can navigate challenges and proactively address systemic deficiencies, ultimately fostering enduring excellence and competitiveness in the evolving market landscape.

## **6. Discussion**

Drawing upon our main findings, we now organize the insights gleaned from our study in conjunction with existing scholarly works to formulate a model consistent with our previously developed propositions. **Figure 2** delineates two distinct trajectories concerning the uptake and implementation of TQM in social enterprises, leveraging insights from scholars such as Mintzberg (2014), Choi and Behling (1997), Waldman et al. (1998) and Liao et al. (2023). These trajectories underscore the stark dichotomy between short-term tactical maneuvers and long-term strategic orientations in the landscape of TQM integration within the context of social enterprises.



**Figure 2.** Paths of TQM adoption and implementation in social enterprise.

In examining TQM adoption and implementation within our sample of social enterprises, it becomes evident that the managerial approach to TQM significantly impacts organizational outcomes. While one path explores the tactical aspects of TQM implementation across the three cases, the other path takes a forward-looking stance, proposing solutions for these enterprises. It emphasizes the importance of visionary thinking, proactive strategies, and alignment with organizational goals to ensure sustained quality and leverage it for long-term sustainability of social enterprises. This echoes prior research suggesting that a short-term focus on efficiency improvement, without considering the broader societal impact of TQM, may harm the organization and contradict the mission of social enterprises. The two paths depicted in **Figure 2** underscore this, highlighting the difference between short-term tactics and long-term strategies in TQM implementation. Each path offers distinct theoretical and managerial implications, as well as policy impacts. In the subsequent section, we will explore the implications of our findings and conclude by offering a concise overview of practical implications, potential limitations and future research avenues.

## 7. Implications and concluding remarks

### 7.1. Theoretical implications

Our findings add to the growing body of evidence that the adverse impact of an overemphasis on efficiency mindset, cost-cutting, and short-termism through TQM or similar methodologies can derail these initiatives from their intended purpose, which extends beyond mere financial goals to encompass societal welfare and broader organizational objectives (By, 2021; Binci et al., 2020). This deviation undermines the core mission of social enterprises: fostering growth, long-term societal impact, and sustainability. As Mintzberg (2014) put it succinctly: “Because economic benefits are typically easier to measure than social benefits, efficiency drives us toward an economic mindset that can result in social degradation”. Our study findings align with existing research (Choi and Behling, 1997; Liao et al., 2014; Soltani et al., 2008, 2010a, 2010b; Wladman et al., 1998), which delineates various managerial approaches to TQM initiatives and their resulting consequences. The managerial approach adopted by our sample of social enterprises mirrors Choi and Behling’s (1997) characterization of TQM management as “defensive” (as opposed ongoing developmental approach)—short-term oriented, lacking long-term planning and vision, and prioritizing reactive

responses to immediate customer needs. Our findings also echo Waldman et al.'s (1998) perspective on such managerial approaches, indicating wavering commitment and the potential for negative outcomes (e.g., fostering cynicism regarding organizational change through TQM). Choi and Behling (1997) argued that long-term success hinges on managerial adoption of a developmental orientation—a proposition supported by our findings, which indicate that a singular focus on efficiency and short-termism leads to negative outcomes. In essence, our research underscores the crucial role of TQM adoption in helping social enterprises achieve their dual goals of growth and sustainability, contingent upon the chosen managerial approach. It emphasizes the contrast between the current approach—leading to negative outcomes—and the ideal approach, which holds the potential for positive cultural transformation.

Overall, from a theoretical standpoint, our study expands the realm of TQM research (Liao et al., 2023; Soltani et al., 2008; Waldman et al., 1998) by investigating the nuances of managerial approaches to TQM adoption and implementation within a context that prioritizes both growth and long-term viability over profit-centric goals. We observe that the effectiveness of TQM is not solely determined by its guiding principles, but rather by how it is adopted, rationalized, and aligned with management preferences, often leading to deviations from its intended goals. Finally, our proposed two distinct alternatives/approaches to the adoption and implementation of TQM offer insights crucial for knowledge transfer and enabling social enterprises to fulfill their mission effectively.

## **7.2. Managerial implications**

For managerial teams within social enterprises, embracing a strategic shift towards TQM is imperative to navigate the complex landscape of dual goals: growth and social change. This necessitates a departure from short-term tactical approaches towards long-term strategic planning, aligning TQM practices with both organizational objectives and social impact goals. By fostering a culture of continuous improvement, managers can not only enhance operational efficiency but also advance their social missions. Given the resource constraints and reliance on external sources prevalent in social enterprises, integrating TQM principles becomes essential for ensuring viability and sustainability in the face of these challenges.

## **7.3. Policy implications**

Policymakers hold a significant role in supporting the adoption of TQM within social enterprises by implementing policies that incentivize and facilitate strategic TQM adoption. Recognizing the dual goals of growth and social change, policymakers should prioritize initiatives aimed at fostering long-term sustainability and resilience within the sector. This may involve providing financial incentives, technical assistance, and regulatory support to empower social enterprises in integrating TQM practices. By aligning policy interventions with the strategic imperatives of social enterprises, policymakers can enhance the sector's capacity to drive positive social impact while navigating resource constraints and external dependencies.

#### **7.4. Limitations and avenues for future research**

The reliance on case studies, as well as the limited knowledge of some research participants regarding TQM in the current study, may restrict the applicability of its findings, especially within specific contexts such as the UAE. To address this limitation, future research endeavors should consider employing a mixed-methods approach. By targeting key respondents across various organizational hierarchies, this approach ensures a more comprehensive understanding of TQM across different organizational levels, diverse sectors, and organizational settings. This strategy allows for the validation and expansion of findings, encompassing those within the UAE and the broader Middle East region. More specifically, our list of propositions offers avenues for additional research, encouraging scholars to undertake studies aimed at validating and substantiating our findings through experimental and longitudinal methodologies. It is also essential to delve into the contextual factors shaping TQM adoption and implementation in social enterprises operating within the UAE. This entails exploring the unique influence of local industry dynamics, cultural norms, governmental policies, and socio-economic factors on the efficacy and challenges of TQM practices in the region. By examining these contextual nuances, future research can offer insights tailored to the UAE's social enterprise landscape, enhancing the relevance and practicality of TQM strategies in this specific context. Comparative studies across different types of social enterprises operating within the UAE could uncover variations in TQM adoption and implementation strategies, elucidating context-specific best practices and critical success factors. Finally, longitudinal studies could provide valuable insights into the sustained impact of TQM practices on the resilience and sustainability of social enterprises within the UAE over time. By addressing these future research avenues, scholars can bridge the gap between theory and practice, facilitating the development of contextually relevant TQM approaches that resonate with the unique socio-economic and cultural context of the UAE and wider context of the Middle East region.

#### **7.5. Conclusion**

This research endeavor aims to provide nuanced insights tailored to the specific needs of social enterprises, particularly within regions like the UAE and the broader Middle East context. Drawing from scholarly insights and rigorous examination of TQM research within social enterprises, it makes an attempt to advance the academic discourse on managerial approaches to TQM and the resulting outcomes. By delineating dual trajectories in TQM adoption—juxtaposing short-term tactical maneuvers with long-term strategic orientations—we underscore the critical importance of visionary leadership, proactive strategies, and alignment with organizational goals in fostering sustained quality and long-term sustainability within social enterprises. Looking forward, our findings emphasize the imperative for further systematic research into TQM within social enterprises, with a keen focus on contextual factors shaping its adoption and implementation.

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FS; data curation, FS and YYL; writing—original draft preparation, FS and ES; writing—review and editing, ES; supervision, ES; project administration, FS, YYL and ES. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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