ISSN: 0975-833X

Available online at http://www.journalcra.com

International Journal of Current Research
Vol. 18, Issue, 04, pp.36947-36952, April, 2026
DOI: https://doi.org/10.24941/ijcr.50479.04.2026

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CURRENT RESEARCH

RESEARCH ARTICLE

WHEN STRONG TIES MATTER MOST: SOCIAL NETWORKS AND GRADUATE EMPLOYMENT IN GHANA'S LABOUR MARKET

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ARTICLE INFO

Article History:
Received 14th January, 2026
Received in revised form
24th February, 2026
Accepted 25th March, 2026
Published online 30th April, 2026

Keywords:
Ghana, labour market, social networks, weak ties, strong ties

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the role of weak and strong social ties in graduate job access in Ghana. While existing literature emphasizes the informational advantages of weak ties, this study finds that strong ties—particularly family and close friends—are more instrumental in accessing meaningful employment in Ghana's highly informal and competitive labour market. Drawing on qualitative data from 90 university graduates in Accra and Kumasi, the findings reveal the contextual nature of tie effectiveness. The study challenges dominant theories rooted in Western contexts and argues for the importance of cultural and institutional settings in shaping labour market dynamics in the Global South. Implications for theory, career counselling, and youth employment policies are discussed.

Citation: Dr. Emmanuel Agyemang, PhD, 2026. "When Strong Ties Matter Most: Social Networks and Graduate Employment in Ghana's Labour Market". ***International Journal of Current Research, 18, (04), 36947-36952.***

INTRODUCTION

Labour market outcomes across the globe are increasingly mediated by informal job search strategies. Social networks, especially the distinction between strong and weak ties, have become central to understanding how individuals navigate employment opportunities. Granovetter's (1973) seminal work on the "strength of weak ties" suggests that distant social connections are more useful for accessing non-redundant information and novel opportunities. However, the utility of such ties depends heavily on the cultural and institutional contexts in which job searches occur. Sub-Saharan Africa, and Ghana in particular, presents a distinct socio-economic and political landscape where the applicability of Western network theories warrants critical re-examination. Ghana's labour market is characterized by high levels of informality, limited formal sector job opportunities, and the pervasive role of kinship, patronage, and reciprocity in employment practices. These features suggest that the nature and effectiveness of social ties in job search processes may differ significantly from those in more individualistic, market-driven economies. The transition from university to work in Ghana is often marked by uncertainty and competition. Despite rising levels of higher education enrollment, formal sector job creation has not kept pace, leaving many graduates reliant on personal networks and informal strategies. Within this context, social ties become essential mechanisms for navigating a congested labour market(Agyemang 2024; Institute for Fiscal Studies 2018; Owusu-Ansah and Kofi 2012; Aryeetey 2011).

However, not all ties are equal in their capacity to provide access to meaningful employment. This paper interrogates the distinctions between strong and weak ties, not only as abstract categories but as lived and embodied relationships shaped by historical and institutional forces. Although social networks have long been acknowledged as valuable resources for job seekers, the relative importance of weak versus strong ties in the Ghanaian context have not been rigorously examined. Existing research on informal job search methods often fails to distinguish between types of ties or to interrogate the cultural logics that underpin their use (Baah-Boateng et al. 2019;Afum-Osei et al. 2019; Adraki et al. 2018). This gap is especially critical for understanding graduate employment, given that university graduates face both heightened expectations and intensified competition in a constrained labour market.Moreover, many studies on graduate employment focus on structural constraints such as macroeconomic policies, educational mismatch, and labour market segmentation. While these are important, they do not adequately explain how individuals navigate these constraints through social mechanisms. This study takes a relational approach, examining how graduates leverage social ties—embedded within Ghana's cultural, political, and institutional settings—to secure employment. The central argument of this paper is that tie effectiveness is context-dependent. In settings like Ghana, where collectivist values, historical patterns of state involvement, and informal political economies prevail, strong ties play a crucial role in job attainment. This study thus

reinterprets Granovetter's hypothesis by integrating cultural, political, and institutional dimensions, emphasizing how trust, loyalty, and reciprocal obligation—hallmarks of strong ties—are uniquely effective in this environment.This paper investigates the role of weak and strong ties in graduate job access within Ghana's labour market. Drawing on interviews with 90 university graduates in Accra and Kumasi, the study offers new insights into the mechanisms through which social ties influence employment outcomes. In doing so, it contributes to a broader rethinking of network theory by situating it within the cultural, institutional, and economic specificities of the Global South.

Ghana's Labour Market: An Overview: Ghana's labour market has undergone significant transformations in recent decades, shaped by successive economic reforms and structural adjustment policies (Aryeetey and Baah-Boateng 2016; GSS 2019). While the economy has experienced robust growth, this has not translated into commensurate employment generation, creating a persistent gap between economic expansion and job creation (Baah-Boateng et al. 2019). Reliable labour market data on graduate employment remain limited, with the Ghana Living Standards Survey (GLSS) serving as the primary source of labour market indicators. However, the GLSS does not disaggregate graduate unemployment from general labour statistics, constraining debates on policy interventions targeted at graduate employment.

Employment in Ghana is predominantly informal, with approximately 71.3 per cent of the workforce engaged in informal activities, often characterised by low wages, job insecurity, and inadequate working conditions (GSS 2019). By contrast, only 28.7 per cent of labour market activities are classified as formal. The prevalence of informality reflects structural weaknesses in the economy, as employment growth lags behind output growth despite over a decade of macroeconomic expansion (Aryeetey and Baah-Boateng 2016; Baah-Boateng et al. 2019). Sectorally, the labour market has shifted from agriculture to services, mirroring changes in the overall economy. Agricultural employment declined from 55 per cent in 2005 to 36 per cent in 2017, while the services sector rose from 31 per cent to 46 per cent over the same period. Industry has remained relatively stable, accounting for roughly one-fifth of employment since the mid-2000s (GSS 2019; Afum-Osei et al. 2019). Within these sectors, self-employment—particularly own-account work—dominates, representing nearly three-quarters of all employment compared to just over one-fifth in wage employment.

Unemployment levels have also reached concerning levels, particularly among young people and the educated. Overall unemployment for adults aged 15 and above increased from 4.6 per cent in 2006 to 6.5 per cent in 2015, while youth unemployment (15–24 years) rose from 9.5 per cent to 14.4 per cent during the same period (GSS 2019). The prevalence is higher among urban residents and tertiary-educated individuals than among rural and less-educated populations (Baah-Boateng et al. 2019). Scholars attribute these trends partly to skill mismatches between graduates and labour market demands (Boateng and Ofori-Sarpong 2002; Bawakyillenuo et al. 2013). With limited opportunities in the formal sector—the primary destination for educated workers—competition for jobs remains intense, compelling graduates to rely heavily on social networks to navigate employment pathways.

Theoretical Framework: Weak and Strong Ties: Granovetter's (1973) classification of social ties into strong and weak categories is foundational in network theory. Strong ties, characterized by emotional intensity, frequent interaction, and intimacy, typically involve family members and close friends. Weak ties, by contrast, are more casual acquaintanceships, connecting individuals to wider and more diverse social circles. Granovetter's central insight was that weak ties serve as bridges, providing access to novel and non-redundant information, thus facilitating job mobility and career advancement. This theory, however, emerged from Western, individualistic contexts and assumes relatively open, fluid labour markets where formal recruitment mechanisms predominate. In such settings, weak ties excel at linking people to distant social groups and opportunities inaccessible through close-knit circles (Granovetter, 1983; Lin, 1999). The "strength of weak ties" thus highlights the informational advantage of loose, bridging connections.

Yet, critiques from scholars studying non-Western or less formalized labour markets question the universal applicability of this model. In many Global South contexts, including Ghana, the labour market is embedded in socio-cultural norms that emphasize collectivism, reciprocity, and patronage networks (Emirbayer& Goodwin, 1994; Mudge, 2008). Here, strong ties may offer advantages not only through emotional support but also via direct influence, trustworthiness, and the enforcement of reciprocal obligations, all crucial in environments marked by institutional fragility. Studies in China (Bian, 1997) and post-Soviet contexts (Boorman, 1975) reveal that strong ties often provide access to scarce or rationed resources, including jobs, because of their ability to mobilize loyalty and guarantee discretion. Similarly, in African labour markets, the overlap between family, ethnic, and political networks can make strong ties indispensable for navigating opaque hiring processes characterized by patron-client relations (Levy, 2014; Hearn &Buffardi, 2016). This paper adopts a contextualist approach to network theory (Emirbayer& Goodwin, 1994), emphasizing that tie strength cannot be abstracted from cultural, institutional, and political conditions. In Ghana's labour market, the salience of strong ties is amplified by informal hiring practices, bureaucratic complexity, and social expectations of mutual obligation. This challenges liberal market assumptions and demands a relational understanding of how social capital functions in securing employment.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The distinction between weak and strong social ties has been central to sociological understandings of how individuals access employment opportunities. Granovetter's (1973) seminal work introduced the "strength of weak ties" hypothesis, positing that weak ties—acquaintances and distant contacts—are more valuable than strong ties for accessing novel job information. Weak ties connect individuals to diverse social circles, thus providing access to non-redundant information otherwise unavailable within close-knit groups. This bridging function facilitates job mobility and social advancement, especially in competitive and fluid labour markets (Granovetter, 1983; Lin, 1999). Empirical studies in Western contexts consistently support this advantage of weak ties, particularly where formal labour market institutions, meritocratic recruitment, and open competition dominate

(Granovetter, 1983; Granovetter, 1995). For example, research on graduate employment in the US and Europe often highlights how weak ties help individuals break into unfamiliar industries or geographic regions (Seibert, Kraimer, & Liden, 2001).
However, this theory's assumptions are increasingly challenged when applied outside these contexts. The "one-size-fits-all" approach neglects significant socio-cultural and institutional variations across societies (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Emirbayer& Goodwin, 1994). Studies in China (Bian, 1997), for instance, illustrate how strong ties embedded in family and close friendship networks remain central to securing jobs, particularly in contexts with weak formal institutions and heavy reliance on guanxi (personal connections). Bian shows that strong ties facilitate trust and enforce reciprocal obligations, vital for accessing scarce or rationed employment opportunities. In post-Soviet and Eastern European settings, research similarly emphasizes the instrumental role of strong ties in environments where informal practices and clientelism prevail (Boorman, 1975; Brown & Konrad, 2001). Here, strong ties provide both information and direct influence, such as endorsements or guarantees that mitigate bureaucratic uncertainty.

Turning to Sub-Saharan Africa, and Ghana specifically, labour markets are shaped by socio-political realities including high informality, ethnic patronage, kinship obligations, and weak institutional enforcement (Levy, 2014; Hearn &Buffardi, 2016). Informal hiring is common, and recruitment often depends on personal connections embedded in family and ethnic networks (Ansah et al., 2019). This results in a labour market where access is not solely about information but about trust, loyalty, and reciprocal exchanges—qualities typically associated with strong ties. The salience of strong ties in African contexts can be interpreted through the lens of social capital theory. Coleman (1988) distinguishes between bonding social capital—tight-knit relationships that provide emotional support and enforce norms—and bridging social capital, which connects diverse groups and facilitates access to new resources (Putnam, 2000). In uncertain economic environments, bonding capital is often critical to survival and social mobility. Strong ties can enforce trust and mutual aid, making them reliable channels in the face of institutional deficiencies.

Furthermore, recent scholarship on youth employment highlights the importance of distinguishing between the types of jobs accessed through different ties. Patulny et al. (2019) argue that strong ties tend to facilitate access to "meaningful" jobs—those aligned with career aspirations and social status—whereas weak ties often help secure any form of employment, including temporary or less prestigious positions. This distinction is especially relevant in Ghana, where graduates navigate a competitive market with high expectations and social pressures to secure stable, respectable jobs. Complementing these theoretical insights, African labour markets, though seldom the focus of these debates, exhibit similar dynamics. In Ghana, studies by Adraki et al. (2018), Affum-Osei et al. (2019), and Baah-Boateng et al. (2019) confirm that informal networks are the dominant channel of employment. Ansah et al. (2019) document how graduates frequently rely on family and close social networks to overcome formal recruitment barriers. Similarly, research by Hearn and Buffardi (2016) highlights how patron-client relations intertwine with kinship to shape employment access. Yet, these studies fall short of distinguishing between weak and strong ties. Nyarko et al. (2014) found that networks composed of family and friends yielded the highest job success rate, but the tie typologies were not fully theorized. Consequently, there remains a notable gap in distinguishing the nuanced ways strong and weak ties operate, particularly regarding how institutional contexts mediate their effectiveness. Existing research often treats social networks homogenously or focuses on their quantitative aspects (e.g., size or frequency), rather than exploring the qualitative dimensions of trust, obligation, and influence embedded in ties.This study thus responds to a growing call in the literature for context-sensitive analyses that integrate cultural, political, and institutional variables into the study of social networks and employment (Mudge, 2008; Emirbayer& Goodwin, 1994). By focusing on Ghana's graduate labour market, it advances this agenda, providing insights into how strong and weak ties are mobilized differently within a complex socio-economic and political environment.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative design to explore how social ties influence graduate employment in Ghana. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 90 university graduates residing in Accra and Kumasi, the country's largest urban and economic centres. These cities were selected for their contrasting labour market environments and represent diverse opportunities and challenges for graduates. Participants were purposively sampled to ensure diversity across disciplines, universities, gender, and employment status. This sampling strategy aimed to capture a broad spectrum of experiences in navigating the labour market. Recruitment was facilitated through alumni networks, professional associations, and snowball referrals.Interviews focused on participants' job search strategies, the nature of their social ties, and perceptions of the usefulness of these ties in securing employment. The interview guide was iteratively refined to probe the role of family, friends, acquaintances, and institutional actors.All interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent and transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were imported into NVivo software for thematic analysis. Coding followed a hybrid approach combining inductive and deductive methods: initial codes were developed from theory and literature, then refined through emergent themes in the data. Key themes included types of ties mobilized, information flow, cultural norms of reciprocity, institutional barriers, and strategies to overcome challenges. Particular attention was given to contextual influences such as ethnicity, gender, and political connections.Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Leipzig and local Ghanaian institutions. Participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. Limitations include the non-representative sample and potential social desirability bias, though efforts were made to establish rapport and elicit candid responses.

Empirical Findings

Contextualizing Tie Strength in Ghana: The data reveal that graduates consistently situate their job search strategies within the broader socio-cultural and political context of Ghana. The country's collectivist culture, which values kinship ties, reciprocal obligations, and community solidarity, strongly shapes the way social networks function in employment. Respondents emphasized that family and close friends are not merely sources of information but are trusted gatekeepers who

provide access to opportunities that would otherwise remain closed.

One graduate from Kumasi explained:

"In Ghana, you cannot just walk into a job without someone to vouch for you. It is your family or close friends who open doors because they know the people involved."

This trust is not incidental; it is embedded in longstanding cultural norms that demand loyalty and reciprocal support. Weak ties, by contrast, were often described as unreliable or superficial. Graduates expressed skepticism about relying on acquaintances for serious job prospects, perceiving weak ties as more useful for temporary or peripheral roles.

Strong Ties as Gateways to Meaningful Employment: Among graduates who secured employment in reputable public institutions and multinational companies, the role of strong ties was pronounced. For example, several respondents working at the Ghana Cocoa Board and Electricity Company of Ghana reported that a close relative or friend's recommendation was pivotal in their hiring process.

A respondent working at the Ghana Revenue Authority shared:

> *"My uncle, who works there, helped me get the interview and prepared me for it. Without his support, I doubt I would have even been considered."*

These accounts illustrate how strong ties function not only as informational conduits but as active sponsors who invest social capital to guarantee the candidate's credibility. This "sponsorship" is essential in an environment where formal recruitment is often opaque, and nepotism is widespread.
Strong ties thus serve as mechanisms for graduates to secure "meaningful" employment—jobs that align with their qualifications, career ambitions, and social standing. This finding aligns with Patulny et al.'s (2019) distinction between meaningful and any job, underscoring the premium placed on strong ties for accessing stable and prestigious positions.

Weak Ties and 'Stepping-Stone' Employment: Conversely, weak ties were predominantly associated with temporary, less prestigious jobs or initial entry points into the labour market. Many graduates reported securing short-term contracts or casual work through acquaintances or contacts encountered in internships, university networks, or programmes like the Nation Builders Corps (NABCO).

One participant recounted:

> *"I got a temporary job through a friend of a friend, but it was not what I wanted. It was just to earn something while I kept looking for a better opportunity."*

These roles were often perceived as stop-gap measures or "stepping stones," offering some work experience but lacking long-term prospects or social prestige. Weak ties were thus valuable for gaining immediate employment but rarely led directly to career advancement. This dynamic reflects a dual labour market structure where weak ties help graduates remain afloat, while strong ties are necessary for upward mobility and stability.

Institutional and Political Economy Influences: Beyond social and cultural factors, the study reveals how Ghana's political economy—characterized by patronage, informality, and bureaucratic opacity—conditions the effectiveness of social ties. Several respondents pointed to the necessity of strong ties to navigate bureaucratic hurdles, favoritism, and informal gatekeeping practices.

A graduate seeking a position in a government agency noted:

> *"Without someone inside, it is almost impossible to get hired. The formal process is just for show; the real decisions happen behind closed doors."*

The prevalence of informal networks and patron-client relations means that strong ties not only provide access to information but also serve as political currency within hiring systems. This reality complicates efforts to promote meritocratic recruitment and amplifies inequalities based on social connections.

DISCUSSION

Reassessing the Strength of Strong Ties: The empirical findings challenge the widely accepted Western-centric paradigm that weak ties are the primary drivers of job mobility. In Ghana's context, strong ties—comprising family, close friends, and trusted community members—emerge as pivotal mechanisms for securing meaningful employment. This extends beyond the mere transmission of information to encompass trust, influence, and reciprocal obligations, which are especially salient in labour markets marked by informality and institutional weakness. The prominence of strong ties in Ghana resonates with earlier findings from other non-Western settings (Bian, 1997; Boorman, 1975), reinforcing the notion that the strength of ties must be understood within the specific socio-political and economic context. Unlike in liberal market economies, where formal recruitment and open competition reduce the need for personal endorsements, Ghana's labour market is characterized by opaque hiring processes where informal social capital can determine access. This contextualization nuances Granovetter's (1973) theory by illustrating how the "strength of weak ties" is not a universal principle but rather contingent on cultural norms and institutional arrangements. In environments where formal institutions are weak or circumvented, the enforcement capacity and loyalty inherent in strong ties become indispensable. The study thus calls for a more situated understanding of network theory that integrates these cultural and political economy dimensions.

The Cultural and Institutional Embeddedness of Networks: The findings underscore that social ties in Ghana are deeply embedded within a matrix of cultural expectations, political histories, and institutional practices. Ghana's collectivist values prioritize family and community loyalty, where social obligations and mutual support create durable bonds that facilitate employment opportunities. These ties operate not simply as social resources but as embedded systems of trust and obligation, underpinning social reproduction and economic survival. Institutionally, the prevalence of patronage and informal hiring further entrenches the role of strong ties. The formal labour market's lack of transparency and prevalence of nepotism mean that

meritocratic principles are often secondary to social connections. This institutional embeddedness challenges policy discourses that assume open, competitive labour markets and highlights the importance of understanding local governance and hiring cultures. This dual cultural-institutional embedding means that graduates cannot simply rely on market mechanisms but must navigate complex social terrains. The effectiveness of strong ties is thus inseparable from the broader socio-political fabric where networks become channels of power, influence, and social control.

Implications for Network Theory and Policy: Theoretically, this study demands a recalibration of social network models to account for the contextual contingencies of tie strength. Network theories developed in Western, liberal economies risk oversimplification when applied in the Global South. Incorporating cultural and institutional variables enables a richer, more accurate depiction of how social capital functions in diverse settings. From a policy perspective, the findings suggest that efforts to address graduate unemployment in Ghana must engage with the social realities shaping labour market access. Attempts to promote meritocracy and transparency cannot ignore the entrenched role of strong ties. Labour market reforms should therefore combine institutional transparency measures with strategies that empower graduates to develop diverse networks, including bridging ties that might open alternative pathways. Career counselling programs should recognize the dual importance of strong and weak ties, equipping graduates with skills to navigate patronage networks while also fostering new connections across social boundaries. Additionally, interventions might focus on increasing institutional accountability to reduce the reliance on patronage networks that disadvantage those without strong social capital. Ultimately, enhancing graduate employment outcomes requires a multi-dimensional approach that blends economic reforms, institutional strengthening, and culturally informed social policies. Recognizing the embeddedness of social ties offers a pathway to more effective and equitable labour market interventions.

CONCLUSION

This study provides robust evidence that the effectiveness of social ties in facilitating graduate employment in Ghana is deeply embedded within the country's unique cultural, institutional, and political context. Contrary to the prevailing notion rooted in Western labour market theories—that weak ties are superior for accessing novel job information—the findings reveal that strong ties, especially those grounded in family and close friendship networks, play a decisive role in securing meaningful and stable employment in Ghana's informal and highly competitive labour market. By situating Granovetter's theory within the socio-political realities of Ghana, this research challenges the universality of the "strength of weak ties" hypothesis. It highlights that in contexts characterized by informal hiring practices, bureaucratic opacity, and patronage, strong ties are not merely sources of information but channels of trust, loyalty, and reciprocal obligation. These qualities make strong ties powerful social capital assets for navigating the challenges of job scarcity and institutional fragility. Moreover, the study underscores the importance of distinguishing between different types of employment outcomes. Strong ties were primarily associated with access to "meaningful" jobs—positions that align with graduates' career aspirations, offer stability, and confer social status—while weak ties often facilitated entry into temporary or less prestigious roles. This nuanced understanding advances both theoretical and practical discussions around social capital and employment. The policy implications are significant. Addressing graduate unemployment in Ghana requires acknowledging and engaging with the social fabric through which job opportunities are mediated. Policies focused solely on formal labour market reforms or meritocratic recruitment will be insufficient unless they also consider the entrenched social and institutional dynamics that sustain reliance on strong ties. Multi-level interventions that enhance institutional transparency, foster bridging social capital, and support graduates in navigating complex networked environments are crucial. This research also opens avenues for future investigation. Comparative studies across different regions of Ghana, other African countries, or distinct economic sectors could deepen understanding of how network dynamics vary within and beyond the Global South. Additionally, quantitative studies could complement these qualitative insights by measuring the relative impact of different tie strengths on employment outcomes. In sum, this study contributes to a more context-sensitive and relational sociology of labour markets, emphasizing that social networks and job search strategies cannot be divorced from the cultural and institutional matrices in which they operate. For Ghana and similar contexts, strong ties remain an indispensable resource for graduates striving to overcome the persistent challenges of employment access in weak labour markets.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This paper is based on research supported wholly by the ACCESS Network and Leipzig University through funding from DAAD with funds from the German Federal Ministry of Economic Development and Cooperation (BMZ).

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