Diana International Research Conference

PROCEEDINGS 2026

Transforming Futures:
Women and Social Entrepreneurship
in a Digital Age

June 26 – 29, 2026

Gordon Institute of Business Science (GIBS), University of Pretoria
Johannesburg, South Africa

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Summary of the 2026 Diana International Research Conference

Babson College, in partnership with the Gordon Institute of Business Science (GIBS), University of Pretoria, hosted the annual Diana International Research Conference in Johannesburg, South Africa. Scholars and doctoral students gathered for a multi-day research conference to advance the field of women's entrepreneurship. Following the conference, Impact Day brought together scholars, researchers, investors, entrepreneurs, educators, and policymakers committed to creating a more inclusive and equitable landscape for women entrepreneurs.

This year, the conference convened around the theme Transforming Futures: Women and Social Entrepreneurship in a Digital Age. The conference focused on the intersection of women's entrepreneurship, social impact, and digital transformation — exploring how women entrepreneurs are reshaping markets, communities, and institutions in a rapidly changing world. Invited topics included:

- Women's social entrepreneurship across global, multi-cultural, geographic, community, family, and institutional contexts
- Digital transformation, platforms, and AI in women-led and social ventures
- Access to capital, crowdfunding, gender-lens investing, and the funding gap
- Identity, culture, and cognition in women's entrepreneurship
- Ecosystems, policy, and the enabling environment for women entrepreneurs
- Education, training, and capacity-building for women social entrepreneurs

Many thanks to our conference chairs, reviewers and sponsors!!

Conference Organizing Committee

Editorial Review Board

We are grateful to the Editorial Review Board for their outstanding efforts in the editorial review process. The Board generously volunteered their time and expertise to provide valuable feedback on the conference submissions.

Best Conceptual Paper Nominees

From “Mom” to Money? The Semiotics of Category Congruence and Cultural Origin in Crowdfunding Success

Safdarianghomsheh, Salimath

Principal Topic

Digital crowdfunding platforms (e.g., Kickstarter, Kiva.org, Indiegogo) enable entrepreneurs to represent themselves directly to potential backers and pursue financing beyond traditional gatekeepers. This is especially beneficial for under-represented groups that encounter credibility and risk perceptions in conventional finance. Recent research suggests that reward-based crowdfunding exhibits greater gender equality (Fellnhofer & Deng, 2024). However, platforms cannot ensure success; instead, entrepreneurs’ meaning-making efforts in this digital space become pivotal for winning over backers.

We focus on mompreneurs, a distinct subgroup of women entrepreneurs whose ventures and work arrangements are shaped by childcare and attempts to integrate enterprise with motherhood (Duberley & Carrigan, 2013; Richomme-Huet, Vial, & d’Andria, 2013; Ekinsmyth, 2011). Because motherhood is socially and institutionally contested across entrepreneurial settings, it raises persistent questions about when motherhood identity becomes an asset or a liability in evaluation and resource acquisition (Heilman & Okimoto, 2008; Correll, Benard, & Paik, 2007).

Crowdfunding is a meaning-driven arena in which founders mobilize resources through narratives, symbols, and identity cues. What founders say about themselves is not merely descriptive but functions as culturally encoded signals that shape how audiences interpret the venture and decide whether to back it. Narratives provide resonant frames for legitimacy judgments and resource allocation (Lounsbury & Glynn, 2001) and symbolic management helps founders influence interpretations when material evidence is scarce (Zott & Huy, 2007). Narratives are central to resource acquisition because they render entrepreneurial projects intelligible and investable. They guide how audiences categorize founders and assess the plausibility of their claims (Martens, Jennings, & Jennings, 2007), and founders draw on symbolic repertoires to craft professional identity and legitimacy under uncertainty (Clarke, 2011).

Motherhood disclosure in crowdfunding campaigns is not a neutral demographic label but a salient, structurally meaningful identity cue in entrepreneurial settings. Yet its implications in crowdfunding remain underexplored. Prior debates suggest motherhood cues may generate either penalties or benefits, but such framing overlooks category-organized platforms like Kickstarter, where identity cues become economically consequential when they align with category-coded offerings (Mollick, 2014).

Building on semiotic theory (Li, 2017; de Saussure, 1916; Peirce, 1868) in entrepreneurship, we explain how meaning emerges from the interplay between signs and interpretive contexts, such that the same sign can have different consequences depending on where and how it is embedded (Smith & Anderson, 2007). We ask whether motherhood disclosure in crowdfunding campaigns operates as a category-consistent sign that enhances crowdfunding success, and whether product category and founders’ cultural origin moderate this relationship. We argue that motherhood disclosure is understood as an identity sign whose consequences depend on its symbolic congruence with the product category and founders’ cultural context.

Methodology

This is a conceptual, theory-building paper. We develop a semiotic account of motherhood disclosure that integrates cultural entrepreneurship, narrative legitimacy, symbolic management, and entrepreneurial symbolism. Anchored in semiotic reasoning, we conceptualize motherhood disclosure as a culturally laden, context-sensitive sign commonly linked to care, family and childhood and argue that its effects hinge on coherence, that is the extent to which the sign aligns with the product category’s symbolic field and the entrepreneur’s broader narrative. To illustrate scope conditions (not to test hypotheses), we use purposive sampling to identify mompreneur campaigns from Kickstarter during the post-COVID period (June 2023-June 2025) and use them as illustrative examples of the model.

Results & Implications

Our framework advances three propositions. First, motherhood disclosure does not confer a uniform advantage because identity signs lack fixed meaning. Their consequences depend on how audiences decode them through prevailing interpretive codes and evaluation norms, which vary across decision frames and audiences (Gao et al., 2025; Howe & Menges, 2025; Snellman & Solal, 2023; Smith & Anderson, 2007). Consistent with this view, research shows that motherhood can trigger divergent inferences in evaluative judgments (Heilman & Okimoto, 2008; Correll et al., 2007).

Second, motherhood disclosure is more likely to improve crowdfunding success when it aligns with the product category, especially in motherhood or childhood-related domains; because it draws on shared cultural symbols, reinforces narrative fit, and supports category-appropriate legitimacy claims (Soublière et al., 2024; Soublière & Gehman, 2020; Manning & Bejarano, 2017; Hsu et al., 2009; Zott & Huy, 2007; Hsu, 2006; Zuckerman, 1999; Swidler, 1986). When motherhood is weakly linked to a category's symbolic field, disclosure should yield smaller or more equivocal benefits unless founders explicitly translate it into category-relevant competence and value via symbolic management and identity work (Taeuscher et al., 2021; Mmbaga et al., 2020; Caza et al., 2018; Durand & Thornton, 2018; Fisher et al., 2016; Pontikes, 2012; Nagy et al., 2012; Shepherd & Haynie, 2011). As grounding illustrations, among 52 Kickstarter campaigns that disclosed motherhood, 25 were successful, 18 failed, 3 were canceled and 6 were live at coding, with outcomes appearing to cluster by category. We use these cases to motivate scope conditions, not to offer confirmatory evidence.

Third, we claim that founders' cultural origin also moderates the relationship between mompreneur disclosure and campaign performance. Because meanings attached to motherhood and parenting consumption are culturally patterned, audiences may interpret and reward motherhood signs differently across contexts. Accordingly, cross-cultural crowdfunding research suggests that founders' origins can amplify or attenuate the payoff of motherhood disclosure even in category-aligned domains (Shneor et al., 2022; Fan et al., 2021). In our illustrative set, campaigns were predominantly US based, with limited representation from other countries.

Between Reform and Tradition: Institutional Contexts of Women's Entrepreneurship in Oman

Al Ghafri, Althalathini

Principal Topic

Women's entrepreneurship in the Gulf region unfolds within a distinctive institutional landscape where rapid modernization coexists with enduring socio-cultural traditions. Across Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, national development agendas, such as Oman Vision 2040, Saudi Vision 2030, and UAE Vision 2021, have positioned entrepreneurship as a key vehicle for economic diversification, private sector growth, and women's empowerment (Hashim, 2023; Langworthy & Naguib, 2023). These reforms have expanded formal infrastructures of opportunity through SME development programs, e-government portals, and banking initiatives designed to lower procedural barriers and increase women's economic participation. Yet, research consistently shows that the translation of formal policy ambitions into practical inclusion remains uneven, as gender-neutral reforms often overlook the deeply embedded social relations and cultural norms shaping women's entrepreneurial lives (Bastian et al., 2018; Alshareef, 2022).

Oman provides a particularly salient context for examining these dynamics. Under Vision 2040, the state has promoted innovation, entrepreneurship infrastructure, and women's participation in the economy through digitalized licensing systems, online registration platforms, and targeted finance schemes (Oman Vision 2040, 2020; GEM Oman, 2022). For many women, these reforms have reduced bureaucratic complexity and increased autonomy in managing business activities. However, as prior studies suggest, policy implementation is not socially neutral. Women's encounters with banks, municipal authorities, and support agencies remain mediated by informal norms and frontline discretion, where respectability scripts, kin endorsement, and religiously inflected meanings shape credibility and access (Najma, 2020; Tlaiss, 2015).

Within this hybrid institutional setting, kinship emerges as a central institution that is simultaneously enabling and constraining. Family networks frequently provide the financial resources, labor, premises, and moral endorsement necessary to legitimize women's entrepreneurial activities, particularly in contexts where formal support is limited or conditional (Ghouse et al., 2019; Abd El Basset et al., 2024). At the same time, kinship operates as a form of conditional governance, imposing implicit boundaries on women's time, mobility, sectoral choices, and decision-making authority. These dynamics are further shaped by religion and social respectability, which influence perceptions of appropriate behavior, acceptable forms of enterprise, and credible leadership, particularly in conservative or rural settings (Tlaiss & McAdam, 2023; Dauletova & Al-Busaidi, 2022). As a result, women entrepreneurs engage in continuous legitimacy work, crafting culturally resonant entrepreneurial identities that reconcile reform-driven opportunities with local moral expectations.

While existing scholarship on women's entrepreneurship in the Arab world has extensively documented structural and cultural barriers, less attention has been paid to how women actively navigate, reinterpret, and mobilize institutional environments in practice (Al-Dajani et al., 2021; Al Boinin, 2023). This study addresses this gap by examining how Omani women entrepreneurs convert formal eligibility into tangible access within a context characterized by institutional duality, where modern reforms and traditional norms coexist and interact. Drawing on an intersectional institutional framework, the study explores how gender intersects with class, education, marital status, and geography to shape entrepreneurial trajectories and access to resources (Giménez & Calabrò, 2018). The study examines women's entrepreneurial agency within the interaction of state reform and kinship governance in Oman.

Methodology

This research employed a qualitative, interpretivist approach grounded in a social constructionist perspective to explore how Omani women entrepreneurs navigate institutional dualities. Fourteen participants, aged 23-54, were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling using entrepreneurship networks, women's associations, and peer referrals. The sample included entrepreneurs from both urban and rural regions who had operated registered or home-based ventures for at least one year. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in Arabic between May 2023 and May 2024 via Zoom, each lasting approximately one to one and a half hours. Interviews focused on participants' entrepreneurial pathways, access to finance, kinship relations, digital engagement, and strategies for gaining legitimacy. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and translated with careful attention to conceptual fidelity. Data were analysed abductively (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007) using thematic coding in NVivo, moving iteratively between emerging empirical insights and institutional and intersectional frameworks, with attention to variation across urban and rural contexts. Analysis proceeded through open coding, thematic clustering, and iterative refinement, supported by reflexive memoing and analytic traceability (Miles, Huberman & Saldaña, 2013). Ethical procedures included informed consent, the use of pseudonyms, and removal of identifying information to safeguard confidentiality.

Results & Implications

The analysis revealed that Omani women entrepreneurs navigate a complex institutional environment where modernization reforms intersect with entrenched cultural expectations. Participants widely credited Vision 2040 reforms and e-government systems for simplifying licensing and registration processes, reducing bureaucratic burdens, and enabling greater autonomy. However, these benefits were unevenly distributed. Women in urban areas accessed digital platforms and financial programs more easily, while those in rural settings faced limited internet access, stronger kinship surveillance, and restrictive gender norms. Kinship networks emerged as a double-edged institution, providing essential financial, emotional, and reputational support while simultaneously constraining women's time, mobility, and authority. Many women legitimized their ventures through religious and moral framing, portraying entrepreneurship as socially responsible or faith-driven work, which helped mitigate scrutiny but also reinforced expectations of modesty and service. Digital tools such as Instagram further expanded informal market access, yet also exposed women to imitation and social judgment. Overall, the findings show that Omani women convert formal eligibility into access through layered legitimacy work that blends family endorsement, moral framing, and digital visibility. The study contributes by theorizing this process as "legitimacy translation", the dynamic negotiation through which institutional dualities produce stratified yet innovative pathways to entrepreneurship.

Best Empirical Paper Nominees

Faith, Family, and Female Agency: How Religiosity Shapes Socially Oriented Entrepreneurial Growth

Jasim

Principal Topic

Entrepreneurship in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region is deeply embedded within institutional, cultural, and religious systems that diverge noticeably from Western paradigms. In the Arabian Gulf, entrepreneurship operates within hybrid institutional environments characterized by strong state involvement, collective social orientations, and the pervasive influence of Islamic values. Yet, existing entrepreneurship theories have largely been constructed within individualistic and secular contexts, overlooking how religion and family function as institutional forces shaping entrepreneurial behavior in Muslim societies (Bruton, Zahra, & Cai, 2017; Dana & Dana, 2008). This theoretical imbalance limits the explanatory power of established models when applied to non-Western settings and constrains our understanding of the mechanisms through which women entrepreneurs navigate restrictive sociocultural systems.

Within the Arabian Gulf, women's entrepreneurship is both encouraged and constrained. On the one hand, Gulf governments promote female entrepreneurship as part of economic diversification agendas; on the other, religious and cultural expectations circumscribe women's public presence, networking practices, and business autonomy. These contradictions render the Gulf an analytically rich setting for investigating how female entrepreneurs exercise agency under normative and institutional constraint. This study therefore explores how religiosity, conceptualized as an informal institutional force, shapes Muslim female entrepreneurial growth intentions-measured through plans to hire more employee, introduce new products or services, and expand market presence- which reflects not only economic ambition but also a form of social value creation. It further examines the mediating roles of family support and social networking freedom—key relational mechanisms through which women negotiate the boundaries between faith, family, and enterprise.

The study asks: How does religiosity influence socially oriented entrepreneurial growth intentions among Muslim women in the Arabian Gulf, and through which social and familial mechanisms does this relationship unfold? This inquiry responds to recent calls for indigenous theorizing that foregrounds the role of informal institutions—such as religion, family, and social norms—in shaping entrepreneurial agency within the MENA context (Banerjee, 2021; Bruton et al., 2021). It also contributes to broader debates about how entrepreneurs reconcile conflicting logics of modernity and tradition, economic rationality and moral accountability, and individual aspiration and collective identity.

Theoretical Framework: This study is grounded in Institutional Theory, which explains how actors operate within and respond to formal and informal institutional structures. While formal institutions (laws, regulations, market systems) prescribe the structural boundaries of entrepreneurial activity, informal institutions—including religion, family, and social norms—define the moral and cognitive frameworks that shape behavior and legitimacy (North, 1990; Bruton et al., 2010). Within the Gulf's hybrid institutional setting, these informal systems are not peripheral but constitutive of entrepreneurial practice.

In this context, religiosity is conceptualized not merely as personal faith but as a sociocultural institution that shapes identity, motivation, and legitimacy. Building on El-Gamal (2006), religiosity in this study encompasses both intrinsic (faith-driven) and extrinsic (socially manifested) dimensions. Intrinsic religiosity reflects internalized commitment to Islamic values and moral codes that influence decision-making, while extrinsic religiosity captures the public display of religious adherence—such as dress, speech, and lifestyle—that signals conformity to social expectations. Both dimensions can shape entrepreneurial behavior in distinct ways: intrinsic religiosity may foster perseverance, ethical conduct, and a sense of divine purpose; extrinsic religiosity may impose social visibility constraints, limiting public engagement and mobility.

The study situates family support as a mediating mechanism linking religiosity to entrepreneurial growth. In the Gulf, family operates as both a primary enabler and constraint. Familial endorsement can legitimize women's participation in business, particularly when it aligns with religiously sanctioned norms of modesty and respectability (Welter, 2011). Conversely, lack of family approval may curtail women's ability to expand networks, travel, or engage publicly. Thus, family support functions as an interpretive filter through which religious values are negotiated and enacted in entrepreneurial practice.

A second mediating mechanism, social networking freedom, captures the entrepreneur's ability to engage with diverse professional contacts—both male and female—and participate in public events such as exhibitions, collaborations, and conferences. In conservative Gulf societies, such engagement often carries social risk, as women's public visibility may be scrutinized through religious and cultural lenses (Kayed & Hassan, 2011). Yet, the capacity to form and maintain professional networks is vital for accessing resources, information, and market opportunities (Aldrich & Cliff, 2003). By examining how religiosity interacts with family approval to shape women's networking behavior, the study sheds light on the nuanced ways Gulf entrepreneurs reconcile cultural expectations with business imperatives.

Finally, this framework integrates technology adoption as a behavioral expression of entrepreneurial openness. Digital platforms enable Gulf women to bypass spatial and gender-based restrictions by engaging in online marketing, collaborations, and visibility-building activities. In this sense, technological engagement becomes both an indicator of adaptive agency and a proxy for social freedom. By linking religiosity, family support, and digital networking behavior, this study provides an integrated model of how female entrepreneurs in the Arabian Gulf navigate institutional complexity to pursue growth that advances social good.

Methodology

The study used a two-phase mixed-method design combining a structured survey with AI-assisted text analysis to reduce common-method bias (Podsakoff et al., 2003). Muslim female entrepreneurs across the Gulf completed measures of religiosity, family support, social networking freedom, and growth intentions, following El-Gamal's (2006) intrinsic–extrinsic distinction. AI was then used to code public digital content from LinkedIn, Instagram, and websites, capturing networking and technology use. Technology adoption was coded on a four-point scale (Ilyas et al., 2023), enabling triangulation. SEM and OLS checks confirmed significant pathways from religiosity to growth through family support and social freedom.

Results & Implications

Intrinsic religiosity aligned with perseverance and higher growth intentions, while extrinsic religiosity showed a negative association due to visibility constraints. Strong family support softened these limits and legitimized public engagement. Women with supportive families showed greater networking freedom and stronger social growth orientation. AI-coded digital activity confirmed these patterns: entrepreneurs active online displayed higher ambition and adaptive behavior. Religiosity thus operates as both an enabler and constraint depending on family endorsement.

The study advances institutional theory by framing religiosity as a shaping informal institution in hybrid Gulf contexts (Bruton et al., 2021). It adds to gender scholarship by showing that female agency often emerges through family-backed legitimacy rather than autonomy (Welter, 2011). Methodologically, it demonstrates the value of integrating surveys with AI-based digital analysis to capture behavioral indicators of agency.

In conclusion, entrepreneurship support in the Arabian Gulf can be strengthened by aligning policy initiatives with cultural and religious forms of legitimacy, engaging families as allies, and promoting digital skills that expand women's market reach within socially accepted boundaries. When framed as morally grounded and socially beneficial, female entrepreneurship gains legitimacy that supports mobility, networking, and technology-based visibility. This study shows that Muslim female entrepreneurs do not simply work around institutional constraints but actively reinterpret them, drawing on religiosity, family support, and selective social freedom to build resilience and pursue growth that generates social value. By integrating indigenous perspectives with empirical analysis, the study offers a nuanced account of how entrepreneurship in the Gulf emerges at the intersection of religion, gender, and technological modernization, extending contemporary entrepreneurship theory in culturally diverse contexts.

Transforming Constraints into Confidence: Digital Social Networks and Self-Efficacy in the UAE's Evolving Entrepreneurial Ecosystem

Maharaj

Principal Topic

The rapid digitalization of entrepreneurship has enabled women to transcend traditional ecosystem barriers through digital social networks (DSNs) (Manolova et al., 2020). Young women are increasingly using digital platforms to learn, connect, and envision their entrepreneurial futures. Yet, in contexts where gendered and cultural constraints persist, the ways women adapt and build entrepreneurial self-efficacy (ESE) through digital engagement remain underexplored (Chaker & Zouaoui, 2023; Shukla et al., 2021). Research on how DSNs shape women's entrepreneurial confidence, aspirations, and intentions remains scarce. This paper examines how female university students in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) leverage DSNs, such as Instagram, LinkedIn, and TikTok, as learning and empowerment tools.

Drawing on Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986; 1997) and Entrepreneurial Self-Efficacy (ESE) (Chen et al., 1998), the study conceptualizes DSNs as proxy ecosystems: digital environments that substitute or supplement limited access to traditional resources such as mentorship, role models, and business networks. It also integrates contextualized entrepreneurship perspectives (Welter, 2011; Brush et al., 2023), emphasizing how sociocultural and institutional factors shape women's efficacy beliefs and entrepreneurial agency. The study investigated the relationships between digital social networks (DSNs), entrepreneurial self-efficacy (ESE), entrepreneurial aspirations (EA), and entrepreneurial intention (EI), and whether ESE mediates these relationships. Conceptually, the model integrates psychological and social mechanisms of empowerment into a sequential chain: DSN use à ESE à EA à EI

In doing so, the study positions DSNs as gender-sensitive ecosystems of empowerment that enable young women to develop entrepreneurial agency and navigate socio-cultural constraints (Henry et al., 2016; Brush et al., 2019). It responds directly to calls from GEM's recent Women's Entrepreneurship Report (GEM, 2023) and the DIRC 2026 theme to explore how women harness digital tools for inclusive and socially transformative entrepreneurship.

Methodology

A quantitative design was employed, utilizing survey data from 300 female university students aged 18–25, across business, STEM, and social science majors at a leading university in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Respondents represented both Emirati and expatriate backgrounds, reflecting the country's multicultural higher education landscape. With ethical approval, data were collected online in early 2025 via institutional channels and entrepreneurship courses. Participation was voluntary and anonymous.

Four validated scales were used, each rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree):

1. Digital Social Network Engagement (DSN): 12 custom items assessed students' use of online communities for mentoring, learning, and promotion of business ideas ($\alpha = 0.946$).

2. Entrepreneurial Self-Efficacy (ESE) — 16 items adapted from Chen et al.'s (1998) ESE scale, measured confidence in opportunity recognition, risk management, networking, leadership, and balancing social expectations ($\alpha = 0.987$).

3. Entrepreneurial Aspirations (EA) — 16 items adapted from Global Entrepreneurship Monitor indicators reflected students' ambition to launch impactful or growth-oriented ventures ($\alpha = 0.978$).

4. Entrepreneurial Intention (EI) — 20 items adapted from Liñán & Chen (2009) measured determination to start a business ($\alpha = 0.985$).

Composite scores were computed using mean aggregation when at least 70% of items were completed. Scale reliabilities were excellent.

Data was analyzed using SPSS v.29 and the PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2022). Descriptive statistics and correlations were first examined. To test hypotheses, ordinary least squares (OLS) regressions and mediation/moderation analyses were performed, using 3,000 bootstrap samples with 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals. All variables were standardized prior to analysis. Variance Inflation Factors (VIF < 6) confirmed acceptable multicollinearity.

Results & Implications

Participants reported high DSN use ($M = 4.44$, $SD = 0.72$), moderate self-efficacy ($M = 3.40$, $SD = 1.28$), and moderately strong aspirations ($M = 3.43$, $SD = 1.22$) and intentions ($M = 3.36$, $SD = 1.22$). Bivariate correlations were positive and significant across constructs: DSN–ESE ($r = .45$), DSN–EA ($r = .41$), and DSN–EI ($r = .42$), supporting the theorized relationships. My hypotheses were as follows:

Hypothesis 1: DSN use positively influences EI among female university students.

Hypothesis 2: ESE mediates the relationship between DSN use and EI.

Hypothesis 3: EAs mediate the relationship between DSN use and EI.

Hypothesis 4: ESE and EA sequentially mediate the relationship between DSN use and EI.

Hypothesis 5: ESE moderates the relationship between DSN use and EI, such that the relationship is stronger for those with higher self-efficacy.

The findings supported the proposed model. DSN use was positively associated with entrepreneurial intention, indicating that students who engaged more actively online expressed stronger motivation to start a business. This relationship was primarily explained by ESE: DSN use significantly increased women's confidence in their entrepreneurial abilities, and this confidence strongly predicted their EI.

This study advances theoretical understanding of how digital ecosystems foster self-efficacy and adaptive entrepreneurship among young women in transitional economies, offering a nuanced understanding of the initial entrepreneurial journey (Stephens & Miller, 2024; Nambisan, 2017). It challenges Western-centric assumptions that presume open ecosystem access, illustrating instead how DSNs act as catalysts of inclusion, empowerment, and resilience. Rather than assuming open, gender-neutral access to offline ecosystems, this study demonstrates that DSNs function as adaptive ecosystems of efficacy, facilitating vicarious learning, identity rehearsal, and social validation that collectively enhance ESE.

Practically, for educators and policy makers, the results justify programs that explicitly build ESE through digital mentorship, role-model exposure, and structured online communities, particularly for young women navigating gendered constraints (Ahmed et al., 2025). The study demonstrates a concrete mechanism by which digital connectivity transforms constraint into capability, positioning DSNs as inclusion levers within entrepreneurial ecosystems, and enabling young women to redefine entrepreneurship not only as a career path but as a socially transformative act of self-efficacy.

Best Papers Fitting the Conference Theme Nominees

Transforming Futures: Women's Social Entrepreneurship in Uganda in a Digital Age

Nziku, Kagaba, Brush, Bikorimana

Principal Topic

Globally, Uganda ranks among the highest in female entrepreneurship, with women-led businesses reaching approximately one-third of all businesses (World Bank, 2021). Evidence suggests that Kampala, as the nation's commercial and political hub, hosts a dense concentration of women entrepreneurs, many supported by initiatives such as the Uganda Women Entrepreneurship Programme (UWEP) and the GROW project, which collectively aim to reach over 56,000 women nationwide (Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development [MGLSD], 2023; UWONET, 2025). Social entrepreneurship represents a distinct subset of Uganda's broader entrepreneurial activity. Social entrepreneurship is defined by Dees (2001) as the pursuit of sustainable social value through innovative and resourceful action. Dees' framework identifies social entrepreneurs as change agents who prioritise mission over profit, recognise and act on opportunities, innovate continuously, demonstrate boldness despite resource constraints, and commit to measurable impact (Dees, 1998, 2001).

Recent evidence indicates that women-led ventures often emerge in response to systemic gaps in education, healthcare, and environmental sustainability (World Bank, 2021; CARE Uganda, 2022), effectively engaging in social entrepreneurship. At the same time, there is evidence that digital entrepreneurship is empowering and, in some cases, emancipatory for women entrepreneurs who had been excluded from traditional entrepreneurship based on traditional social and cultural norms (McAdam et al., 2020). Recent developments in Uganda's digital landscape have created new opportunities for social women entrepreneurs to establish and expand their businesses. Digital platforms, including mobile money transfer, social media, and e-commerce, are transforming how women interact with markets and communities (Bbosa, 2023). However, persistent challenges such as limited internet access, low digital literacy, lack of management skills, high electricity costs, low electricity levels in rural areas, and gendered norms continue to hinder the potential of social women entrepreneurs (Centre for Multilateral Affairs [CfMA], 2023; International Energy Agency, 2023; Turyankira et al., 2024). This raises the question, "How do women entrepreneurs in Uganda leverage digital tools to overcome challenges and scale their social ventures?"

Methodology

This study will adopt a qualitative, interpretive approach to examine how women social entrepreneurs in Kampala, Uganda, navigate the digital era to leverage digital tools and overcome barriers to business development and performance. Drawing on Dees' (1998, 2001) social entrepreneurship framework, the research will explore five core dimensions: mission-driven impact, opportunity recognition, innovation, resourcefulness, and systemic change. These dimensions will be reframed through the lens of digital transformation to understand how technology intersects with social entrepreneurship in resource-constrained environments.

Data will be collected through semi-structured interviews with approximately 20 women social entrepreneurs operating across diverse sectors, including business, education, health, climate resilience, and community empowerment. Participants will be purposively sampled from urban and peri-urban Kampala, identified through entrepreneurship hubs, UWEP beneficiaries, and digital business networks. To ensure rigour, a screening process will confirm that participants meet the criteria of women-led social ventures, defined as enterprises founded or co-founded by women with explicit social or environmental missions.

The interview guide will integrate themes from Dee's (1998, 2001) framework with digital inclusion indicators, including mobile money usage, e-commerce adoption, social media engagement, and digital literacy. Interviews will be conducted both in-person and online, lasting 45–60 minutes, and will be audio-recorded with participant consent. Transcripts will be analysed using thematic coding in NVivo, applying a hybrid inductive–deductive strategy to surface emergent insights while mapping responses to theoretical constructs (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). To strengthen validity, the study will triangulate findings with secondary data from program reports, policy documents, and digital platform usage statistics. Ethical approval will be obtained from Makerere University, and informed consent will be secured from all participants. This methodological design ensures both theoretical advancement and policy relevance by situating womens' lived experiences within broader debates on social entrepreneurship and digital transformation in the Global South. The study will also triangulate findings with secondary data from programme reports, policy documents, and digital platform usage statistics to enrich contextual understanding.

Results & Implications

The study is expected to reveal the extent to which women social entrepreneurs in Kampala strategically leverage digital tools to overcome barriers to business development and performance. Researchers will examine whether or not platforms such as mobile money, social media, and e-commerce enable entrepreneurs to address structural constraints, including financial exclusion, limited infrastructure, and gendered norms. Findings are anticipated to highlight the extent to which adaptive strategies align with Dee's (1998, 2001) framework, particularly opportunity recognition, innovation, and bold action despite limited resources. At the same time, the study will identify persistent challenges to digital inclusion, such as low digital literacy, unreliable electricity, and informal enterprise structures, and their implications for entrepreneurial growth. These insights will advance theoretical understanding of social entrepreneurship and inform gender-sensitive policy interventions aimed at promoting equitable digital access and strengthening innovation ecosystems.

The originality of this study lies in its empirically grounded theoretical contributions that extend existing frameworks, particularly Dee's model, by situating social entrepreneurship within processes of digital transformation. The findings will inform policy by providing actionable recommendations for government agencies, development partners, and entrepreneurship hubs to foster gender equality, inclusive economic growth, and digital inclusion in Uganda and the wider Global South. Focusing on the lived experiences of Ugandan women social entrepreneurs, the study bridges social entrepreneurship and digital transformation in the Global South, offering theoretically grounded and policy-relevant insights that support Diana's mission to advance inclusive, sustainable, and gender-aware models of enterprise.

Feminist Empowerment Meets Technology's Sociomateriality: Digital Social Entrepreneurship in Palestine

Ahmed, Dean, Burns, Cooper

Principal Topic

Research on Palestinian women's entrepreneurship has offered rich insights into how women navigate patriarchal norms, displacement, and socio-economic marginalisation under occupation (Al-Dajani et al., 2013; Althalathini et al., 2020). More recent work has begun to consider how digital entrepreneurship may expand Palestinian women's virtual mobility and address economic marginalisation (Althalathini & Tlaiss, 2023). Yet despite these contributions, the focus has been mainly on necessity-based entrepreneurship rather than socially/opportunity driven ventures. Furthermore, limited attention has been given to the sociomaterial dimensions of empowerment as it emerges through women's digital entrepreneurial practices and how social-driven ventures may be enabled through sociomateriality of digital technologies.

To address this gap, this study conceptualises empowerment as emerging from the technology's sociomateriality shaped by occupation, conflict and social-political goals where digital technologies and fragile infrastructures intersect with gender norms and everyday material constraints. Drawing on the sociomateriality concept which is understood as the mutual constitution of technologies and social worlds (Davidson & Vaast, 2010; Nambisan, 2017), we examine how women's digital social entrepreneurial practices develop through the interplay of material fragility, technological affordances, and gendered expectations. Empowerment is conceptualised not as linear outcome, but as an emergent and negotiated process (Al-Dajani et al., 2013) arising through women's daily sociomaterial engagements within a conflict-shaped environment. Through these engagements, women cultivate critical consciousness and enact forms of sociopolitical empowerment expressed through their ventures.

The novelty of this paper resides in the integration of feminist empowerment theory (Duncanson, 2018) and sociomateriality (Davidson & Vaast, 2010; Nambisan, 2017) to show how empowerment emerges because of, rather than despite, conflict-driven material collapse.

Methodology

The study employs an interpretive qualitative approach. Semi-structured interviews with 12 Palestinian women digital entrepreneurs were conducted in Arabic via Zoom in April-May 2021. Participants were university-educated and digitally literate. They operated ventures in digital education, legal information platforms, sustainable clothing, and e-commerce. This sample offered a distinct context for examining empowerment among women who entered digital entrepreneurship with advanced technical skills and an initial sense of agency. Sampling combined criterion and snowball strategies to access a population fragmented by mobility restrictions and infrastructural instability.Data were analysed using multi-stage thematic analysis informed by feminist empowerment theory and sociomateriality. Coding focused on how digital tools interact with conflict-driven material breakdown, gender norms, and emotional labour.. The integrated framework enabled attention to the relational, embodied, emotional, and material dimensions of digital entrepreneurship elements not explored in previous studies.

Although data were collected in April–May 2021during the pandemic and prior to the significant escalation of violence in Gaza after 7 October 2023, the sociomaterial dynamics identified in this study remain highly relevant. The earlier context already reflected chronic infrastructural fragility, digital dependency, and mobility restrictions that have since intensified. The pandemic shaped both data collection (necessitating Zoom interviews) and participants' entrepreneurial practices, further highlighting the centrality of digital technologies in contexts of crisis. The recent destruction of critical infrastructures suggests that digital entrepreneurship may now play an even more vital role in enabling women to sustain social ventures, maintain cross-border engagement, and navigate heightened fragmentation. These temporal layers underscore that empowerment in conflict is not static but continually renegotiated as material conditions change, reinforcing the study's arguments about the emergent sociomaterial nature of empowerment.

Results & Implications

The findings demonstrate that women's initial empowerment to establish their socially-driven ventures emerges through sociomaterial conditions in which digital technologies substitute for non-functioning infrastructures. For participnats, conflict-driven material fragility does not constrain entrepreneurial action; instead, it generates spaces for digital opportunity exploitation. Digital platforms enable participants to reconstruct disrupted systems such as education, information provision, or gender roles develop new modes of social innovation, and serve fragmented markets. This illustrates that empowerment is not a prerequisite for entrepreneurship, but an emergent and negotiated process that begins through women's practical use of digital tools to address community needs and support social goals in the absence of functioning infrastructures.

Second, the analysis shows that empowerment develops across interconnected and mutually constitutive levels, with critical consciousness forming a central element. This consciousness arises through women's daily sociomaterial engagements with digital technologies and is shaped by material fragility and gendered constraints. It is negotiated, reflective, and socially driven, enabling women to articulate community-oriented goals, recognise structural inequalities, and reinterpret their entrepreneurial roles within their families and communities. Thus, in this study empowerment is conceptualised as an evolving and socially purposeful process grounded in women's ongoing digital practices.

Finally, the study reveals that this critical consciousness enables forms of sociopolitical empowerment, expressed through geopolitical agency, digital visibility, and platform-mediated soft resistance. Women use digital entrepreneurship to assert Palestinian presence across borders, counter reductive narratives, and participate in subtle forms of political expression. Through cross-border engagement, audience-building, and the pursuit of socially oriented project goals, participants employ digital platforms to advance sociopolitical aims that extend beyond individual economic advancement. Digital entrepreneurship thus becomes a transformational space where women cultivate political presence, contribute to social goals and collective representation, and navigate conflict-driven constraints through everyday acts of digital resistance.

Together, these contributions reposition digital entrepreneurship not simply as an economic activity, but as a sociomaterial and sociopolitical practice through which Palestinian women develop agency, consciousness, and forms of empowerment oriented toward social and political goals. The findings illuminate how empowerment in conflict settings emerges across interconnected levels, sociomaterial opportunity and critical consciousness each shaped by the material, digital, and gendered dynamics under occupation.

Best Paper Led by a Junior Scholar Nominees

Narratives of Care and Identity: How Senegalese Mothers of Children with Disabilities Become Social Entrepreneurs

Seye

Principal Topic

Women who care for children living with disabilities often face emotional, social, and institutional challenges that profoundly shape their trajectories. This study examines how Senegalese mothers construct entrepreneurial identity through their caregiving experiences and their creation of inclusive social ventures. By integrating entrepreneurial identity theory, care ethics, and narrative inquiry, this study offers a novel perspective on how women in the Global South transform lived experience into social innovation, expanding current understandings of identity construction in women’s social entrepreneurship.

Method

Using a narrative inquiry approach based on life story interviews, the research explores how women make sense of their journeys, identify critical turning points, and articulate the motives that led them to establish schools, therapy centers, or community-based support initiatives.

Results & Implications

The findings reveal that caregiving operates as a powerful catalyst for social entrepreneurship by generating a sense of responsibility, moral purpose, and social justice. Three identity processes emerge: (1) care-driven purpose, where personal adversity becomes a source of mission; (2) resistance identity, as women challenge stigma and institutional neglect; and (3) community-oriented identity, strengthened through digital platforms, parent networks, and collective action.

How Does Entrepreneurship Training Support the Needs of Women Social Entrepreneurs in Sub-Saharan Africa

Bhaludra, Cooney

Principal Topic

Social enterprises are widely regarded as a vital catalyst for social and economic development, owing to their ability to address societal challenges through innovative strategies while simultaneously striving for financial sustainability within a market-oriented framework (Pulido et al., 2014). Contemporary research indicates that women have become more involved in social entrepreneurship and related activities (Haugh & Talwar, 2016) and are actively addressing societal concerns by developing innovative solutions across various sectors (Amofah, 2021). However, Anambane & Adom (2018) emphasized that cultural practices and gender norms significantly influence the viability of women-led social enterprises in developing countries. In this context, Skubis et al. (2023) highlighted that despite their potential to drive social and economic development, women social entrepreneurs (WSEs) often face limited access to training, mentorship, and financial resources in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). Socio-cultural variables, such as husband-wife and parent-child relationships, social status and authority, and political and economic systems, significantly restrict entrepreneurship in SSA (Wolf & Frese, 2018). Addressing these challenges through inclusive policies and targeted support mechanisms is essential to empowering WSEs and enabling them to drive community development across the region. The existing literature highlights numerous entrepreneurship training programs designed to cultivate women's business acumen (Dams et al., 2022). However, there appears to be a conspicuous lack of targeted initiatives specifically catered to WSEs, particularly in the Africa.

Dana (2001) underlined that effective training and support require a thorough understanding of individuals, including their cultural values, experiences, and mindsets. Failure to consider these factors often results in unsuccessful training programs that do not realistically assist or educate the intended beneficiaries. Cho and Honarati (2013) demonstrated that the limited effectiveness of many training programs in developing countries stems from the direct adoption of Western vocational education models, resulting in a mismatch between program design and local socio-economic realities. Therefore, a deeper exploration is required to understand the specific support and resources WSEs need to refine their innovative strategies and enhance their entrepreneurial impact in SSA. This study examines how entrepreneurship training influences WSEs to overcome cultural constraints, gender stereotypes, limited access to finance and market competition in SSA. Guided by a gender lens, the study investigates how social and cultural constructs of gender influence access to opportunities and resources.

Research Aims: (1) To investigate how entrepreneurship training influences the development of entrepreneurial skills among WSEs; (2) To examine how entrepreneurship training empowers WSEs to overcome economic, social, and cultural barriers.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative case study design to examine how entrepreneurship training supports WSEs in SSA, focusing on a training programme specifically designed by Reach for Change (RFC) in Ethiopia. The training included developing skills related to business planning, financial management, marketing, and legal awareness, along with targeted support in areas such as social media marketing, building and managing a digital presence, and brand development, reflecting the evolving needs of WSEs in the Digital Age. A purposive sample of 32 participants was selected to ensure the inclusion of individuals with relevant experience related to the research objectives. Data was collected through online semi-structured interviews with WSEs who participated in the training program, key informants involved in the program and other stakeholders. Documentary analysis of training material, policy documents, and program reports was used to contextualize the findings and enhance triangulation.

Data will be organized, coded, and analyzed using NVivo software, which will facilitate the management and interpretation of qualitative data. Data will be analysed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-stage framework. Analysis will proceed through familiarisation with the data, initial inductive coding, and the systematic generation and review of themes. Codes will be iteratively refined and organised into higher-order themes. This analytic process will enable a nuanced examination of how entrepreneurship training influences WSEs in the SSA context.

Results & Implications

Firstly, the study's findings can challenge Western-centric approaches to entrepreneurship by emphasizing context-specific pathways of WSEs in SSA. Unlike Western models that focus on individualism and formal institutional support, the study demonstrates how collective learning and digital peer networks influence women's social entrepreneurial outcomes in SSA. Secondly, the study is expected to highlight how entrepreneurship training significantly influences WSEs' skills, confidence, self-efficacy, and problem-solving capabilities in this region. Participants expressed that exposure to entrepreneurship training and concepts enabled more efficient business processes, decision-making, and the identification of market opportunities. The novelty and originality of this research lie in its focus on a largely underexplored group—WSEs in SSA. By combining theoretical insight with empirical evidence from the Ethiopian context, the research offers novel perspectives that advance understanding of women's social entrepreneurship development. The outcome is to develop an evidence-based framework outlining the key components to be incorporated into tailored training programs for WSEs in SSA.

This study contributes to SE and development research in three key areas. Firstly, it advances emerging scholarship by introducing a conceptual framework that underscores the paucity of research exploring the influence of entrepreneurship training on WSEs in SSA. Second, it offers empirical insights and advances a more comprehensive understanding of the social entrepreneurial processes of WSEs in Ethiopia. Third, the knowledge and resources produced by this study can be utilized by training institutions to develop programs designed to address the specific challenges, aspirations, and contexts of WSEs in the region. Lastly, the knowledge can provide practitioners with evidence to develop supportive environments for WSEs, while considering the region's social and cultural expectations.

Resources & Context

Barriers to Women's Social Entrepreneurship in South Africa's Digital Age

Lichy, Scheepers

Principal Topic

Women's social entrepreneurship is a powerful force for shaping equitable futures and tackling global challenges such as poverty, climate resilience, healthcare (Sánchez-Limón et al., 2025). In the Global South (GS), women are often at the forefront of such ventures, playing a critical role in achieving the UN SDG (Contreras & Dornberger, 2023). For this study, we define social entrepreneurship as the process through which human potential, social capital and community engagement drive the transition toward greater social and environmental sustainability (Borquist & De Bruin, 2019; Bousquet & Lichy, 2024). Despite its significance, the ways in which women in the GS engage in social entrepreneurship and harness digital resources to start/grow their ventures remain under-explored (de Bruin et al., 2024; Farquhar et al., 2024; Swartz et al., 2023).

We draw on Entrepreneurial Ecosystems (EE) Theory (Stam & van de Ven, 2021) in our analysis. Mainstream EE scholarship has often overlooked how gendered power structures and historical inequities disrupt these systems at the micro level, particularly in the GS (Ojong et al., 2021). Women respond to and experience these networks differently from men, facing unique constraints and leveraging distinct support mechanisms (Brush et al., 2019). This is particularly true in social entrepreneurship, where women will often prioritise social value creation over purely economic goals (Hechavarría et al., 2017; Borchardt et al., 2024). Understanding these dynamics requires a decolonising perspective that challenges the established Western-centric management knowledge (cf., Schumpeter, 1939) and positions local realities at the core (Girei, 2017). This study, therefore, develops the following RQ:

How do interconnected socio-cultural, institutional and infrastructural barriers within the South African entrepreneurial ecosystem impede women social entrepreneurs in a digital age?

Methodology

Guided by Dana & Dana (2005), we employ a phenomenological qualitative design, informed by Gioia Methodology (Gioia et al., 2013; Magnani & Gioia, 2023), to inductively generate a theory grounded in participants' lived experiences. This approach allows themes to emerge from the data rather than being constrained by pre-existing theoretical categories (Braun et al., 2019).

Data were collected using the Gallery Walk technique (Karlsson, 2020; Makmun, Yin & Zakariya, 2020), a participatory and visual method designed to stimulate reflection and collective meaning-making. In this interactive process, our forty participants collaboratively identified, discussed and visually mapped the barriers they encounter in their entrepreneurial journeys. Working in small groups, participants recorded their ideas on flipcharts under four thematic headings (See Appendix) and then rotated to review and add insights to other flipcharts. Using Gioia methodology, data analysis progressed from first-order concepts (informant-centric terms) to second-order themes (researcher-centric concepts), then aggregated into overarching dimensions to build a data structure and model.

Results & Implications

Our analysis of the participants' flipchart feedback revealed an interconnected ecosystem of barriers, which we synthesise into the Women Social Entrepreneurs Barriers (WSEB) Model. To bridge theory and practice, we also adapt the Business Model Canvas (BMC) into a practical diagnostic and strategic tool. In an era of rapid digital transformation, our paper examines the critical disconnect between the potential of digital tools and the persistent challenges of patriarchal norms, financial exclusion and digital divides.

In South Africa, male domination of the economy makes women very vulnerable, as documented in the GBV narratives of Black African women street traders in Durban (Mkhize & Ntuli, 2025). This marginalisation is intersectional; black and low-income women face compounded discrimination due to race, class and colonial legacies (Ngoasong & Kimbu, 2019; Ojediran & Anderson, 2020, pushing them into informal sectors with limited legal protection (Aliamutu & Mkhize, 2024). Such intersectional marginalisation is a consistent feature of social entrepreneurship in Africa, echoing studies highlighting both its growth and persistent challenges (Odeyemi et al., 2024).

Our contribution is two-fold. First, we develop a context-specific model that redefines EE barriers through a gendered lens, emphasising the interdependence of cultural norms, policy design and institutional support. Second, we challenge EE scholarship to account for how lived experiences shape engagement with ecosystems. As such, this study challenges Western-centric EE frameworks, and offers stakeholders a context-specific model (WSEB) and a practical framework (BMC) to foster inclusive, digitally enabled social entrepreneurship in the GS. Our study highlights the need for ecosystem reforms that meaningfully support women's digitally-driven social innovation in the GS.

The Unconventional Entrepreneur and Resourcefulness in a Chronic Turmoil Context

Tlaiss, Khanin

Principal Topic

Previous research has developed contrasting perspectives on entrepreneurial resourcefulness (Michaelis et al., 2020; 2022; Williams et al., 2021). Based on resource dependence theory (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978), some authors have emphasized that resourcefulness involves deliberate resource seeking or acquisition, accomplished by building coalitions with more powerful resource holders (Villanueva et al., 2012). In contrast, other authors have characterized resourcefulness as the ability to use assets at hand in an ad hoc fashion, defined as bricolage, and contrasted selective bricolage, which leads to firm growth, with parallel bricolage, which may stifle firm growth (Baker & Nelson, 2005).

In addition, scholars have linked some resourcefulness types to psychological and social adaptation (Williams and Shepherd, 2016b, 2018; Williams et al., 2021) and to cognitive creativity (Sonenshein, 2014). These types of resourcefulness, however, remain under-researched. Furthermore, we lack conceptual frameworks to explain how unconventional entrepreneurs, e.g., refugees, people with disabilities, or mature individuals (Bakker & McMullen, 2023) practice such understudied types of resourceful behaviors. In this paper, we explore the resourceful behaviors of older, destitute women entrepreneurs operating in patriarchal Lebanon marked by chronic turmoil (Tlaiss & Khanin, 2025). While so doing, we apply Postcolonial feminist theory (Manning, 2016; Mohanty, 1984, 2003) that objected to describing women in non-Western contexts in an inherently biased manner, contributing to their prejudicial "othering" (Mohanty, 1984). Building on this perspective, we argue that women in non-Western contexts, such as Arab subalterns, may be agentic and exhibit various forms of entrepreneurial resourcefulness. We also employ intersectionality theory (Collins & Bilge, 2016) to explain how unconventional women entrepreneurs may encounter interrelated barriers that mutually reinforce one another, such as rural context, gender, age, and socio-economic status, and to examine how they agentically overcome such barriers.

Methodology

We follow a qualitative interpretative methodology, drawing upon in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Purposive sampling strategy and network sampling were used (Patton, 1990). Interviews lasted between 80 and 180 minutes. They were audio-recorded and took place in the interviewees' homes, at their request. All the interviews were conducted in Arabic, then translated and back translated. Our sample size is 15 women entrepreneurs. None of them completed high school; all were married, had at least three children, and were grandmothers. The participants were all over 55 years old. In analyzing the interviews, we have employed a thematic analysis protocol (Gioia et al., 2013).

Results & Implications

Faced with severe deterioration in their families' living conditions, the women in this study decided to start informal businesses from home. As their husbands and children were unemployed due to the compounded crises that shook Lebanon, and could not find work, the women were forced to act. They hit upon the idea of selling traditional, homemade food to city dwellers.

In Lebanon's patriarchal countryside, women are expected to be homemakers, whereas all business activities are reserved for men (Tlaiss and Khanin, 2025). The interviewees grasped that it was their location, their gender, and the patriarchal expectations of their culture in terms of gender roles that represented the principal barriers to their starting a business. Participants associated their limited education with their rural location, gender, and low socioeconomic status. Due to the ingrained poverty in rural Lebanon, children stop going to school at an early age to begin helping their parents. Another reason participants felt their entrepreneurial career would not take off was their age. They pointed out the widespread perception in their community that only young, educated males may start a business. These intersectional barriers left the women feeling extremely demotivated.

Despite having realized the magnitude and multitude of the internalized and intersectional barriers to entrepreneurship they were facing, the participants did not surrender. They developed what we call psychological resourcefulness, which we define as emotional-cognitive malleability and flexibility: the ability to adjust emotionally and mentally to prevailing conditions and to adapt to or change them through appropriate action. The participants' psychological resourcefulness unfolded as they took stock of the competencies they possess as prerequisites for entrepreneurship, ultimately strengthening entrepreneurial self-efficacy. Having raised their entrepreneurial self-efficacy to a significant degree (given their initial self-deprecating criticism), the participants began searching for the most fitting resource configurations to enable their new ventures to acquire and retain customers. In creating a new business, the women exhibited what we called architectural resourcefulness, which we conceptualize as the ingenious social-creative abilities to build a new market segment and to reconfigure resources creatively to design and construct a new entrepreneurial ecosystem.

The Dynamics of Entrepreneurial Resource Interaction: A Study of Women Entrepreneurs' Practices in Lesotho

Neneh, Motsomotso

Principal Topic

Resources are central for the functioning of any entrepreneurial venture (Kaciak & Memili, 2024; Rahman et al., 2023; Dana et al., 2020), yet many entrepreneurs, especially women, continue to face persistent resource constraints that hinder their success (Inkizhinov et al., 2021; Rahman et al., 2023). Indeed, global evidence shows that in 49% of economies, women lack equal access to the entrepreneurial resources essential for entrepreneurial success (GEM, 2024/2025). Hence, women entrepreneurs rely on personal resources (Sivathanu and Pillai, 2020) and on interactions within their social networks to develop and acquire resources they need to deliver valued solutions (La Rocca et al., 2019; Glinka, et al., 2023). Different forms of resources, including human capital, financial resources, social support, and physical/cultural resources, have been validated as instrumental for the success of women entrepreneurs (Welsh & Kaciak, 2019; Glińska-Neweś et al., 2023). While extant research has largely examined the types of resources women entrepreneurs possess and how these resources contribute to entrepreneurial outcomes, what is less clear is how different resources interact to support and sustain women's entrepreneurial activities. Building on the Resource Interaction Approach (RIA), which has been defined as "[…] the processes of combination, recombination, and co-development of resources" (Baraldi et al., 2012: 266), this study examines how women entrepreneurs combine, recombine, and develop resources to enhance their entrepreneurial activities. Based on the RIA, the features of resources are neither fixed nor innate, but emerge and change throughout interactions with other resources (Baraldi et al., 2012; Glinka, et al., 2023). As such, the value of resources is determined by how they are used in a particular context and by the other resources with which they interact (Baraldi et al., 2012). Hence, the RIA shifts from merely identifying the resources women entrepreneurs possess to recognising them as active agents who mobilise, transform, and elevate the value of their resource portfolios through interaction to enhance their entrepreneurial activities (Glińska-Neweś et al., 2023).

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative approach using an interpretative phenomenological design to examine the lived experiences of how entrepreneurs combine, recombine, and develop resources to enhance their entrepreneurial activities. The study targeted women entrepreneurs in selected Lesotho districts (Maseru, Leribe and Mafeteng), representing urban, semi-urban and rural areas, for inclusivity. Data were obtained from 30 purposively selected women entrepreneurs who met specific criteria and had access to family resources and external networks. Data analysis followed the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) guidelines by Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009). The findings were organised and presented using Gioia et al.'s (2013) three-stage data structure (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Data Structure (not shown)

Results & Implications

The results from Figure 1 indicate that three themes (i.e. family and social resources mobilisation, human and personal capability development, and strategic business practices) emerged in illustrating how women entrepreneurs in Lesotho interact with the RIA features (i.e. combination, recombination and co-development of resources) to shape their entrepreneurial activities. First, for the family and social resource mobilisation theme, the women entrepreneurs demonstrated how they combine diverse household, social, and physical resources to support their businesses. P9 noted, "He produced, and during harvest time I would see to it that we sold to make money", illustrating how her husband's production skills are combined with her marketing skills and social network to create an efficient farming business model. P3 added "My husband… is only active on admin issues… renewing business license", demonstrating how she combines her operational skills with his administrative support to maintain compliance. Likewise, P6 added "they have joined the water pipes together… sharing the water available", indicating how physical infrastructure and strategic social partnerships are combined to reduce water constraints. These excerpts demonstrate how resource combination occurs through everyday interaction within households and communities.

Second, for the human and personal capability development theme, the participants demonstrated how they recombined and reconfigured resources to enhance their entrepreneurial ventures. P21 shared, “I sold lip gloss, makeup, handbags… to buy equipment for my salon” illustrating how existing retail skills and informal trading activities are recombined to generate financial capital for the core business. P20 explained “Creativity at home with cooking at home….. helps with patterns customers request”, showing how household creativity is recombined and transferred into business innovation. These examples illustrate resource recombination as women transform personal and household capabilities into new entrepreneurial value.

Third, within the strategic business practice theme, participants illustrated how resources are co-developed through ongoing interactions within their entrepreneurial ecosystem. P30 explained, “My aunt mentored me… she wants to leave this business legacy with me,” highlighting how family mentorship cultivates entrepreneurial insight over time. P28 stated, “Workshops… got interested in farmers… started poultry,” demonstrating how training stimulates the development of new business ideas. P8 noted, “I learned from another entrepreneur how to speak calmly to customers”, which illustrates how soft skills are gradually improved through regular customer interaction. P5 added, “One business helped me start another one” illustrating how experience in one venture creates the foundation for identifying new opportunities. These excerpts demonstrate that women entrepreneurs actively co-develop resources through iterative engagement within the entrepreneurial ecosystem.

The findings underscore the importance of strengthening household-based resource practices and transforming everyday skills into marketable innovations to overcome persistent resource constraints. Capacity-development programmes should equip women with the ability to recognise, mobilise, and creatively reconfigure diverse resource sets, enabling more resilient and growth-oriented entrepreneurial outcomes.

Access to Capital

Crowdfunded Social Ventures and the Performance of Women-Led Social Ventures Across Geographic Contexts

Gilbert, Farhoud

Principal Topic

Women are commonly underrepresented in traditional forms of financing (Brush et al., 2018; Greenberg & Mollick, 2015; Saluja, 2024), requiring many women entrepreneurs to consider alternative ways to launch or grow new businesses (Mollick, 2013). For aspiring women social entrepreneurs, crowdfunding – the process of collecting small amounts from the "crowd" –gives access to unrestricted capital that frees recipients to pursue their core business mission, while also legitimizing the concept before the public. In fact, some argue that crowdfunding has significant "potential to empower women entrepreneurs from diverse backgrounds" (Saluja, 2024, pg. 501). Recent research shows that crowdfunding success factors vary for women (Shneor and Vik, 2020), and across social and economic environments (Serwaah, 2022). This intersection of gender and social/economic environments has received recent attention (Gorbatai & Nelson, 2015; Seigner et al., 2022) and warrants special consideration in research that attempts to understand gender differences in crowdfunding.

With unrestricted capital, entrepreneurs in theory gain legitimacy and autonomy in the marketplace which should enhance a venture's ability to compete. As such, crowdfunding outcomes should improve social and financial performance of those that receive it. However, the crowdfunding literature has limited empirical examinations on how fundraising achievement affects firm performance. Consequently, we not only know little about whether crowdfunding outcomes benefit venture performance, but also whether it benefits women differently than men. We are also unable to assess whether women or men from different social or economic backgrounds are affected differently. This paper examines differences in the performance of crowdfunded social ventures to determine how crowdfunding affects the social and financial performance of firms that are led by women and men from various countries.

Methodology

Leveraging a surveyed sample of 133 social ventures - initially identified from a group of 1004 social ventures from seven social impact crowdfunding platforms - we ran maximum likelihood structural equation modeling with a multigroup analysis method (Byrne, 2004) to analyze potential differences in crowdfunding and performance outcomes. African women entrepreneurs (n = 38) tied for largest single regional–gender group in the dataset. These social entrepreneurs are active in Education, Cultural/Entertainment, Environment, and Development sectors. Their activities are predominantly nonprofit social ventures. In fact, across all sectors, 26 of their campaigns are nonprofit and 12 are for-profit social ventures. Nonprofit operations outweigh profit initiatives in Education (12 vs. 2) and Development (4 vs. 1).

Compared with non-African women (n = 31), African women are more active in nonprofit campaigns overall, while non-African women participate more evenly across nonprofit and profit, especially in Environment and Health. Relative to African men (n = 38), African women show stronger representation in Education and Development, whereas African men are more prominent in Cultural/Entertainment, Education, and Environment but remain largely nonprofit as well. In contrast, non-African men (n = 26) exhibit a more diversified nonprofit –profit balance and are more involved in profit-driven activities in sectors such as Health and Cultural/Entertainment.

The most common sources of finance for African women entrepreneurs are friends or neighbors (n = 12), followed by online crowdfunding (n = 9), family members (n = 6), and government programs or grants (n = 6), with only minimal use of own personal funds (n = 4) or selling products/services (n = 1). With respect to crowdfunding outcomes in our sample, African women entrepreneurs reached 95% of their funding goals, similar to African men at 93%. These levels appear admirable until one considers they are far below non-African women who achieved 153% of their crowdfunding goals, and non-African men who achieved 106%.

Results & Implications

We find that crowdfunding outcome is positive and significantly related to legitimacy only for men (β = 0.305, $p = < 0.001$), and negative and significantly related to autonomy for men as well (β = -0.376, p = 0.017). The estimates are significantly different than those for women. Thus, crowdfunding outcomes provide more legitimacy to men than to women. But contrary to expectations, higher crowdfunding outcomes led to less autonomy for the men in this sample, perhaps suggesting those men leveraged their crowdfunding outcomes to pursue other sources of funding that restricted their autonomy.

Across entrepreneur groups (African women, African men, Non-African women, and Non-African men), crowdfunding outcome influenced legitimacy for African men and both autonomy (negatively) and legitimacy of Non-African men. Crowdfunding outcome was not related to legitimacy or autonomy for African or non-African women. These results were also significant across groups. However, we found that autonomy independently has a negative influence on non-African women ventures' financial performance, a finding which might suggest that non-African women's tendency to be autonomous limits their ability to achieve financial objectives. However, legitimacy independently and positively influenced their social performance, suggesting it empowers non-African women to achieve social goals. The only supported relationship for African female entrepreneurs was legitimacy and financial performance, suggesting that African women with legitimacy achieve higher financial performance than other groups.

Several theories have confirmed gender and crowdfunding disparities (Saluja, 2024), yet few studies have explored how these disparate outcomes then impact women-led social venture performance. This study addresses this gap and shows that crowdfunding outcomes do not uniformly improve women-led social venture performance, for either social or financial performance. Moreover, we find these differences to be especially pronounced when nationality is taken into consideration. Thus, our results empirically confirm intersectionality of the relationship between gender, nationality, crowdfunding outcomes and social venture performance.

Entrepreneurial Equity Aspirations: An Outgrowth of Equity Ethics in Women STEM Entrepreneurs

McGee, Bui, Engelman

Principal Topic

Black and other underrepresented racially minoritized (URM) students, particularly women, remain significantly underrepresented in STEM entrepreneurship despite strong interest. This study introduces and validates the concept of Entrepreneurial Equity Aspiration, an outgrowth of Equity Ethics theory, which reflects URM students' specific motivation to use STEM entrepreneurship as a vehicle to advance racial and social justice. Using national survey data from 367 URM STEM undergraduates, we examined how this aspiration relates to entrepreneurial experience and intent. Exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses confirmed the scale's validity as a measure of justice-oriented motivation toward STEM venturing. Mediation analysis showed that entrepreneurial equity aspiration plays a meaningful role in linking experience to intent. These findings reveal that equity-driven motivations, shaped by systemic inequities and a commitment to community impact, are a potent force shaping how URM students, especially women, approach entrepreneurship. The results point to the need for education and training programs that actively nurture these aspirations by connecting STEM, justice, and community-engaged entrepreneurship.

Women, particularly Black and other racially minoritized (i.e., Latinx, Indigenous) individuals, are driving social entrepreneurial activity globally, often motivated by a desire to "make a difference" and address community challenges (Elam et al., 2024; Hechavarria et al., 2017). However, within U.S. STEM fields, these groups remain severely underrepresented as entrepreneurs (Fry et al., 2021; National Science Board, 2024). Although Black women represent one of the fastest-growing entrepreneurial segments (Monroe-White & McGee, 2024), structural barriers—including limited access to capital, exclusion from networks, and racialized perceptions of competence—restrict full participation (McCluney et al., 2018).

While traditional entrepreneurship literature emphasizes profit-seeking, a growing body of work aligns with social entrepreneurship scholarship, indicating that URM entrepreneurs are frequently motivated by community needs and racial justice (Bates, 2011; Rosca, Agarwal & Brem, 2020). This aligns with what researchers theorize as Equity Ethics as fundamental principles guiding behavior and action thriving toward justice, especially racial justice, and rectifying racial inequities through the employment of one's STEM abilities (McGee & Bentley, 2017; McGee et al., 2025). Building directly from this foundation, we conceptualize Entrepreneurial Equity Aspiration as a specific, future-oriented drive to apply STEM skills and entrepreneurship explicitly as tools for social change and collective emancipation.

This study examines how Entrepreneurial Equity Aspiration, as an outgrowth of Equity Ethics, functions as a key motivational force in the entrepreneurial development of URM STEM students, with particular relevance for understanding women's pathways into social venturing. Using national survey data from 367 URM STEM undergraduates, this study aims to: a) validate a new scale measuring Entrepreneurial Equity Aspiration, designed to assess the strength of justice-oriented motivations toward STEM entrepreneurship, and b) examine how this aspiration mediates the relationship between entrepreneurial experience and entrepreneurial intent. The study is guided by three questions:

What is the underlying factor structure of the Entrepreneurial Equity Aspiration scale among racially minoritized STEM undergraduates?

To what extent does entrepreneurial experience predict students' entrepreneurial intent?

Does Entrepreneurial Equity Aspiration mediate the relationship between entrepreneurial experience and entrepreneurial intent?

Entrepreneurial Equity Aspiration is defined as a future-oriented drive among racially minoritized STEM students to harness entrepreneurship as a deliberate tool for social change, rooted in an Equity Ethic. It integrates two components: equity, which involves transforming systems for fair access and just outcomes (Bui, 2020; Folayan et al., 2022), and aspiration, which entails imagining and striving for unrealized futures (Gale, 2014). This construct captures the translation of a broader Equity Ethic into a specific motivational force directed at entrepreneurial action.

For URM STEM students, particularly women, entrepreneurship becomes a form of resistance and a pathway to empowerment, allowing them to apply technical skills to real-world problems affecting their communities (Deveci & Seikkula-Leino, 2023; Sanchez-Limon et al., 2025). This aspiration reflects an emancipatory intent (Alvesson & Willmott, 1992), where venturing is pursued not solely for economic mobility but as a means to confront structural barriers and promote collective well-being. In the context of a digital age, such aspirations may increasingly involve leveraging technology and innovation to scale social impact.

This study is grounded in the theory of Equity Ethics (McGee & Bentley, 2017; McGee et al., 2023, 2025). Equity Ethics describes a concern for racial justice and a commitment to disrupting inequity, born from lived experiences with discrimination and marginalization in STEM. It involves social empathy, interpreting social suffering, and a commitment to action.

We posit Entrepreneurial Equity Aspiration as a core, actionable expression of Equity Ethics within the entrepreneurial domain. It is the channel through which equity concerns are translated into a motivation to create ventures, products, or services aimed at improving outcomes for marginalized communities. This study's scale is specifically designed to assess the intensity of this motivation toward STEM entrepreneurship, making the latent force of an Equity Ethic measurable in the context of venture creation.

Methodology

Participants: The final analytic sample consisted of 367 URM undergraduate STEM students, recruited via a national strategy. The sample was predominantly Black (90%), majority female (63%), and 51% were enrolled at HBCUs (Table 1).

Variables and Measurements (Table 2):

Outcome: ENT intent (continuous, Likert-scale mean).

Predictor: ENT experience (categorical: no experience/no intent; no experience/intent to learn; has experience).

Mediator: Entrepreneurial Equity Aspiration (continuous, 5-item Likert scale, e.g., “I am motivated to use entrepreneurship to actively promote racial and social justice.”).

Controls: Race, gender, HBCU attendance, patent interest, minority status stress.

Statistical Analyses: We performed an EFA and CFA to validate the new scale (RQ1). For RQs 2 & 3, we conducted a regression-based mediation analysis using bootstrapping.

Results & Implications

RQ1: Both EFA and CFA confirmed a robust single-factor structure for the Entrepreneurial Equity Aspiration scale. The scale demonstrated excellent internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.93$), strong factor loadings (≥ 0.857), and met all thresholds for convergent and discriminant validity (Tables 3-6).

RQ2: Entrepreneurial experience significantly predicted entrepreneurial intent. Compared to those with no experience/intent, students who intended to learn ($\beta = 0.8422$, $p < .001$) and those with experience ($\beta = 0.3403$, $p < .001$) reported higher intent. Gender negatively related to intent ($\beta = -0.1569$, $p < .001$), highlighting a persistent gap. Critically, Entrepreneurial Equity Aspiration was a strong, positive predictor of intent ($\beta = 0.4472$, $p < .001$) (Table 7).

RQ3: Entrepreneurial Equity Aspiration significantly mediated the relationship between experience and intent. For students intending to learn, the indirect effect was $\beta = 0.1616$ (CI: 0.0493–0.2430). For students with experience, the indirect effect was stronger at $\beta = 0.2221$ (CI: 0.0730–0.3307) (Figure 2).

This study validates Entrepreneurial Equity Aspiration as a distinct and powerful construct that explains why many racially minoritized STEM students, especially women, are drawn to entrepreneurship. Our findings show that a significant portion of the link between gaining entrepreneurial exposure and forming entrepreneurial intent is explained by the strengthening of justice-oriented aspirations.

Gendered Barriers to Credit Access: A Descriptive Analysis of Institutional Barriers and Loan Denials to Capital Financing for Women-Owned Businesses in Massachusetts

Silva, Aldaz

Principal Topic

The persistent disparity in capital access for women-owned businesses (WOBs) remains a central inquiry in the field of entrepreneurial finance. This descriptive study investigates the principal question: Why are female small business owners less likely to apply for (and obtain) debt capital than their male counterparts?

This inquiry holds critical significance within gender and entrepreneurship scholarship, as persistent disparities in credit access perpetuate the underperformance and smaller scale of female-owned firms, limiting their contributions to economic growth (Mijid, 2015). Female-owned businesses, despite comprising a growing share of the U.S. entrepreneurial landscape, remain underrepresented, smaller in assets, sales, and employment, and concentrated in less profitable service and retail sectors, often underperforming relative to male-owned counterparts (de Bruin & Swail 2024). Drawing on institutional theory (Ahl & Nelson 2015), (Ilie & et al 2021), the study conceptualizes discouragement—defined as non-application due to anticipated rejection—as a feedback mechanism rooted in normative (gender stereotypes), cognitive (self-perceptions of creditworthiness), and regulative (lending practices) logics that constrain female entrepreneurs' agency.

We build upon Mijid's (2015) analysis of discrimination in U.S. small business lending and Kivalya and Caballero-Montes' (2023) multidimensional framework of women entrepreneurs' empowerment, which emphasizes economic, bargaining, sociocultural, financial, human capital, personal, and political-legal dimensions inhibited by credit barriers. Feminist institutional theory suggests that gender-neutral mechanisms often produce gender-biased outcomes because women entrepreneurs are statistically more likely to operate in service sectors with fewer tangible assets (Ahl & Nelson 2015) and may possess fragmented credit histories due to the "dual burden" of caregiving and enterprise management (Global Entrepreneurship Monitor, 2025). By interrogating these dynamics, this study challenges the "deficit model" of female entrepreneurship, which attributes funding gaps to a lack of financial literacy, and instead provides empirical support for a "structural barrier model."

Methodology

This study employs a descriptive mixed-methods research design utilizing primary data from the 2025 Survey on Financial Funding Challenges and Opportunities, and focus groups. The dataset captures a cross-sectional snapshot of women business owners across Massachusetts (n=73). To ensure internal validity regarding credit market friction, the analysis isolates the sub-sample of respondents who actively sought external debt financing (commercial loans or lines of credit) within the preceding 12 months (n=24). This methodological filtration distinguishes "strict denial" outcomes from "discouraged borrower" phenomena, allowing for a precise calculation of denial rates.

Data analysis proceeded in three phases. First, cleaning of data, then denial rates were calculated and disaggregated across key independent variables: annual revenue, number of employees, business age, and frequency of financial record reconciliation. Third, a correlation analysis was conducted to measure the strength of association between specific institutional barriers reported by applicants (e.g., "Limited Business History," "Incomplete Application") and the dependent variable of loan denial. This layered approach enables the study to map the specific contours of financial exclusion.

Results & Implications

The findings provide robust empirical validation of the "Missing Middle" phenomenon within the Massachusetts market. The analysis reveals a non-linear, "barbell" distribution of capital access. Micro-enterprises and mature firms experienced a 0% denial rate in this sample, suggesting effective liquidity mechanisms for very small (via personal credit/micro-finance) and very large (via financial institutions) actors. However, businesses in the $100,000 – $499,999 revenue band faced a critical discontinuity, with a 33.3% denial rate. This identifies a "Valley of Death" for growth-stage firms that have outgrown micro-finance products but lack the collateral density required for prime commercial underwriting.

Three paradoxes emerged from the data that contribute significantly to the literature:

The Paradox of Diligence: Contrary to the hypothesis that poor financial literacy drives rejection, businesses that reconciled financial records most frequently faced the highest denial rates (23.1%). This suggests that "financial hygiene" is insufficient to overcome structural underwriting mismatches for growth-stage firms.

The Operational Scale Threshold: Solopreneurs faced a 25% denial rate, which dropped to 0% once firms surpassed five employees, indicating that lenders use human capital scale as a proxy for organizational stability.

The "History" Trap: The strongest statistical correlate for denial was "Limited Business History" (r=+0.45). Crucially, this barrier was cited by firms in the 3-5 year "growth stage," not just startups. This implies that standard banking definitions of "history" (often requiring 3+ years of sustained profitability) penalize high-growth WOBs that reinvest revenue into expansion, thereby suppressing net income.

These findings contribute to the literature by extending Mijid's (2015) discrimination model with Kivalya and Caballero-Montes' (2023) institutional logics, demonstrating how credit discouragement multidimensionality hampers normative (e.g., business development) and cognitive (e.g., self-efficacy) empowerment, beyond mere access.

This study also contributes to entrepreneurial practice by delineating the specific revenue bands where market failure occurs for WOBs, moving the conversation beyond aggregate denial rates. It challenges the efficacy of generic "financial literacy" interventions, demonstrating that growth-stage women entrepreneurs are operationally competent but institutionally mismatched.

For policy, the identification of specific gap necessitates targeted intervention. The study recommends the establishment of a state-level Growth-Stage Guarantee Fund specifically calibrated for loan amounts between $50,000 and $250,000, de-risking this segment for commercial lenders. Furthermore, the strong correlation of "Low Credit Score" (r=+0.38) as a barrier underscores the need for underwriting innovation, specifically the adoption of cash-flow-based models that leverage banking data.

Addressing these structural friction points, the financial ecosystem can better serve the "Missing Middle," unlocking significant economic potential.

Women Angel Investors: Digitalization and Social Embeddedness

Swartz, Li, Son

Principal Topic

Angel investing plays a critical role in shaping entrepreneurial growth and innovation across global ecosystems, providing significant early-stage financing, expertise, and network access for startups (Bonini et al., 2018; Shane, 2012; Guenther et al., 2022). In emerging markets, where formal financing structures remain uneven and underdeveloped, angel investors fill critical gaps in entrepreneurial support, contributing knowledge-intensive resources such as market entry guidance, decision-making support, and network mobilization (Daou et al., 2022; Lingelbach, 2012). The decision to invest, in line with economic behavior generally, is constrained by social relations (Granovetter, 1985) which are shaped by institutions and path dependencies. Embeddedness theory (Granovetter, 1985; Qin et al., 2022; Jack & Anderson, 2002) provides an analytical lens for understanding how angel investing is structured through relational, institutional, and geographic ties. Investor embeddedness shapes deal flow access, information exchange, and investment decisions (Granovetter, 1985). Prior research on informal and angel investment shows that such investment decisions are predicated on social trust (Urban & Moreno, 2022; Ding et al., 2015) and Qin et al., (2022) demonstrate that individuals are more likely to become early-stage informal investors when they possess prior entrepreneurial experience and are embedded in peer groups rich in entrepreneurial activity. Peer-group effects (social homophily, role modelling, and knowledge spillovers) therefore significantly influence who chooses to invest.

This embeddedness perspective is salient for understanding women angel investors, whose investment pathways may depend not only on prior experience but on access to weak ties (Granovetter, 1973) - entrepreneurship-dense, supportive peer networks in mainstream investment ecosystems. For women angel investors, weak ties formed online help circumvent the historical reliance on strong ties rooted in elite, male networks. Digital platforms and other AI-enabled tools now mediate the discovery, verification, and public visibility of both investors and entrepreneurial ventures. These platforms influence who is recognized within the ecosystem, how investment opportunities circulate, and what kinds of investors gain legitimacy, thereby adding a technological layer to embedded social and institutional dynamics that shape angel investing.

Further complexity arises out of South Africa’s networks being characterized by racialized histories and identities, economic inequality, and geographic clustering. The concentration of investors in hubs such as Cape Town and Johannesburg reflects the spatial embeddedness of risk capital more generally (Avdeitchikova, 2012) and highlights structural barriers that limit participation by underrepresented groups, including women (Meyer et al., 2024; Briter Bridges, 2024; Briter Bridges, 2023; Luiz & Charalambous, 2009). In emerging markets, angel investing communities are small and develop through informal or semi-formal networks embedded within broader institutional and socio-economic structures (Lingelbach et al., 2009; Avdeitchikova, 2012). These contexts create unique ecosystem configurations that diverge from global North assumptions about risk capital development, requiring scholars to adopt contextualist perspectives (Lingelbach et al., 2016; Hamman et al., 2021). For instance, Samsani et al., (2023) show an emergent informal investor cohort in South Africa (1.6% of their sample being adult women) who invested mainly in opportunities brought to them by close ties.

Despite the growing research on gender in entrepreneurial finance, significant gaps remain in understanding how women angels participate in emerging ecosystems, how digital platforms shape the relational and geographic embeddedness that influence investment behavior, and how digitalization impacts these processes. This study addresses these gaps by analyzing the intersection of gender, digital mediation, and network dynamics within South Africa’s angel investor ecosystem, leading to the following research questions: How do technological platforms and social network embeddedness shape the visibility, participation, and investment behavior of women angel investors in South Africa’s entrepreneurial ecosystem? Additionally, how does geographic and relational embeddedness of women angels influence their investment choices and deal flow patterns?

Methodology

This study employs a multi-stage, mixed-methods research design that integrates digital data collection, triangulated verification, and geospatial and relational analysis. The author(s) conducted digital platform analyses, including investor profiles, platform-mediated deal sourcing and analysis of patterns during fall 2024. In fall 2025 a final data set of 22 women angel investors was identified across different investment channels. This purposive sample comprises the data set for the final part of data collection in the form of semi-structured interviews to be conducted in spring 2026.

The first phase of this research (fall 2024) confirmed the gendered nature of South Africa's angel investor community enabling us to identify a fall 2025 dataset of 22 women angels. This data was cleaned and verified, and location fields and affiliations were standardized. We constructed a two-mode (bipartite) network linking individual angel investors to their affiliated groups or syndicates. Using NetworkX, we computed degree centrality (number of direct connections) and betweenness centrality (extent to which a node lies on shortest paths between others). These measures identify highly connected hubs and potential brokers within the South African women angel investment ecosystem, which will be used to inform our qualitative sampling strategy.

Results & Implications

Our analysis shows geographic concentration of women angels in Gauteng (12), followed by the Western Cape (7), with a further three individuals showing a primary location as unknown. Investments made by the individuals were even more Gauteng-centered (14), followed by the Western Cape (4), and a further 4 as "unknown". The network has a dominant hub that concentrates the majority of investors in the data set, visible in both degree (number of linked investors) and betweenness (position on shortest paths, i.e., brokerage potential). A second tier comprises two smaller groups, with a further bucket of "unaffiliated" investors who might be independent angels or for whom we may lack complete affiliation data. Some single-link groups appear on the periphery of the network and could connect to distinct sub-ecosystems.

Digitalization

Women Social Entrepreneurs: Leveraging Digital Technologies to Create Value

Villasana, Salazar

Principal Topic

Social entrepreneurs (SE) face a unique challenge: they must create and sustain social value, a task made more difficult by the informality and unpredictability that often characterize the social sector (Dees, 2001; Müller, 2012). To address this complexity, they are required to design financially viable and innovative business models capable of delivering meaningful social outcomes (Gregori & Holzmann, 2020). Digital technologies have become central to this effort, enabling innovation and facilitating new business model configurations in pursuit of their mission (Prodanov, 2018). These technologies may include business analytics, social media technology, mobile applications and development, cloud computing, the internet of things, machine learning, blockchain, and artificial intelligence with more novel technologies and applications being introduced in all industries (Nambisan et al. 2017).

However, digitalization has also deepened the global gender gap, limiting women's ability to advance their social missions. Approximately 50% of women report becoming entrepreneurs to make a positive difference, and in most regions, they contribute to more than two-fifths of innovation (Samsami et al., 2025). Yet women still face lower access to Internet connectivity and digital devices, constraining their adoption of digital tools such as social media and e-commerce (Khoo et al., 2024; Samsami et al., 2025). Nevertheless, there are opportunities for SEs in the use of artificial intelligence (AI) and other digital technologies. For example, research shows that generative AI boosts innovation and flexibility by automating content creation, engaging customers, and enabling data-driven decisions (Bran et al., 2025).

Given these dynamics, examining women social entrepreneurs (WSE) within the digital revolution is particularly relevant in Latin America, where intentions to adopt digital tools are comparatively higher to other world regions (Samsami et al., 2025). This study therefore investigates how digital technologies (AI, e-commerce and social media) shape business model value in Mexican women-led social SMEs, a growing domain within social enterprise research (Dees & Anderson, 2003; Lumpkin et al., 2013). We conceptualize these social SMEs as hybrid organizations, which draw on two different sectoral paradigms: logics and value systems (Doherty et al., 2014).

Methodology

A qualitative research design was employed to examine the relationships among social SMEs, digitalization, and the value created within their business models. Semi-structured interviews were conducted over a three-month period, using judgmental sampling, defined as the selection of participants based on the researchers' expertise and informed judgment (Ponemon & Wendell, 1995). Participants were drawn from a two-month social entrepreneurship program offered by a university in Mexico. The selection criteria required: a) evidence of digital activity for business purposes (e.g., AI, digital marketing, e-commerce); b) formal recognition as a Social SME with at least two years of experience in its social sector; and c) active regional and/or national operations within Mexico.

At the beginning of each interview, participants completed a profile survey to confirm eligibility and document the characteristics of their organizations, including years in operation, number of collaborators, beneficiaries, and income prior to digitalization.

We follow Gregory & Holzmann´s (2020) logic on the impact of the embeddedness of digital technologies into the business model value capture of sustainable entrepreneurship. The semi-structured interview consisted of fourteen open-ended questions asked in the same sequence via Zoom, divided into the following domains:

Social and digital experience of the interviewee

Blended value proposition effects on the business model

Integrative value creation effects on the business model

Multidimensional value capture effects on the business model

Other value effects on the business model

The aim was to understand the different and novel configurations from the business model value components such as value capture, value creation and value proposition derived from the embeddedness of digital technologies.

Results & Implications

Among the preliminary findings of this study, digital technologies allowed for a “blended value proposition”. Commercial and social value propositions are merged into transformed digital offerings for clients, beneficiaries, and stakeholders. In addition, digital platforms and e-commerce make products, content, and services more accessible, affordable, convenient, and efficient, enabling organizations to increase revenue while giving stakeholders a deeper understanding of their social value, achievements, and needs. However, the absence of human contact in communicating the social and emotional elements of the value proposition poses a significant challenge. Nevertheless, the collaborative interactions and contributions is perceived as compensating for the limitations imposed by reduced physical contact.

In terms of value creation, two main practices were identified: community building and broader stakeholder integration. Embedding digital technologies enabled interaction not only between the organization and its stakeholders, but also among stakeholders themselves, thereby expanding the scope of value creation. The use of e-commerce platforms, payment methods, and digital delivery solutions reinforced the value generation in the business process.

Findings also provide insight into the Mexican social SME’s context. Adopting and integrating digital technologies into their core business operations, for example, increased the distribution channels in the outbound logistics activities of the value chain. The use of e-commerce platforms, payment methods, and digital delivery solutions reinforced the value generation in the business process. Also, WSEs reported that digitalization generated substantial time and cost savings across their business operations. Enhanced client engagement through digital communication minimized transportation needs and reduced overall operational expenditure. Moreover, this shift in managerial approach led to modifications in internal policies, particularly those related to sales procedures.

Baking for Success: Bricolage, Digital Platforms and Innovation Amongst Kenya's Home Baking Micro-Entrepreneurs

Holt, Agbleze, Khayesi, Mitiek

Principal Topic

This paper examines the lived experiences of women operating home-based micro-baking enterprises, many of which began informally in domestic kitchens and in some instances expanded into small shops. While some participants received training led by social entrepreneurs and community organisations, some of the most successful are acting much like hybrid social enterprises (after Holt & Littlewood, 2015), offering advice, training and networks to fellow bakers.

We investigate how women entrepreneurs in subsistence and necessity-driven contexts leverage digital platforms, technology and peer networks to generate income, pursue personal fulfilment, and navigate poverty-related constraints. Much of the existing work on enterprise development in the Global South, emphasises the transfer of "inputs" such as cash, capital, microfinance and skills (Blattman et al., 2013). In addition to generic business skills (Kibir et al., 2025) and new startups incubators (Fox et al., 2025), programmes led by social enterprises (and others) may focus on teaching a specific 'business in box' models such as solar light sales/rental, or running chicken businesses (Steinfield & Holt, 2019). Other programmes teach specific skills such as basket making or sewing (Strydom & Kempen, 2021) often as part of collective groups (Jones et al., 2012), making jewellery (Singh, 2017), embroidery/beading (Atieno, 2020), or to bake (Khairatun, 2024) and run bakeries (Haque & Quader, 2014). Many of these activities are based in the informal economy (after Webb et al., 2009) where individuals operate untaxed, unregistered but legitimate (as opposed to criminal) enterprise activities either hybrid alongside employment or as self-employed entrepreneur.

Our study adds to this literature by examining how digital tools intersect with informal, passion-driven ventures, particularly in a domain (baking) often overlooked compared to handicrafts, agriculture, or tailoring and in mainstream entrepreneurship research.

Methodology

We conducted 56 semi-structured interviews (in English and Kiswahili) and field observations in both rural and urban areas across Kenya. Participants were identified through a mixture of local networks and snowballing sampling. We collected over 70 hours of recorded interviews, along with observational data from visits to their kitchens and in some instances their shops. An interview guide was used, with thematic prompts to allow for probing for deeper context (Stirzaker et al., 2022). Interviews were recorded (with participant permission and informed consent), uploaded to a transcription programme and then manually checked, along with translations of any Kiswahili terms. Interviews ranged in length from 35-109 minutes. Transcripts were anonymised and given a unique ID and then uploaded into NVivo. Template analysis was adopted (after King et al., 2017) allowing for the flexible use of using a priori codes derived from the literature as well as new emerging codes.

Results & Implications

Our findings show that women micro-entrepreneurs in the informal economy, engage in adaptive bricolage, creatively use a range of digital platforms to overcome financial constraints, , limited formal training, and institutional voids. These platforms that include WhatsApp, Facebook, YouTube, M-Pesa, Instagram, and Pinterest form a patchwork entrepreneurial ecosystem enabling inspiration on product design and innovation, connecting with existing and potential customers, informal peer learning and skill upgrading, low-cost financial transactions and risk reduction, and then also the practical logistics of running their business and their supply chains.

We find that, similar to Si et al (2021) these digital technologies facilitate engagement by marginalized entrepreneurs who may be cut off from local entrepreneurial ecosystems. This may have emancipatory benefits allowing women to run informal home-based businesses, especially when operating outside the home has cultural (after McAdam et al., 2019) or logistical challenges (Webb et al., 2013). Our findings resonate with Kimuli et al. (2021) and Fauzi & Sheng (2021) who identified that the spread of social media has improved the performance of micro-entrepreneurs, though they also noted more digital literacy and training was needed, also noted in our data.

For the entrepreneurs, these platforms offer business opportunities that widen their reach, reduce costs and information asymmetry (Nguyen et al. 2024). They reduce risks that street-based informal economy businesses face and promote flexibility that fits the context they experience. However, they are not platform-dependent entrepreneurs (after Cutolo & Kenney, 2021) and do not use platforms such as Amazon, Etsy or eBay. Instead, we see a bricolage effect of a patchwork of digital platforms used to learn, share and communicate.

We also identify entrepreneurial passion as a central motivational driver, consistent with Cardon et al. (2017), yet still under-examined within subsistence contexts. The women in our study demonstrate significant gendered resilience, with many, often single mothers or those facing economic displacement, overcoming sociocultural barriers to build legitimacy and financial independence (McAdam et al., 2019). Their experiences reveal unique cooperative–competitive dynamics, where entrepreneurs share knowledge and support one another while simultaneously competing for clients, producing a hybrid environment of mutual assistance and market rivalry. We further observe extensive resource bricolage, reflected in creative approaches to raising capital, adapting domestic spaces for business use, and innovating around procurement. Finally, the bakers engage in informal innovation, developing new flavours, designs, business models, and even social-enterprise-like mentoring behaviours.

We argue engaging in this distinctive form of innovation rooted in bricolage, peer learning, and digital improvisation within what is often dismissed as low-tech or mimetic entrepreneurship enables bakers to operate and pursue their passion while navigate resource constraints within informal setups. A key component is the digital platforms they utilise. The study offers practical insights for social enterprises and development organisations designing livelihood and training programmes for women in the informal economy.

What Drives South African Women Entrepreneurs' Use of AI? Interactions of Self-Efficacy and Moral Self

Ng, Scheepers, Sia

Principal Topic

Aligned with the Diana Conference theme of transforming futures in a digital age, this study examines how self-efficacy and ethics in Artificial Intelligence (AI)influence the behavioural intentions of women entrepreneurs in using AI. The research is situated within a resource-constrained environment, i.e. South Africa, where women entrepreneurs, and Black women entrepreneurs in particular, play a crucial role as social agents (Dacin et al., 2010; Dees, 2001), and where we argue that these entrepreneurs contribute to social upliftment. While women entrepreneurs' social mission, that is, emphasising social value goals over economic value goals, is widely accepted (Elam et al., 2024; Hechavarria et al., 2017), women's concern for ethical principles in the use of digital tools has received less attention.

The study draws on Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1977), which emphasises the dynamic interaction among personal, behavioural, and environmental factors. Current literature on self-efficacy emphasises the importance of dependable experiential learning sources. Nevertheless, the perception of whether someone will be able to use the learning ethically is underrepresented. This relates to Bandura's (2002) construct of a moral self and the self-regulatory mechanism where individuals refrain from engaging in ways that violate their moral standards. Aristotle's (1999) virtue ethics theory addresses ethical judgment. It emphasises character-infused decision-making as something that the moral agent can develop and strengthen through virtuous experience, even in contexts that constrain moral agency (Nguyen & Crossan, 2022). Hence, we argue that a sense of moral self-efficacy is required, namely a person's self-belief that they can assess whether a tool is being used ethically or not. Once the person establishes that the use of tools aligns with their moral standards, they will be more likely to use these tools. We, therefore, hypothesised that the ethical standard a person holds can affect the impact of their confidence on their behavioural intention to use AI.

Methodology

The research team organised a capacity-building project funded by XX1 in early 2025. This project involved a one-day workshop (concept of AI, its usage, the ethical considerations and various AI tools) for women in South Africa. A total of 265 women attended the training and were requested to complete a post-training online survey at the end of the workshop. From the 212 responses received, eight were incomplete, and 53 were completed by women in employment. Hence, the total sample for analysis is 151 women entrepreneurs in this study. Their age ranges from 19 to 58 years old, with approximately 50% being below the age of 30. More than 90% of the women are from the black community, and 78% are single. Five constructs, each with corresponding items, were adapted from prior studies. AI Awareness (3) adapted from Wang et al. (2023), AI knowledge (4) from Ng et al. (2022), self-efficacy (3) and behaviour intention in using AI (3) from Ng et al. (2023), and ethics in AI (3) from Ng et al. (2022). We analysed our research model using the Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) technique and SmartPLS v.4.0 software. It is a widely used technique in academic research on behavioural intention (Abreh et al., 2025; Jumani & Sukhabot, 2022) and is considered suitable for the early stages of theory development, emphasising testing various and complex relations among latent variables simultaneously using a small sample size (Reinartz, Haenlein, & Henseler, 2009).

Results & Implications

We first examined the measurement model and assessed its reliability, as well as its convergent and discriminant validity. All five constructs achieved the recommended composite reliability of more than 0.80 (from 0.86 to 0.95), and more than 0.7 on Cronbach's alpha (0.75 to 0.92). Therefore, all constructs exhibited satisfactory internal consistency. Convergent validity is also achieved where average variance extracted (AVE) values for every construct were above the recommended 0.50 (range 0.67 to 0.81). All the outer loadings varied from 0.79 to 0.93, corresponding to the respective constructs.

To test the research model, we used the bootstrapping procedure with a resampling rate of 5000 to generate the standardised beta and p-value. The results are presented in Figure 1. The research model had an explanatory power of nearly 65% on the intention to use AI. The results show that AI awareness and knowledge have a positive influence on women entrepreneurs' self-efficacy in AI, which in turn affects their intention to use AI. Self-efficacy was a partial mediator as we found significant positive relationships between awareness ($\beta = 0.150$, $p < 0.05$) and knowledge ($\beta = 0.228$, $p < 0.05$) on intention to use AI. Furthermore, we found that AI ethics generated an inhibiting effect on the direct relationship between self-efficacy and intention to use AI. This result suggests that when women entrepreneurs have strong AI ethics, their decisions to use AI in business are guided more by moral principles than by confidence in their ability (self-efficacy). So, even if they can use AI (high self-efficacy), they may choose not to use it if it conflicts with their moral values.

While existing studies emphasise women entrepreneurs' social mission goals, the current study showed that adhering to ethical principles is also an important driver for women entrepreneurs to pursue AI tools. Hence, the study advocates that AI training programmes must include the ethical use of AI tools and assist entrepreneurs in deciphering the black box of the AI decision-making processes.

Digital Gap or Digital Bridge? The New Wave of Digitalization and the Internationalization of Women-Led SMEs

Manolova, Yordanova, Pergelova

Principal Topic

The new wave of digitalization, including big data analytics, artificial intelligence (AI), or robotization, marks a shift from connectivity and information flow to digital agents' autonomy, intelligence, and physical action. While advanced digital technologies hold the promise of creating a "digital bridge" linking SMEs to international markets in innovative and cost-efficient ways, they can also deepen the "digital gaps" between large and small players as their adoption requires significant upfront financial outlays, technology skills, and organizational culture open to digitalization. These challenges may be exacerbated for women-led SMEs, because of unequal access to finance, a digital skills gap, as well as a "technology trust" gap (Deloitte, 2024). Hence, our study addresses two research questions, a) What is the impact of the adoption of advanced digital technologies (big data, AI, robotics) on SME internationalization; and b) What is the influence of gender on the relationship between advanced digital technologies adoption and SME internationalization?

We ground our exploration in the dynamic capabilities perspective, coupled with a gendered technology adoption lens. Dynamic capabilities refer to the ability of the organization to integrate, build, and reconfigure internal and external competencies to address a changing business environment (Teece et al., 1997). The incorporation of advanced digital tools, such as big data analytics and AI, allows SMEs to analyze massive, complex datasets to derive insights, predict trends, and thus "sense" opportunities in existing and new markets and identify internationalization gaps in their portfolio (Bertello et al., 2025; Fredrich et al., 2022; Sohrabpour et al., 2021). The autonomous improvement over time, in turn, facilitates the development of highly personalized offerings at scale, thus enabling SMEs to also "seize" the international market opportunities created by the advanced digital affordances (Gnizy, 2019; Liu et al., 2024; Zhang & Deng, 2023). Finally, predictive analytics coupled with automation of complex tasks enables the nimble reconfiguration of product/market offerings and optimization of supply chains, thus allowing a "constant renewal" of SMEs' international strategy (Kumar et al., 2025; Mallela et al., 2024; Zong et al., 2025). Formally, H1: Higher usage of advanced digital tools is positively associated with SME internationalization.

A growing body of research has theorized and empirically documented that the adoption of digital technologies is not gender neutral (Gaweł & Mińska-Struzik, 2023; Orser & Riding, 2018; Roopaei et al., 2021; Samuel & Samuel, 2018). The gendered effects on technology adoption and deployment are further compounded by the complex nature of advanced digital tools (Vanneste & Puranam, 2024).

Previous research has highlighted the financial constraints to the technological advancement of women led new and small firms (Guzman & Kacperczyk, 2019), as well the digital skills gap (Gawel, 2025; Orser & Riding, 2018; Samuel & Samuel, 2020). Women are also less likely to trust AI-assisted predictions (Deloitte, 2024), one reason being perhaps the higher "betrayal aversion" to AI violating trust (Vanneste & Puranam, 2024).

Despite these challenges, advanced digital tools offer several differential benefits for the internationalization of women-led SMEs. The Deloitte (2024) report notes that women's greater familiarity with AI may lead to increase of positive feelings and decrease of negative feelings. The diffusion of AI technologies can create new opportunities for women to run business more independently and in a more gender-neutral manner (Gawel, 2025). Formally, H2: The effect of the usage of advanced digital tools on SME internationalization will be stronger for women-led SMEs.

Methodology

The data for the study came from a phone survey of Bulgarian SMEs. Bulgaria is a midsized Eastern European economy, a member of the European Union since 2007, with SME contribution to GDP, percent women-led SMEs, and level of digital transformation comparable to, and thus generalizable to other Eastern and Central European economies (European Commission, 2022). The data were collected in 2023 using quota sampling (n = 1000, average age 19.2 years, 41% led by a female CEO). There were no statistically significant differences between male and female-led SMEs in industry distribution, including participation in high technology sectors and knowledge-intensive services. The independent variable, use of advanced digital tools, was measured as the tally of three binary items, the use of big data, AI, and robotics. The dependent variable, internationalization, was measured in two ways, a binary variable capturing whether or not the firm exports (yes = 1; 0 = no), as well as the selfreported percent international sales. The moderator variable, gender, was measured as sex at birth of the CEO (0=female, 1=male). The hypotheses were tested using regression estimations, controlling for organization age, industrial sector, and innovation activity.

Results & Implications

Preliminary results indicate that men-led SMEs are slightly older and bigger than women-led SMEs, more likely to use advanced digital tools, and also more likely to export. The usage of advanced digital tools is positively associated with both of our measures of internationalization, exporting and percent international sales, in support of H1. The interaction of the index of using advanced digital tools and gender is positively and significantly associated with the percent international sales, but not significantly associated with exporting, indicating that while men and women-led SMEs using advanced digital tools are equally likely to export, men tend to leverage big data, AI, and robotics better for the purposes of international expansion (percent international sales). Thus, H2 receives mixed support. Taken together, our findings suggest that advanced digital tools enable SME internationalization and that women-led SMEs need to be bolder and more proactive in taking full advantage of these technological affordances.

Culture & Identity

Celebrated or Deficient? The Portrayal of Women Entrepreneurs and Their Use of Technology in South African Media

Pergelova, Beck

Principal Topic

Both technology and entrepreneurship have been traditionally portrayed as male-dominated, risk-taking activities, positioning women are the “others” (Brush et al., 2022; Kubberød et al., 2021). This perception sustains a “gendered order” that marginalizes the feminine (Marlow & McAdam, 2015). While recent studies have investigated digital technologies as a site for women entrepreneurship (Kelly & McAdam, 2022) and have documented digitalization as a potentially democratizing force (Pergelova et al., 2019; Wiig et al., 2024), research suggests it does not fundamentally disrupt entrenched gendered assumptions (Martinez Dy, 2022), as societal gender roles, norms and expectations shape the image of both technology and entrepreneurship as male-centred (Reyes & Neergaard, 2023).

One powerful vehicle for transmitting gender roles and expectations is through mass media. Research has documented how the media shapes the representation and public discourse about entrepreneurship and the role of women in it (e.g., Achtenhagen & Welter, 2011; Byrne & Giuliani, 2025; Missonier et al., 2025), by presenting socially endorsed role models and signalling the types of entrepreneurial identities deemed legitimate. Media oftentimes reinforces gendered norms, portraying women entrepreneurs as “super-women” or heroines (Heizmann & Liu, 2022; Byrne et al., 2019; Nadin et al., 2020). While this work highlights media’s role in (de)legitimizing women, two gaps remain: first, with few exceptions (e.g., Blalock & Lyu, 2023; Owalla & AlGhafri, 2020) most studies focus on Western contexts where women have greater resources and policy support, and second, little attention is given to “double trouble” settings where gender intersects with technology (van Veelen et al., 2019). To address those gaps, we ask: How are women entrepreneurs and their use of technology portrayed in South African media?

Digital technologies increasingly support women’s entrepreneurship in Africa (Fayyaz, 2024), yet women remain less likely than men to adopt them - 10% less overall and 14% less in low-income countries (Women’s Entrepreneurship Report, 2024). In South Africa, many women struggle to access and use technology for business growth (Irene, 2019). While government initiatives such as the Women Technology and Innovation Programme (2023) aim to address this (South Africa’s Report 2019-2024), shifting societal perceptions requires more than policy; it necessitates broader acceptance of changing gender roles through public discourse. Hence, this study explores how media portrayals of women entrepreneurs and technology may influence these perceptions.

Methodology

This paper is based on an analysis of 5 years of data (2021-2025) in the two most widely-read online newspapers in South Africa – News24 (259 239 904 page views) and the Citizen (13 682 869 page views) (The Media Online, 2024). We used the following keywords to search for articles related to women entrepreneurs and their use of technology: Women, Female, Enterprise, Business, Entrepreneurship, Technology, Business Owner, Entrepreneur, SMME; CEO (different combinations and iterations of these words were used). This resulted in a total of 84 articles for our analysis. All articles were downloaded and analysed following the Gioia methodology via a systematic analysis starting with first order-codes, then moving to second-order themes and aggregate theoretical dimensions. In addition to the text, we analysed the images used in the articles, as images can significantly affect perceptions of women entrepreneurs (Pritchard et al., 2022). This resulted in a “multiplication of meaning” (Lemke, 1998) which helped us gain a deeper understanding of how women entrepreneurs were portrayed, as the visual and verbal elements can reinforce the message, or there can be a text-image divide (Bateman, 2014).

Results & Implications

The number of articles on women entrepreneurs and their use of technology has generally increased over time. The prevalence of articles in 2025 has drastically increased compared to the preceding four years. The underlying trend across all articles is the positive lens used across both media outlets to discuss the use of technology as a leveller for women when engaging in entrepreneurial activities. From the analysis of the 84 articles, four broad themes emerged:

(1) Balancing work and life. The “sacrifices and challenges of balancing motherhood with personal ambitions” was a consistent theme across articles.

(2) Awards and recognition. Celebratory narratives recognising women from multiple industries were common.

(3) Learning. Three second level themes included collaborating with others, learning to accept failure and developing skills and competencies.

(4) Technology/AI usage for success. This theme is characterised by the untapped promise of technology to facilitate growth and create opportunities and open up new markets.

A key finding from our analysis concerns the imagery accompanying news articles. Men are typically depicted in action-oriented, on-location shots that convey entrepreneurial activity, whereas women are shown in glamorous settings - wearing gala gowns and posed for aesthetic appeal. This contrast between visual representation and textual narratives of struggle and resilience underscores a significant dissonance in media portrayals.

Our analysis shows that portrayals of women entrepreneurs in South Africa reflect a “double celebration”: highlighting women’s achievements and technology as an equalizer. Yet, this discourse embeds a “deficiency” narrative, reinforcing traditional gender norms. Women are praised through awards promoting entrepreneurship, but their choices remain constrained by depictions of balancing family and work. Technology is framed as a solution, while women are portrayed as learners who must adapt and embrace failure, contrasting sharply with the glamorous, idealized images, solidifying the dissonance of the message. This juxtaposition risks creating confusion, reinforcing unrealistic expectations, and perpetuating stereotypes of women as less technologically competent, potentially limiting entrepreneurial aspirations.

Legitimacy Denied: How Race, Ethnicity, Gender, and Just-World Beliefs Shape Perceptions of Entrepreneurial Failure

Siraz, Alvarez, Claes

Principal Topic

The digital transformation is essentially transforming how women social entrepreneurs build visibility, purpose, and legitimacy in the online space. However, there is relative paucity of empirical studies on how digital storytelling practices are converted into legitimacy, especially in Global South situations where gendered inequalities and structural biases are still active. Based on the legitimacy theory, signaling theory, and feminist entrepreneurship, the paper will analyze the influence of digital storytelling on three interdependent forms of legitimacy pragmatic, moral, and cognitive by analyzing the impact of key dimensions of digital storytelling multimedia richness, perceived authenticity, emotional tone, and impact-oriented narratives.

Method

The study takes the quantitative and multi-source design that integrates systematic content analysis of social media with survey conducted on 250 stakeholders who are engaged in dealing with social enterprises that are operated by women. The proposed relationships are tested using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), and the connections between digital bias that occurs due to gender in online contexts are investigated.

Results & Implications

This study introduces new Western-centric theories of digital entrepreneurship and legitimacy creation by situating itself in a Middle Eastern setting. It has a theoretical contribution to make, in elucidating the workings of digital narratives as signals of strategic legitimacy, and practical contribution to make, in providing information to women entrepreneurs, incubators, support organizations, and policymakers who aim to enhance inclusive, credible and robust digital entrepreneurial ecosystems.

"#2Female2Fail": Digitization and the Intensification of Gendered Legitimacy Pressures in Entrepreneurial Ecosystems

Cook, Steinfield, Scheepers

Principal Topic

Digital technologies are often celebrated as democratizing forces that lower barriers to entry, reduce friction, broaden participation, and expand access to networks, visibility, capital, and more equitable pathways into entrepreneurial ecosystems (EE) (Nambisan, 2017; Sussan & Acs, 2017; Jennings & Brush, 2013; Marlow & McAdam, 2013). At the same time, research on women entrepreneurs in general documents persistent biases in credibility assessments, heightened scrutiny, and the need to outperform to gain legitimacy (Ahl, 2006; Byrne et al., 2019; Thébaud, 2010; Eagly & Karau, 2002). These streams of research—digital democratization and women's general experiences—seldom speak to each other, leaving an open question about how digitization interacts with gendered expectations and legitimacy dynamics in practice.

Our study addresses this gap by examining how women who operate within entrepreneurial ecosystems as actors—fund managers, accelerator leaders, mentors, key service providers, and ecosystem builders—navigate digital tools, platforms, and forms of online visibility. While feminist digital labor scholarship has shown that digital environments can amplify visibility labor, self-presentation demands, and bias (Duffy & Schwartz, 2018; Duffy & Sawey, 2022; Scolere et al., 2018; Valdivia, 2018), these insights remain largely unexplored in the entrepreneurship research. This disconnect sets up a central puzzle: How does digitization reshape gendered legitimacy pressures for women operating as actors within entrepreneurial ecosystems?

Methodology

Drawing on semi-structured interviews with 25 female ecosystem actors across several countries include Canada, South Africa, the USA, Kenya, and the Netherlands, we find that digitization does not lead to democratization but perpetuates inequities by heightening four key elements: performativity, legitimacy, workloads, and digital stratifications.

Results & Implications

First, digitization reproduces and amplifies existing inequalities through new layers of digital performativity, algorithmic visibility, and credibility labor. Across interviews, participants described as being "scared to make mistakes" because "mistake acquires incompetence when you're a woman." This leads to the feeling of being "too female to fail," with participants noting that errors were interpreted not as individual missteps, but as reflections on women's capacities more broadly. In a digital landscape where your reputation rests less on personal connections and more on projected images, protecting that image is critical to success. Some felt compelled to maintain polished LinkedIn presences (even when reluctant to be online) because "you have to show yourself." For Black, immigrant, and racialized women, digital visibility brought additional risks of misrecognition, stereotyping, trolling, and heightened surveillance, with one noting that male colleagues "don't really see" the scrutiny she faces.

Second, having to navigate legitimacy mazes was a pervasive experience across digital and analog settings. Securing a hold in the EE requires personal endorsements— "you just need someone who believes in you and legitimizes the business." Women described operating in low-trust digital environments where entrepreneurs increasingly dismissed programs as "a scam." Participants also detailed the erosion of trust from poorly run accelerators that use AI-generated content "with hallucinations," which created reputational risk: "I never want that on my face." These dynamics created a constant defensive posture, forcing women to be anticipating questions, pre-answering objections, and managing perceptions to avoid being seen as "incompetent women."

Third, digitization intensifies overwork and hustle expectations. While Byrne et al (2018) note a similar super-women effect for female entrepreneurs at large, here we draw attention to the rapid proliferation of digital tools with which women entrepreneurs must keep up. Women described routinely working "nights and weekends" because "you have to be better than [men, and entrepreneurs in the ecosystem] all the time," nothing that they "overprepare... double doing this job" to avoid credibility loss. Combined with heightened visibility pressures but a lack of connection to those ‘in the know’, female EE actors do more and more, downloading news apps “so that [they can] look like [they] know what people are talking about,” Moreover, the need to navigate a low-trust landscape meant many women actors, particularly those just starting-up or who were not part of an elite network, were having to put on additional, free virtual seminars to build a reputation. Being locked out of analogue, personal networks result in additional workloads to convince others in the digital environment that you can be trusted. Gendered expectations to work harder, be constantly available, and to “not say no” meant female actors, particularly those on the margins, were doing more “even at the expense of your health.”

Lastly, digitization via AI produced new stratifications—the AI-savvy, the AI-ignorant, and the AI-skeptic—which had implications for keeping up with critical trends and demands from entrepreneurs. AI-savvy entailed actors who strategically embraced AI, leveraging it to streamline operations or access global visibility (“we come up” in AI-driven search results), which they then shared with entrepreneurs. A few of these actors had elite connections in the know, although most put in the extra time to get a head of the innovation curve. AI-ignorant used AI but without fully understanding its capacity, resulting in instances where they were potentially putting their own proprietary knowledge, work reputation and image at risk by sharing too much information with AI or relying on it without properly vetting its output. The third group—AI-skeptics—largely refrained from leveraging AI and approached it cautiously, which in turn meant they were becoming increasingly ill-equipped to manage the changing landscape.

Taken together, our findings advance theory by reframing digital entrepreneurial ecosystems as sites of intensified inequality, where digitization overlays performativity and credibility surveillance, legitimacy mazes, invisible and visible workloads, and platform-engagement stratifications onto existing structures of gender, race, class, and professional identity. This challenges the prevailing assumption that digital transformation inherently democratizes entrepreneurship (Nambisan, 2017; Sussan & Acs, 2017) and demonstrates the varied ways digital systems create new forms of inequities that disproportionately burden women on the margins.

Practically, this study suggests that building equitable entrepreneurial ecosystems requires more than offering digital tools or training. It requires recognizing how digitization reshapes legitimacy processes, exacerbates intersectional inequities, and creates new forms of labor that are often invisible, uncompensated, and unevenly distributed. Without addressing these systemic dynamics, digitization risks deepening rather than dismantling inequality in entrepreneurial ecosystems.

Unpacking Women's Entrepreneurial Identity Research

de Almeida Furquim, Stroila, Wosiak

Principal Topic

Identity has become a prominent lens in entrepreneurship research, providing scholars with a means to examine how individuals construct meaning, enact roles, and navigate venture creation (Leitch & Harrison, 2016; Mmbaga et al., 2020; Radu-Lefebvre et al., 2021; Wagenschwanz, 2021). Entrepreneurial identity is defined as "a set of moral virtues that expert entrepreneurs have internalized and routinely practice" (Duening & Metzger, 2017, p. 2). It is contextually contingent (Ozasir Kacar et al., 2023) and shaped by cultural norms, beliefs, and social expectations (Jones et al., 2019). Although identity is a complex construct with varied theoretical roles (Leitch & Harrison, 2016), identity has provided valuable insights into entrepreneurial motivation, strategic choice, and growth (Mmbaga et al., 2020).

Despite growing scholarly interest in entrepreneurial identity, the entrepreneurial identity of women has received limited attention. Despite evidence that gendered norms and social expectations shape entrepreneurial experiences (Boddington, 2024; Elliott et al., 2021), the literature often treats entrepreneurial identity as gender-neutral (Swail & Marlow, 2018), thereby obscuring how women navigate gendered role expectations and identity tensions (Boddington, 2024). Existing sector-specific analyses (e.g., Appelstrand & Lidestav, 2015) remain narrow and do not capture broader cross-conversational patterns (Mmbaga et al., 2020), societal and institutional mechanisms (Petersen et al., 2025), and formation conditions of women's entrepreneurial identity (Radu-Lefebvre et al., 2021).

Research indicates that gender is a pivotal dimension influencing the formation of entrepreneurial identities (Mmbaga et al., 2020), suggesting that overlooking women's entrepreneurial identity risks misrepresenting the very concept of entrepreneurial identity itself (Boddington, 2024). Women's entrepreneurial identities are forged under conditions of persistent structural inequality (Brush et al., 2019; Isakova & Stroila, 2025), which influence not only individual entrepreneurial journeys but also broader patterns of venture performance (Srivastava & Pandita, 2025) and access to resources (Motoyama et al., 2021). The lack of systematization in the literature and the underexploitation of women's identity hinder theory enhancement by embedding inconsistent constructs and measures (Radu-Lefebvre et al., 2021) and scattering evidence across conversations (Mmbaga et al., 2020), especially for women, and by leaving identity underexamined in major syntheses of women's entrepreneurship.

A systematic literature review is therefore needed to consolidate dispersed insights, highlight underexplored areas, and provide a foundation for future research. Such synthesis aligns with calls for integrative, context-sensitive, and identity-focused agendas that incorporate intersectionality and methodological rigor (Henry et al., 2015; Radu-Lefebvre et al., 2021; Wagenschwanz, 2021). Accordingly, this study addresses: (1) What themes characterize research on women's entrepreneurial identity? and (2) What future directions emerge from this thematic mapping?

Methodology

A systematic literature review approach (Tranfield et al., 2003) is applied, guided by a thematic analysis using the Theory, Context, Characteristics, and Methods (TCCM) framework (Paul & Rosado-Serrano, 2019). TCCM is used to synthesize how studies theorize women's entrepreneurial identity, the contexts in which identity research unfolds, the core concepts that structure the field, and the methods used to examine it. This structured approach identifies established and emerging themes, providing direction for strengthening research by informing future inquiry and action to expand women's entrepreneurial participation.

A Scopus and Web of Science search using "entrepreneur* identity" AND ("wom*n" OR "gender") yielded 192 documents (December 2005 – June 2025). After applying specific inclusion criteria, including articles, language, and journal quality as assessed by the Scopus database's Scimago Journal Rank and the Web of Science's Journal Impact Factor, 61 key peer-reviewed papers were systematically reviewed to analyze women's entrepreneurial identity.

Results & Implications

The preliminary results of the systematic review of the literature, following the TCCM review protocol, suggest that research on women's entrepreneurial identity draws on theoretical lenses (T), including Identity, Social Identity, and Identity Work theories, to conceptualize identity as a social and dynamic process. Post-structuralist and postfeminist approaches further highlight how norms, power, and discourse shape entrepreneurial identity and problematize individualized empowerment narratives. Moreover, the field's research is embedded in national, institutional, and cultural contexts (C), such as the UK, Sweden, France, Turkey, and India, as well as digital and pitching contexts, migrant and transnational environments, and family life stages (especially motherhood). The themes characterizing (C) research on women's entrepreneurial identity revolve around entrepreneurship being gendered by stereotypically masculine norms, while intersectionality is essential to understanding the heterogeneity of women's experiences. Cultural norms, neoliberal expectations of self-governance, entrepreneurial self-efficacy, impact, and female entrepreneurship further characterize the field's research. Methodologically (M), studies predominantly employ qualitative, interpretivist, and constructionist approaches. In-depth interviews and life-story narratives are the primary data sources, while analysis is based on thematic and narrative techniques. The TCCM-based synthesis also provides future research directions to broaden theories and contexts, focus on entrepreneurship education, and expand methodologies for studying identity formation.

This study makes three contributions. First, it builds on and extends prior entrepreneurial identity reviews (Mmbaga et al., 2020; Radu-Lefebvre et al., 2021; Wagenschwanz, 2021) by centering women's experiences and addressing a blind spot, advancing understanding of how gendered identities shape entrepreneurial motivations, practices, and outcomes, thereby contributing to both entrepreneurship and identity scholarship. Second, it contributes to the scholarship on gender and entrepreneurship (Boddington, 2024; Elliott et al., 2021) by identifying the themes that constitute research on women's entrepreneurial identity and addressing concerns about the limited dissemination of women-focused work into mainstream entrepreneurship (Jennings & Brush, 2013; Petersen et al., 2025). Third, it positions women's entrepreneurship research at the center of entrepreneurship theory-building by outlining future research directions and consolidating fragmented insights (Mmbaga et al., 2020).

Women in Tech

Market Innovation or Commodification of Gender: Who Benefits from FemTech?

Woods, Orser

Principal Topic

FemTech is “a subsector of the tech industry focused on solutions to address the health needs that solely, predominantly, or differently impact the health of women, girls, non-binary and trans [people], as well as those assigned female at birth.” (RBC, 2024). FemTech companies cater primarily to health needs, including maternal, pelvic and menstrual health, fertility, menopause, contraception, incontinence, fitness, mental health and sex tech (Koivula, 2023). Innovation encompasses products, services, diagnostic tools, therapeutics, wearables, and sex- and gender-responsive care delivery systems (Qian Yi et al., 2024).

The World Economic Forum and McKinsey Health Institute estimate that addressing the global ‘women’s health gap’ could boost the economy by $1 trillion annually by 2040 (Ellingrid et al., 2024). Similarly, the FemTech global market is valued at over $1 trillion by 2027 (RBC, 2024). The growth in FemTech is fuelled, in part, by increasing awareness of the health equity gaps (Ellingrud et al., 2024) and destigmatization of women’s health needs.

Critics cite challenges that include the commodification and exploitation of women’s health (Altman, 2019; Tsingou, 2025), medical unreality of products, gender stereotyping in the absence of MenTech, and privacy violations (Alfawzan & Christen, 2023). It it also difficult for founders to access capital given misalignment between FemTech business models and venture capitalists’ (VC) expectations (Henn & Mihaylova, 2024) with under investment disproportionately evidenced among women-owned FemTech ventures (RBC, 2024; Marsella et al., forthcoming).

To examine FemTech, this study employs two perspectives, Schumpeter’s conduct model and entrepreneurial feminism. Schumpeter positions the entrepreneur as the prime agent of change, introducing “new combinations” of resources that disrupt equilibrium and generate economic development (Schumpeter, 1934; Endres & Woods, 2010). Central to this theory is the concept of innovation as a dynamic process and not merely a functional act. Entrepreneurial feminism is a relational, equity-centered framework that positions entrepreneurship as a feminist act, as entrepreneurs leverage opportunities to trade and innovate as a means of enhancing personal agency and well-being, and as a way of dismantling gendered structures (Orser & Elliott, 2013; Woods & Orser, 2025). By applying these lenses, this study moves beyond individualistic outcomes to consider structural and institutional dynamics in the FemTech sector. To do so, we pose three questions: (1) How is entrepreneurial feminism mobilized within FemTech; (2) How do FemTech ventures frame gender; and (3) To what extent do FemTech ventures seek to advance gender equity?

To inform these research questions, we advance a framework of FemTech that incorporates two continuums: high-tech versus low-tech and masculine versus feminine. The high-tech/low-tech continuum captures the technological intensity of FemTech ventures. The masculine/feminine continuum captures how gender capital is enacted within the venture. Gender capital refers to individual, institutional and structural dimensions through which gender shapes legitimacy, experiences, resources, and opportunities in entrepreneurial ecosystems (Woods, 2025). The masculine emphasizes efficiency and ROI while feminine emphasizes equity, empowerment, and feminist action.

Methodology

This study adapts criteria used to examine the value-proposition of women-focused capital funds (Orser, Riding & Li, 2019). We employ comparative, qualitative assessment of 25 Canadian and 25 Aotearoa New Zealand (A-NZ) FemTech ventures. Researchers collected data from publicly available digital content, websites, and investor reports. The team adhered to the methodology for coding identified by Duriau et al. (2007). Examination of online text enabled us to examine the ventures using a standardized set of coding rules.

An initial inventory of codes advanced by Orser, Coleman and Li (2019) were adapted based on the relevant literature. Codifying of content (testing and refinement) of sample text was undertaken. The coding process moved from coding to ordering and categorization of data. Higher level concepts or themes were discussed among the researchers, a process that adheres to Saldana (2009) guidelines for coding, categorization and analytic reflection. Saturation was reached upon coder agreement of redundancy or replication of text (Saunders et al., 2018). Preliminary assessment codes of the FemTech ventures are presented in Appendix 1.

Codes are then mapped onto the two continuums, allowing for visualization of how the same ventures cluster across high-tech/low-tech and masculine/feminine gender framings. Comparative analysis is undertaken to identify similarities and differences between Canadian and (A-NZ) ventures and patterns of gender framing across technological intensity.

This study demonstrates how technological positioning intersects with gender capital to produce varied anticipated outcomes across national contexts. The study contributes to theory by illustrating ways that gender capital is mobilized among ventures that center on women's health experiences, needs and values. Findings contribute to practice by providing a diagnostic tool for assessing FemTech ventures. This tool can help investors, policymakers, and entrepreneurs distinguish between equity-driven innovators from pinkwashing. Pinkwashing refers to the superficial adoption of gendered branding without substantive commitment to structural change (Orser, Coleman & Li, 2019). The study underscores the importance of gender framing in shaping the outcomes of FemTech, including challenging structural barriers and helping to close gender health equity gaps. FemTech also risks pinkwashing or the superficial framings of gender for profit. Future research should extend this analysis to additional national contexts and explore how intersectional identities, such as race, class, and sexuality shape gender capital with the FemTech sector.

Reframing Entrepreneurial Risk in Women's Tech Venturing: A Feminist Approach to Coping with Risk in Norway and South Africa

Jones, Pettersen, Scheepers

Principal Topic

In Africa, women social entrepreneurs are not only economic actors but also community stewards who mobilise relational values, local wisdom, and collective action to address persistent social challenges. However, dominant models of entrepreneurial mindset remain rooted in Western paradigms that centre on individualism, competition, and self-actualisation. These constructs, primarily derived from WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich, and Democratic) contexts (Shepherd et al., 2025), may inadequately represent how entrepreneurship is lived and understood by African women, especially those whose ventures are rooted in community care, reciprocity, and healing.

This paper presents a systematic literature review (SLR) focused on the Ubuntu philosophy as an alternative lens for understanding the entrepreneurial mindset among African women social entrepreneurs. Ubuntu, often expressed as "I am because we are," reflects deeply embedded values of interconnectedness, mutual respect, humility, and shared humanity (Letseka, 2012). Rather than viewing mindset as an internal cognitive disposition oriented toward personal gain, Ubuntu offers a relational and ethical worldview in which entrepreneurship is an act of service, social responsibility, and community preservation.

The aim of this review is to critically examine how Ubuntu has been conceptualised, invoked, or overlooked in scholarship on women's entrepreneurship in African contexts, and how it might serve as a decolonial and feminist alternative to mainstream entrepreneurial mindset theory.

Methodology

This study follows PRISMA protocols for systematic literature review. Peer-reviewed articles published between 2010 and 2025 were identified through academic databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, and regional African journals. Search terms included: "Ubuntu and entrepreneurship"; "African philosophy and women entrepreneurs"; "Entrepreneurial mindset AND Global South"; "Ubuntu AND social entrepreneurship". The final selection included 64 articles, which were analysed thematically through Ubuntu principles: humanness (botho), solidarity, compassion, relational agency, and communal ethics.

Results & Implications

The review reveals a significant under-theorisation of Ubuntu in mainstream entrepreneurship and mindset literature, despite its presence in African philosophical discourse and practice. The key themes are as follows:

1. Ubuntu as Relational Agency

Ubuntu-informed entrepreneurship emphasises relational agency, the ability to act in ways that strengthen social bonds, meet collective needs, and uphold harmony (Moore & Coulibaly-Willis, 2025). This contrasts sharply with mainstream models that valorise autonomy, competitiveness, and risk-taking.

2. Entrepreneurship as Care and Restoration

African women entrepreneurs frequently engage in ventures that heal social wounds, restore dignity, and serve the vulnerable (Holbert, 2025). These actions are not peripheral but core expressions of entrepreneurship, shaped by cultural notions of duty and care.

3. Decolonising Mindset Theory

Very few studies directly critique the cultural bias of Western theories. Those that do (Masoominejad & Stjernquist, 2024; Bunmi Omodan et al., 2024) call for decolonial theorising that centres African lived realities, ethics, and historical consciousness.

4. Ubuntu as Feminist Epistemology

Ubuntu offers a gender-responsive logic grounded in collective well-being, nurturing, and moral leadership (Omare et al., 2025). It aligns with African feminist frameworks that resist both patriarchal norms and imported feminist assumptions.

This paper contributes to theory by proposing Ubuntu as a philosophical framework for reimagining the entrepreneurial mindset in African women's social entrepreneurship. It critiques the limits of universalising WEIRD-centric theories and instead offers a relational, ethical, and culturally grounded model of entrepreneurial subjectivity.

In doing so, it responds directly to DIRC's call for deeper inquiry into context-specific entrepreneurial phenomena and for examining the limits of Western-centred feminism and entrepreneurship theory in Global South contexts.

Ultimately, the paper argues that Ubuntu is not simply a cultural context, but a radical alternative to dominant models, one that redefines the very meaning of the entrepreneurial mindset through the values of connection, care, and communal well-being.

To Mask or Unmask? How Women Tech-Entrepreneurs Do Social Mission and Impact Through Their Ventures

Itani, Vershinina

Principal Topic

This article examines how women-led technology ventures in Lebanon embed and enact social missions within ostensibly mainstream enterprises, illuminating the interplay between civic engagement, market performance, entrepreneurial ecosystems, and gendered identity work.

Methodology

Drawing on a qualitative dataset of around 50 interviewees, complemented by an autoethnographic lens, the study explores how female founders navigate complex social, cultural, economic and increasingly crisis-shaped landscapes. Findings reveal a “camouflaging model” in which technology entrepreneurs strategically downplay or conceal their social mission in early stages to secure market legitimacy, investor interest, and alignment with the expected identity of high-growth technology firms. Over time, however, their social motivations resurface and become central to how success is defined, practiced, and communicated.

Results & Implications

Our findings show that this camouflaging process cannot be understood solely through micro-identity work or gendered marginalisation; it is deeply shaped by the broader entrepreneurial ecosystem’s shifting engagement with social issues. Since the onset of Lebanon’s cascading crises: economic collapse, the Beirut Port explosion, and widespread public-sector failure, the entrepreneurial ecosystem has itself undergone a profound transformation.

Interviewees describe a marked rise in social entrepreneurship, increased societal consciousness of urgent social problems, and the reorientation of incubators, accelerators, universities, and donor organisations toward social and green ventures. New programs such as Erasmus+ collaborations, Safir, and university-run social innovation tracks have significantly widened the space for mission-led ventures, making social entrepreneurship more legitimate, more visible, and, crucially, more fundable. As donors and ecosystem organisations increasingly prioritise social impact, women technology entrepreneurs find that the very ecosystem that once pressured them to hide their social purpose is now actively encouraging, financing, and amplifying it.

This shifting ecosystem engagement plays a pivotal role in the transition from camouflaging to revealing. While women tech founders initially conceal their social mission due to stereotypes around non-profitability, fears of not being taken seriously, and pressures to conform to the masculine-coded expectations of “real tech entrepreneurship,” the post-crisis landscape begins to reward openness around social purpose. The influx of targeted funding streams, ecosystem-wide interest in agri-food, clean-tech, and developmental solutions, and the political vacuum left by state institutions create a structural pull toward socially oriented business models. As one accelerator manager noted, “Most of the startups after 2020 were developmental startups to cover the needs,” illustrating how ecosystem expectations shift from high-growth technology to crisis-responsive innovation. With this shift, women founders increasingly find resonance between their personal civic motivations and the ecosystem’s new priorities.

Over time, as the business gains legitimacy and demonstrates tangible impact, whether through community engagement, employment generation, or societal contribution, women founders become more confident in foregrounding their social mission. Their evolving identity work is supported by ecosystem actors who, after the crisis, exhibit greater openness, engagement, and financial support for social innovation. What began as a deviant strategy of masking becomes a legitimate path for recognition, with founders articulating success in terms of social contribution, societal transformation, and alignment with national recovery needs. The crisis context also intensifies moral commitments and civic sensibilities, further motivating entrepreneurs to reveal and amplify their social purpose as part of a broader contribution to rebuilding a collapsing country.

Theoretically, this analysis advances debates on gender impact within social entrepreneurship by demonstrating how women founders' identity work intersects with ecosystem-level transformations, institutional voids, and crisis-driven shifts in legitimacy systems. The study shows that social entrepreneurship in Lebanon is not simply an individual choice but an inherently civic practice shaped by both structural pressures and collective aspirations. It challenges conventional accounts of technology entrepreneurship by highlighting how mission-led, socially engaged, women-led technology ventures evolve within, and ultimately reshape the entrepreneurial ecosystem. These insights offer critical implications for policymakers, educators, investors, and ecosystem builders seeking to foster inclusive, mission-oriented entrepreneurial environments in crisis-affected contexts.

The Other Side of the Code: A Theory of Women Social Entrepreneurs in Algorithmic Systems

Whitaker

Principal Topic

Artificial intelligence (AI) and digital platforms increasingly shape the environments in which adolescent girls develop identity, agency, and approaches to emotion regulation. Algorithmic curation, augmented reality beauty filters, and platform-specific visibility logics act as developmental contexts that influence how girls interpret appearance cues, evaluate social information, and imagine possible futures (Bronfenbrenner, 1986; Markus & Nurius, 1986). Developmental psychology demonstrates that adolescence is marked by heightened sensitivity to evaluation, comparison, and identity-relevant feedback (Steinberg, 2008; Crone & Dahl, 2012). Algorithmic systems also shape the emotional landscape in which girls regulate affect, as digital environments introduce affordances—such as asynchrony, persistence, and wide visibility—that influence regulatory strategies and outcomes (Hollenstein & Faulkner, 2024; Valkenburg, 2022). Because early-to-mid adolescence is characterized by heightened limbic reactivity and still-developing regulatory control (Ahmed et al., 2015; Casey, 2019), algorithmic cues emphasizing appearance, popularity, or social evaluation may disproportionately influence emotional and identity development.

This article asks: How can women social entrepreneurs act as system-level change agents within algorithmic environments shaping adolescent girls' identity, agency, and emotion regulation? To address this question, the article draws on integrative conceptual analysis across developmental psychology, sociotechnical governance, and women's social entrepreneurship. Three insights guide this analysis. First, algorithmic systems shape girls' developmental trajectories by structuring what becomes visible, valued, and reinforced, positioning algorithms as developmental contexts rather than neutral technologies. Second, women social entrepreneurs function as boundary actors who translate girls' lived digital experiences into design, policy, and programmatic responses through their proximity to community insight and mission-driven commitments. Third, the entrepreneurial practices highlighted by Dees (1998/2001)—opportunity recognition, innovative adaptation, resourcefulness, and accountability to social value—enable women leaders to frame problems, iterate solutions, and co-create community-driven interventions that disrupt harmful algorithmic feedback loops and cultivate digital spaces that support identity exploration, agency-building, and healthy emotion regulation.

While AI is widely framed as socially beneficial, there is another side of the code: algorithmically curated digital content exerts disproportionate psychological weight on young people (Valkenburg, 2022). Exposure to idealized or digitally enhanced images is associated with elevated comparison anxiety, body dissatisfaction, and negative affect, intensified by algorithmic amplification (Tiggemann & Slater, 2014; Fardouly et al., 2015; Grabe, Ward, & Hyde, 2008; Levine & Murnen, 2009; Rodgers et al., 2020). These pressures are compounded by algorithmic whitening, racialized aesthetic hierarchies, and platform incentives that privilege narrow beauty norms (Duffy & Hund, 2019; Foster, 2022; Riccio et al., 2024). Identity exploration and emotion regulation unfold together in digital contexts, as youth engage in "digital rehearsal" and interpret themselves through algorithmically structured social mirrors (Pérez-Torres, 2024; Avci et al., 2024; Preece et al., 2024). Emerging evidence suggests that digitally cohesive, well-moderated communities may buffer risk, functioning analogously to offline neighborhood cohesion (Brieant & Burt, 2025). As a result, algorithmic systems increasingly operate as identity infrastructures shaping girls' sense of capability, visibility, and agency. These dynamics underscore the need for theory that centers women social entrepreneurs as systemic actors responding to digitally mediated developmental pressures affecting girls and young women.

Methodology

This article employs integrative conceptual analysis across developmental psychology, sociotechnical governance, and women's social entrepreneurship to develop the theory of Algorithmic Identity Stewardship. Ecological systems theory situates algorithmic platforms within adolescents' proximal environments (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). Socio-emotional development research clarifies why girls may be especially responsive to appearance-centered algorithmic cues (Ahmed et al., 2015; Silvers, 2022). Possible selves theory explains how digital portrayals guide identity trajectories and perceived competence (Markus & Nurius, 1986). Youth digital rights scholarship highlights adolescents' limited power to influence platform governance (Livingstone & Third, 2017), while sociotechnical critiques reveal limitations of conventional participatory design in addressing embedded algorithmic dynamics (Sloane et al., 2022). Youth participatory action research and civic engagement frameworks offer mechanisms for integrating girls' lived experiences into intervention design and social innovation (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Checkoway & Aldana, 2013; Ginwright, 2010). Together, these bodies of work establish a foundation for examining how women social entrepreneurs might reshape algorithmic developmental contexts.

Results & Implications

Shifts in the digital developmental landscape create an opening for social entrepreneurship—particularly ventures led by women whose work is grounded in community insight, youth engagement, and mission-driven innovation. Drawing on Dees' (1998/2001) definition of social entrepreneurs as change agents who pursue opportunity, innovate continuously, and prioritize social value, many women entrepreneurs advance missions that empower the next generation of girls to lead at the intersection of technology and social impact. This orientation situates their endeavors in conversation with algorithmic systems shaping identity, agency, and emotional development, aligning with efforts to design technologies and programs that affirm the diverse experiences of young people. Models such as "Ask, Engage, Create" illustrate how women-led ventures mobilize inquiry, mentorship, and creative problem solving to build digital confidence, STEM exploration, and social innovation pathways for girls. These efforts generate opportunities for designing community-based programs and digital tools that enhance emotion regulation, foster supportive online spaces, and expand girls' repertoire of adaptive regulatory strategies.

This paper develops a conceptual theory linking the missions and practices of women social entrepreneurs with the developmental needs of adolescent girls in algorithmic environments. Future directions include interviews and focus groups with adolescent girls, case studies of women-led ventures addressing digital well-being, and co-design workshops pairing girls with social entrepreneurs. Analytic strategies may include thematic analysis, sociotechnical examinations of platform logic, and cross-case comparison of venture strategies.

Education & Training

Fifty Years of Gender and Entrepreneurship Research: Mapping the Intersections with Education and Sustainability

Kisoi, Vlaisavljevic

Principal Topic

Since Schwartz's (1976) landmark article "Entrepreneurship: A New Female Frontier," gender and entrepreneurship research has grown into a vibrant, theoretically diverse field. Drawing on feminist, institutional, identity-based, behavioural and social-capital perspectives, scholarship has examined how gender shapes entrepreneurial identity, opportunity processes, innovation and venture outcomes (Ahl, 2006; Jennings & Brush, 2013; Henry et al., 2016). Over five decades, the field has produced critical insights into women's participation, structural barriers and institutional contexts, yet remains fragmented in relation to two themes increasingly central to contemporary entrepreneurship: education and sustainability.

Education is a fundamental determinant of entrepreneurial capability formation, shaping human capital, self-efficacy, intentions, skills and opportunity recognition (Becker, 1964; Bae et al., 2014; Martin et al., 2013; Nabi et al., 2017). Likewise, sustainability has become a defining concern for entrepreneurial action, with sustainable entrepreneurship linking opportunity processes to ecological and social value creation (Cohen & Winn, 2007; Dean & McMullen, 2007; Shepherd & Patzelt, 2011; Schaltegger & Wagner, 2011). Despite the rapid expansion of both domains, gendered entrepreneurship research rarely integrates education and sustainability, resulting in parallel literatures that seldom intersect.

Existing gender-focused reviews (Ahl, 2006; Henry et al., 2016; Aidis & Weeks, 2016) provide strong conceptual overviews but largely overlook how education and sustainability shape gendered entrepreneurial trajectories. Conversely, reviews of entrepreneurship education and sustainable entrepreneurship rarely incorporate gendered or feminist lenses (Martin et al., 2013; Nabi et al., 2017; Rosário et al., 2023). Recent bibliometric studies (Terán-Yépez et al., 2020; Vargas-Merino et al., 2025) identify sustainability trends but do not explore gendered implications. This fragmentation leaves open fundamental questions about how education and sustainability, two forces reshaping twenty-first-century venturing, interact with gendered entrepreneurial identities, behaviours and outcomes.

To address this gap, this study presents the first integrated, fifty-year bibliometric and topic-modelling review of gender and entrepreneurship research, with specific attention to the evolution and intersection of education and sustainability. This review has four objectives:

Map the intellectual, conceptual and collaborative trajectory of gender and entrepreneurship research (1976–2026).

Identify how education and sustainability themes have entered, evolved within, and intersected with gendered entrepreneurship scholarship.

Trace shifts in theoretical emphasis and research priorities using topic-modelling and temporal mapping.

Integrate findings into a conceptual framework that clarifies interdependencies and future research pathways.

Methodology

The review applies a dual-layer design spanning fifty years. The Historiographic Layer (1976–1999) captures foundational debates and the emergence of women's entrepreneurship research through co-citation and historiographic mapping. The Core Analytical Corpus (2000–2026) examines the period of consolidation and diversification during which sustainability and entrepreneurship education became prominent themes.

Following PRISMA guidelines (Moher et al., 2009) and evidence-based-review standards (Tranfield et al., 2003), the workflow consists of four stages:

Identification and cleaning of Scopus and Web of Science records (1976–2026).

Bibliometric mapping using co-citation, bibliographic coupling, co-word and co-authorship analysis.

Natural language processing and topic modeling to trace semantic and thematic evolution.

Integration and synthesis through overlay visualisation, cluster interpretation and thematic coding to build an integrative conceptual framework.

Results & Implications

Preliminary bibliometric and topic-emergence patterns point to distinct historical phases. From 1976 to 1999, women's entrepreneurship emerged as a legitimate domain, shaped largely by human-capital perspectives and analyses of structural constraints. Between 2000 and 2010, the field broadened to incorporate institutional and opportunity-process theories, generating greater conceptual plurality. From 2010 to 2026, scholarship diversified further, expanding into social entrepreneurship, sustainability, leadership identity and gendered entrepreneurial ecosystems.

Education appears as an under-theorised yet increasingly visible subtheme. Although central to human-capital formation and entrepreneurial intention research, its explicit integration into gendered entrepreneurship studies remains limited. Entrepreneurship education has grown as a cluster but rarely intersects directly with gendered analyses, revealing a significant conceptual gap.

Sustainability and gender also intersect only sporadically. While recent evidence aligns with studies showing women's stronger engagement in sustainability-oriented or eco-innovative ventures, theoretical integration remains sparse and methodologically inconsistent across the literature.

Overall, the review reveals fragmented connections among gender, education and sustainability. Only in the most recent decade do clusters appear that meaningfully integrate these domains, reflecting the early stages of a more holistic research agenda. This emerging convergence aligns with calls for integrated, ecosystem-level perspectives on entrepreneurial participation and capability formation (Acs et al., 2017), though the integration is nascent.

Theoretically, this study contributes the first integrated mapping of gender and entrepreneurship research that incorporates education and sustainability. It extends feminist, institutional and human-capital perspectives by demonstrating how learning processes and sustainability imperatives shape gendered entrepreneurial behaviour, and proposes a conceptual framework that links gendered entrepreneurial ecosystems to education, opportunity structures and sustainability transitions.

Methodologically, the study advances the field by demonstrating a hybrid bibliometric–topic-modelling approach that integrates structural and semantic analyses. The protocol traces intellectual evolution while providing a transparent and replicable workflow applicable across related domains combining bibliometrics with natural-language-processing techniques.

Practically, the study offers evidence-based insights for educators, policymakers and entrepreneurship-support organisations on how education and sustainability influence inclusive entrepreneurial participation. By identifying regional and institutional gaps, the review highlights where targeted curricula, support mechanisms and policy interventions are needed to strengthen gender-equitable and sustainability-oriented entrepreneurial ecosystems.

Identity Work and Social Learning Among Women in Action-Oriented Entrepreneurship Training: Insights from North Korean Women Living Abroad

Glosenberg, Choi, Paik, Gielnik

Principal Topic

Perhaps one of the best-studied action-oriented approaches to entrepreneurship training is personal initiative (PI) training (see Gielnik & Glosenberg, 2025; McKenzie, 2021) – an approach that relies upon communicating and helping trainees to adopt and demonstrate a mindset defined largely by proactivity and innovation. PI training has shown notable potential, via randomized controlled trials, to assist entrepreneurs both in the short-term (e.g., Campos et al., 2017; Glaub et al., 2014; Ubfal et al., 2022) and the longer term – extending up to 7.5 years (Campos et al., 2025). Despite this evidence, the effects of training administrations have sometimes been mixed and have indicated the potential relevance of identity-related factors (Alibhai et al., 2019; Mensmann et al., 2018) including gender (Campos et al., 2025) to the effectiveness of the intervention.

As a method to better understand identity-related mechanisms in PI training, we engage with an extreme population: North Korean women entrepreneurs living in South Korea and the United States. This population is unique for three reasons. First, given that entrepreneurship is a free-market activity and carries with it unique limitations and stigma in North Korea, our population is likely to engage in entrepreneurship in unique ways and despite unique psychological and cultural barriers. Second, relatively few published action-oriented training interventions have been undertaken in Southeast or East Asia. Because this region tends to hold unique cultural values (e.g., collectivism) that shape social interaction and entrepreneurial dynamics (Wu & Wu, 2017), social dynamics within an action-oriented training might be unique and/or more visible than in other contexts. Third, North Koreans, especially women, have tended to experience severe hardship and deprivation before, during, and even following their departures from North Korea. Within North Korea, deprivations including starvation and political persecution are well documented; in addition, despite traumas endured while in North Korea, we note that the large percentage of women who immigrated through China have often encountered traumatizing experiences during their immigration process – prominently including sex trafficking (Brookings Institution, 2011). Moreover, even after leaving North Korea it has been documented that they often face significant obstacles in South Korean society, including social discrimination, deficits in financing, challenges in overcoming language barriers and cultural differences, and limitations in social capital (The Asia Foundation, 2020).

Methodology

We engage in an open-ended qualitative study that embeds some members of the research team into the training itself. This focused and qualitative action-research approach complements the quantitative and large-scale approaches taken to date to understand PI training. This approach also allows for a nuanced and temporal perspective on change during training. The interventions we undertook were a two-part PI training-of-trainers in South Korea, a PI training in the United States, and a PI training, using the trainers trained earlier, in South Korea. To provide a point of reference and contrast, we deliberately include a small number of men and South Korean women into our interventions. The training was administered in a hybrid format wherein trainers interacted virtually with trainees. Semi-structured interviews were held before and after all training interventions. Critical incidents were developed by the first and second authors who participated as trainers.

Results & Implications

We isolated 34 critical incidents that reflected distinct and meaningful turning points in participants' thinking and/or behavior before, during, and/or after training. While analysis of these critical incidents are currently ongoing, our results appear to make at least three contributions to theory regarding gender and entrepreneurship and action-oriented entrepreneurship training. First, our results help to highlight an underappreciated role for identity work and social learning as factors in action-oriented training – helping to expand the propositions of action theory (Frese, 2009). While key studies have hinted at a role for identity-related factors, ours is the first to clearly illustrate their role alongside the more well-studied factors of active performance and self-efficacy (see Gielnik & Glosenberg, 2025 for a review). In particular, our results highlight that entrepreneurs tended to develop an understanding of themselves as entrepreneurial women by observing others, and seeing evidence for their capability to, engage in proactive and innovative behaviors. Second, while prior research has tended to emphasize tension between entrepreneurial distinctiveness and social belonging (Shepherd & Patzelt, 2018), we observe multiple instances of beneficial synergies between an entrepreneurial identity and social belonging among our North Korean women participants. This finding is a notable and unique example of support for the framework by Shepherd and Haynie (2009) on entrepreneurial identity and indicates that even in short entrepreneurship trainings, beneficial forms of identity work might occur that integrates otherwise seemingly contradictory identities: namely that of a traditional North Korean woman and that of an empowered entrepreneur in a capitalistic society. A third contribution stems from observations of the disengagement, and dismissive attitudes of multiple training participants—predominately men and South Koreans. These reactions appear related to social cleavages among the participants. This finding indicates a potential “dark side” to entrepreneurship training: the potential for such an intervention to lead to a lack of psychological safety and identity threat for at least some participants. In the present case, North Korean women were the minority in the training interventions, but our results appear to indicate the potential that women from marginalized or underrepresented backgrounds might not benefit fully from such a training if they are in the minority and experience identity-related cleavages with the rest of the training participants.

The Impact of Gamified Learning on Entrepreneurial Intentions: Gender Dynamics and TPB Insights from a Quasi-Experiment

Segantini, Neves Bezerra de Melo

Principal Topic

Recent literature shows that gaming and game-based learning environments offer a valuable setting to examine gender differences in motivation, learning, and entrepreneurship related skills such as decision-making and self-regulation. Studies indicate that digital games can enhance motivation and learning, though effects vary by gender. Reviews highlight that design features such as immediate feedback, progressive challenge, narrative, and autonomy particularly benefit students with lower self-confidence in traditionally masculinized domains like STEM (McClarty et al., 2012), especially girls, who often begin with lower self-efficacy in math and technical tasks.

A consistent finding is that girls learn more and engage more strategically than boys in gamified environments. A key mechanism is gaming the system: succeeding by exploiting system rules rather than learning. Baker et al. (2025) show that girls engage in this behavior far less than boys, mediating their superior learning outcomes. Lower gaming-the-system rates indicate greater self-regulation and deeper processing, both linked to higher-quality entrepreneurial decision making.

Gameplay preferences also differ by gender: girls tend to favor collaborative, narrative, and goal-oriented mechanics, while boys gravitate toward action, competition, and speed (Kirriemuir, 2002). Narrative and contextual feedback can reduce anxiety and increase girls' self efficacy, which is critical for decisions under uncertainty such as entrepreneurial choice.

Behavioral gaps further emerge in problematic gaming patterns. Boys are more prone to compulsive, repetitive behaviors (Desai et al., 2010), whereas girls display more reflective patterns. In entrepreneurship education, games simulate uncertainty, iteration, and problem solving, and can increase self-efficacy and tolerance for failure. Given girls' higher engagement and lower gaming-the-system tendencies, gamified environments may help reduce gender gaps in entrepreneurship-related skills.

Methodology

We employ a quasi-experimental design to examine how a gamified entrepreneurship learning environment influences students' entrepreneurial intention (EI) and the core antecedents of the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), with particular attention to gender differences. The analysis draws on data from 487 students enrolled in technical education programs at a federal public institution in Northeast Brazil. The sample includes 199 men (95 control, 104 treatment) and 288 women (142 control, 146 treatment), with gender broadly balanced across groups. Of these students, 257 participated in the EcoFarming simulation, the course's main experiential learning component, which immerses learners in a digitally mediated agribusiness environment characterized by uncertainty and resource constraints (Melo & Soares, 2025). The remaining 230 students formed a control group that completed an equivalent curriculum delivered through traditional, non-gamified instruction.

Data were collected at the beginning, middle, and end of the academic year. EI was measured using an adapted version of Liñán and Chen's (2009) scale, while attitudes toward entrepreneurship, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control were assessed using established TPB constructs (Ajzen, 1991). Given that gender shapes both baseline EI and responsiveness to pedagogy, it was treated as a central analytical dimension. Because random assignment was not feasible, we estimated propensity scores using pre-treatment covariates— including gender, age, academic performance, and parental entrepreneurial background—and matched students via nearest-neighbor procedures within the region of common support. This approach strengthens the counterfactual and reduces selection bias. We then applied a difference in-differences framework to estimate treatment effects by comparing changes over time between treated and control students (Angrist & Pischke, 2008).

Results & Implications

Preliminary results show consistent and statistically robust evidence that the gamified activity improved all TPB-related outcomes over time. Students who engaged in the gamified activity demonstrated significant increases in EI and attitude toward the behavior (ATB), subjective norms (SN), and perceived behavioral control (PBC). During the intervention, coefficients for these constructs ranged from 0.25 to 0.34, and these effects intensified in the postintervention period, reaching values between 0.67 and 0.83 ($p<0.001$). EI followed a similar trajectory, increasing by 0.33 during the intervention and by 0.78 afterward, indicating that the gamified environment supported both immediate and sustained shifts in entrepreneurial cognition and motivation.

These findings align with research showing that experiential and feedback-rich learning environments enhance self-regulation, persistence and deeper cognitive processing, mechanisms frequently activated in well-designed game-based learning systems. Gender interaction analyses reveal minimal differences between men and women across most outcomes, suggesting that the intervention exerts broadly similar effects across groups. The only exception appears in subjective norms, where women show a smaller post-intervention effect ($\beta=-0.189$; $p=0.028$). Even so, estimated marginal effects remain positive and significant for both genders, indicating that the gamified activity benefits all students while revealing subtle gender-specific dynamics that merit further investigation.

Transformative Digital Entrepreneurship Education for Gender-Based Violence Survivors

Felix-Faure, Ndlovu, Berg

Principal Topic

Recent evidence from the 2023/2024 GEM Women's Report shows that women are more likely than men to start businesses with the explicit intention of "making a difference" and to prioritise sustainability strategies (Elam et al., 2024). This aligns with broader research indicating that women-led social entrepreneurial organisations make substantial contributions to positive social change through the values they embed in their ventures (Borquist & de Bruin, 2019). Women entrepreneurs also tend to place greater emphasis on social value creation than their male counterparts (Hechavarria et al., 2017), with some scholars suggesting that their heightened concern for social issues positions them particularly well to lead social enterprises (Rosca, Agarwal & Brem, 2020).

Against this backdrop, this study examines a woman-founded social enterprise, the Inclusive Entrepreneurship Academy (IEA), which delivers trauma-informed, critically oriented digital entrepreneurship programs for women gender-based violence (GBV) survivors in South African townships. By focusing on a population largely absent from entrepreneurship and digital inclusion research, the study provides needed empirical insight into how women in highly constrained contexts, facing violence, exclusion, and digital inequity, engage in entrepreneurial learning and leverage digital tools to rebuild agency, pursue economic participation, and contribute to community well-being. Critical pedagogy, trauma-informed practices, and entrepreneurship education are integrated to address systemic inequities while fostering safety, agency, and relevant skills among women GBV survivors.

Although digital learning is considered transformative for underserved and marginalised groups (Sharabani Mukherjee et al., 2025), few studies address the unique needs of women GBV survivors in South Africa. This gap is critical given the intersecting challenges they face, including safety risks, psychosocial distress, limited technology access, and structural inequalities, which demand context-specific, trauma-responsive pedagogical and technological approaches.

Therefore, the research question guiding this study is:

How can a trauma-informed, critically oriented digital entrepreneurship education programme effectively support the empowerment, skill development, and psychosocial resilience of GBV survivors in South African townships?

Trauma-Informed Digital Pedagogy: Creating Caring Learning Environments

This study embeds trauma-informed principles in digital entrepreneurship education to create safe, empowering learning environments for GBV survivors. By prioritizing emotional well-being, trust, and learner agency, the approach aligns with andragogy and trauma-informed pedagogy (Chan et al., 2022) and addresses systemic inequities and mental health challenges (Adams et al., 2023). Integrating trauma-sensitive practices with critical and collaborative learning strategies, the program reduces psychological barriers and fosters resilience and empowerment in digital contexts.

Entrepreneurship Education as a Pathway to Empowerment

The study is implemented through the Inclusive Entrepreneurship Academy (IEA), a South African capacity-building platform that provides context-responsive and equity-oriented entrepreneurship education for underserved communities, particularly in township settings. Within the IEA, entrepreneurship education functions as a social impact intervention, building entrepreneurial literacy, creativity, self-efficacy, and resilience among GBV survivors without presuming that participants become entrepreneurs themselves (Maulida et al., 2024).

Inclusive Digital Learning Strategies for South African Contexts

South Africa's unique socio-educational landscape presents both challenges and opportunities for implementing transformative digital learning for GBV survivors. The country's digital divide, characterized by "lack of appropriate devices, unfitting learning environment, lacking in digital skill, and possessing various socio-economic challenges" (Woo et al., 2022), poses significant barriers to effective digital learning, particularly for marginalized groups including GBV survivors.

Methodology

This study employs a Participatory Action Research (PAR) design to co-develop, implement, and evaluate a digital entrepreneurship learning program for GBV survivors in South African township contexts.

The study uses multiple qualitative methods to capture women GBV survivors’ experiences. Semi-structured interviews with participants and facilitators provide insight into personal transformation, skill development, and psychosocial growth (Isik, 2023), while focus groups enable collective reflection on challenges, successes, and group dynamics (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Reflective journals and digital learning logs offer longitudinal, participant-generated accounts of progress (Suraworachet, Zhou & Cukurova, 2023). Observational and participatory data document real-time interactions, collaborative problem-solving, and co-design workshops that refine curriculum and trauma-informed practices (Qualitative Methods for Digital Social Research, 2025). Digital metrics, including login patterns, task completion, collaborative activity, and entrepreneurial outputs, complement these insights with engagement analytics (Johnston & Jendoubi, 2024; Yang, Ghislandi, Raffaghelli & Ritella, 2019).

The study employs thematic analysis to identify patterns related to empowerment, critical consciousness, entrepreneurial skill development, and psychosocial resilience, following Braun and Clarke’s (2006) widely used framework. These insights are strengthened through triangulation, combining data from interviews, reflective journals, observations, and digital learning analytics to enhance validity (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Outcome mapping is then used to trace how specific learning activities translate into practical skill development, increased confidence, and enhanced personal agency, consistent with approaches outlined by Earl, Carden, and Smutylo (2001).

Results & Implications

We expect increased personal agency and resilience through trauma-informed digital learning (Carello & Butler, 2015; Imad, 2023); strengthened entrepreneurial literacy and digital capabilities for practical problem-solving; and the emergence of community-oriented micro-projects that create social value without needing venture creation by all participants (Brown, 2008; Liedtka, 2018; Ledwith, 2020). The findings will advance critical pedagogy and trauma-informed theory by showing how these frameworks operate in digital contexts and offer practical design insights for inclusive entrepreneurial ecosystems in the Global South. By examining digital entrepreneurship learning in South African townships, the study contributes rare empirical evidence from an under-researched population.

Extending the Effects of Personal Initiative (PI) Training for Women: Considering the Role of Peer Coaching Groups

Glosenberg, Weber, Gielnik, Kuckertz

Principal Topic

A major distinction among approaches to entrepreneurship training can be made based upon the extent to which they focus on classroom activities that emphasize detailed theoretical or business knowledge (a more “traditional” approach) versus an action-oriented approach wherein trainees are encouraged to engage in active learning – usually guided only by heuristics (i.e. shorthand rules of thumb; see Gielnik & Glosenberg, 2025). Within the broader set of action-oriented approaches to entrepreneurship training entrepreneurs is personal initiative (PI) training (Frese et al., 2016), an approach that focuses on creating an active performance orientation in entrepreneurs through heuristics tied to the entrepreneurial process. PI training has shown notable potential, via randomized controlled trials, to assist entrepreneurs both in the short-term (e.g., Campos et al., 2017; Glaub et al., 2014; Ubfal et al., 2022) and the longer term – extending up to 7.5 years (Campos et al., 2025). As such, PI training has become a leading example of the potential effectiveness of training interventions to help entrepreneurs from marginalized backgrounds, including women, in emerging economies (see McKenzie, 2021).

Despite the potential for PI training to assist women, the investigation of the long-term effects of PI training in Togo did not find similar benefits among men and women—indeed, the effects of PI training increase for men, but for women, they are flat or decline in the longer term (Campos et al., 2025). This difference in effects by gender echoes the tendency for entrepreneurship programs to be more effective for men than women (e.g., Berge et al., 2015). The potential for discrepancies in the outcomes for men and women in PI interventions were highlighted in two prior studies. First, Mensmann et al. (2018) found that error competence and entrepreneurial passion were higher among women than men in the PI training condition. These authors reasoned that, based upon social role theory (Eagly & Wood, 2012), women’s socialization as caretakers, as opposed to agentic providers, increases the perceived risks of entrepreneurship, and decreases the perceived returns, for women. Because of PI’s action orientation, women are able to develop a greater sense of passion and error competence through practice and the making of gradual progress during training; however, it is possible that these effects during training tend to fade for women. Second, Alibhai et al. (2019) explored the effects of PI training but found no effects on profit, revenues, and employees. Yet in a post-hoc analysis of the PI training results, the authors noted that levels of personal initiative and error competence were higher among those women whose trainers were also women.

In addition to training, active learning might be promoted by coaching and/or mentoring programs that extend beyond the typical training timeframe. Indeed, Germann et al. (2024) utilized a randomized controlled trial and found evidence for the positive effect of women mentors for women entrepreneurs. This effect of mentoring highlights the potential of social support to benefit women entrepreneurs; often, important forms of social support comes from peers – and in particular, entrepreneurial peers. Peer support is often provided within peer-support/development groups (herein peer-support groups) defined by Terekhin and Aurora (2024) as “organized small groups consisting of members of perceived similar status and roles who regularly meet to foster mutual growth by providing a supportive environment and a flexible agenda” (p. 314). Given the importance of self-regulation/self-monitoring and sensemaking in entrepreneurial learning (Crosina et al., 2024; Eller et al., 2022), peer coaching might be a particularly effective way to promote entrepreneurial development. Moreover, given the role of negative emotions / emotional exhaustion in potentially undermining entrepreneurial efforts (Sardeshmukh et al., 2021), peer coaching might also be of particular help in its ability to buffer those negative effects. Critically, due to the likelihood that women might have fewer opportunities for entrepreneurial development and/or might experience more negative experiences than man, peer-support groups might be particularly important for women. However, based upon prior research on the importance of gender congruence in mentor-mentee and trainer-trainee relationships, the gender composition of such groups might be an important moderating factor.

Methodology

To explore the role of peer-support groups for women following PI training, we conduct a qualitative investigation that is part of a broader randomized controlled trial of PI training with the addition of follow-on peer coaching groups. This trial is currently being conducted in Tanzania among approximately 850 agricultural entrepreneurs. We will conduct a qualitative analysis of selected women and men in both control and treatment conditions before PI training and then following training and during the course of peer-coaching engagement. Participants will be selected based upon theoretical rationales to provide maximum variation in theoretically meaningful factors/processes. Key questions asked include: How do you tend to go about seeking peer support and what sort of support is provided? What factors make participation in peer-coaching frameworks beneficial, difficult, or problematic? Data are to be collected through in-person interviews with participants in the first quarter of 2026.

Results & Implications

The results of our investigation will help to both test and form propositions about how peer-coaching might be of assistance to women entrepreneurs. Interviews will be content analyzed with multiple coders with an eye toward informant-centric first order and theory-facing second-order codes that help to highlight theoretical processes, and how those processes might differ among men and women. We will use these insights to help to build a theoretical model of peer-support processes for women entrepreneurs.

Ecosystems & Policy

Sociocultural Factors Shaping the Transformation Towards an Inclusive Entrepreneurial Ecosystem for Women in the Engineering and Mining Sectors

Msimango-Galawe, Runganga

Principal Topic

Women entrepreneurs are increasingly recognised not only as drivers of economic growth but also as agents of social change. Research, including the GEM 2023/24 Women's Report, demonstrates that women are more likely than men to prioritise social value over personal economic gain when starting businesses. This orientation manifests in women-led ventures—both social and commercial—creating significant employment opportunities, thereby addressing one of South Africa's most pressing social challenges: unemployment. Yet, despite their contributions, women entrepreneurs face persistent structural and sociocultural barriers within male-dominated sectors such as engineering, mining, manufacturing, and construction (Ajani, 2024; Mugove et al., 2024). These sectors hold high potential for job creation and innovation, but entrenched gender biases, restrictive cultural norms, and inequitable access to resources continue to hinder women's entrepreneurial success (Sharma, 2021; Żemojtel-Piotrowska & Piotrowski, 2023).

Objective of the Study: This study investigates the sociocultural factors shaping women's entrepreneurship in the engineering and mining sectors in South Africa, highlighting pathways to transform the entrepreneurial ecosystem into a more inclusive one. While prior research has often focused narrowly on economic outcomes or gender disparities, this study positions women's entrepreneurial activity within a broader sociocultural and systemic framework, linking social value creation, ecosystem inclusivity, and the transformative potential of entrepreneurship education (Schultz et al., 2024; Treanor, 2022; Ghouse et al., 2017). By moving beyond a Hofstede-only cultural lens, the study situates women's experiences within evolving ecosystem dynamics, acknowledging the interplay of culture, education, policy, and social entrepreneurship in shaping outcomes (Hofstede, 1980; Radziszewska, 2014; Kuschel et al. 2020; Mfazi & Elliott, 2022).

Methodology

The research adopted a quantitative, positivist approach, collecting data from 95 women entrepreneurs in engineering through an online self-administered questionnaire (Bryman, 2016; Creswell & Poth, 2018). A cross-sectional research design was employed, and participants were randomly sampled over three months to ensure representation across diverse demographic and regional contexts. Multiple regression and mediation analyses were conducted using SPSS Version 26 to examine the influence of Hofstede's cultural dimensions on entrepreneurial success and the mediating role of entrepreneurship education.

Results & Implications

The findings underscore the profound influence of sociocultural norms on women's entrepreneurial outcomes. Hofstede's cultural dimensions were found to exert a significant negative effect on entrepreneurial success, revealing the barriers women face in navigating traditional, male-dominated business environments. Yet, entrepreneurship education emerged as a critical lever, exerting a strong direct positive impact on women's entrepreneurial performance while partially mitigating the constraints imposed by restrictive cultural norms. The mediation analysis demonstrated that targeted educational interventions could enhance women's agency, confidence, and strategic decision-making, thereby enabling them to challenge entrenched stereotypes and assert leadership in sectors historically dominated by men.

Implications: These results have important implications for policy, practice, and future research. First, they highlight the need to embed inclusive, culturally aware entrepreneurship education programs that not only build technical and managerial skills but also equip women with the tools to navigate sociocultural and systemic barriers. Leadership empowerment modules, mentorship schemes, and programs that explicitly challenge masculine stereotypes are recommended as practical strategies to strengthen women's presence and impact in engineering and mining. Second, government and industry stakeholders must consider cultural dimensions when designing policies and interventions to foster inclusive entrepreneurial ecosystems. This includes targeted support for women-led ventures in sectors critical to national economic transformation and employment creation. Finally, the study underscores the importance of intersectional approaches that account for the combined effects of gender, race, culture, and socioeconomic status on women's entrepreneurial journeys.

Contribution: Beyond immediate policy and educational recommendations, this research contributes to the growing discourse on transformative entrepreneurship in the digital age, where technology, innovation, and social value creation converge. By situating women's entrepreneurship within broader sociocultural and ecosystemic contexts, the study illustrates how inclusive ecosystems can be engineered to promote not only economic success but also social impact (Nabi et al., 2017; Fayolle & Gailly, 2015; Elliott et al., 2021). Women entrepreneurs, particularly in engineering and mining, are uniquely positioned to lead this transformation, bridging gaps in employment, innovation, and social equity while redefining traditional business paradigms.

In conclusion, creating an inclusive entrepreneurial ecosystem for women in engineering and mining requires a multifaceted approach that integrates cultural awareness, education, policy reform, and ecosystem transformation. While sociocultural norms continue to shape entrepreneurial outcomes, strategically designed entrepreneurship education programs offer a viable pathway to empower women, foster innovation, and enhance ecosystem inclusivity. By focusing on social value creation, leadership development, and the dismantling of gendered barriers, this study provides actionable insights for practitioners, policymakers, and educators seeking to support women-led ventures that are both economically sustainable and socially transformative. The findings reinforce the notion that the future of entrepreneurship lies not only in economic metrics but also in the ability to generate meaningful social change and equitable opportunities for all.

The Innovation-Gender Policy Coherence Gap: How Parallel Policy Frameworks Fail to Enable Women's Technology Entrepreneurship

Keeffe, Chang, Bandara, Beekhuyzen

Principal Topic

Despite widespread policy commitments to innovation-driven economic growth and gender equality, women remain severely underrepresented in technology entrepreneurship, securing only 2% of venture capital globally despite comprising nearly 40% of entrepreneurs overall (Tech Nation, 2025). This paper introduces the concept of the "Innovation-Gender Policy Coherence Gap", the absence of systematic coordination mechanisms between innovation and gender equality policy frameworks despite rhetorical commitments to "inclusive innovation".

Most developed economies maintain parallel policy infrastructures: innovation policies focused on ecosystem development alongside gender equality policies addressing workforce participation. Both domains increasingly acknowledge the importance of gender-inclusive innovation, yet coordination remains ad hoc, person-dependent, and structurally fragmented. Drawing on policy coherence literature (May et al., 2006; Nilsson et al., 2012) and feminist institutionalism (Mackay et al., 2010), this paper, through empirical analysis of Queensland, Australia's ecosystem, demonstrates how policy incoherence creates systematic barriers that rhetoric alone cannot overcome.

Methodology

This paper employs a three-layer institutional analysis examining formal policy frameworks (macro layer), implementation organisations (meso layer), and individual experiences (micro layer) across Queensland's innovation ecosystem. The analysis examines policies developed under the Innovation for a Future Economy 2022-2032 Roadmap, with data collection occurring during a political transition to Liberal National Party government (2024).

Data collection includes systematic analysis of 23 policy documents (Advance Queensland innovation strategies, Queensland Women's Strategy, Budget Statements, Gender Equality Report Cards, departmental strategic plans), a focus group with implementers, and interviews with seven stakeholders, including female founders, venture capitalists, and a program partner. This multi-stakeholder approach enables triangulation, revealing pattern convergence while capturing how policy incoherence manifests differently across positions.

The analytical framework employs five coding categories applied systematically across all data sources: (1) Enabler Presence Mapping, (2) Institutional Implementation Analysis, (3) Stakeholder Coordination Dynamics, (4) Gap and Contradiction Analysis, and (5) Institutional Design Insights. This pragmatist feminist methodology (Caretta, 2015; Haraway, 1991; Harding et al., 2016) prioritises democratic knowledge production.

Results & Implications

Macro-layer policy analysis reveals parallel frameworks operating independently: innovation policies list women's programs as initiatives but lack gender-specific objectives or gender-disaggregated outcome measures. In contrast, gender equality policies emphasise workforce participation and pay equity without specific attention to technology entrepreneurship or connection to innovation policy frameworks. This formal-informal institutional disconnect (North, 1990; Scott, 2014) reflects gendered power relations embedded in seemingly neutral institutional arrangements (Chappell & Waylen, 2013).

Five mechanisms through which policy incoherence manifests emerged from meso-layer analysis and were validated across multiple stakeholder perspectives. First, siloed delivery creates fragmentation: separate programs for female founders, First Nations founders, regional founders, and multicultural founders force intersectional founders to choose categories while creating both duplication and gaps. Second, capability gaps mean that some policy staff lack the appropriate innovation or gender expertise. Third, measurement misalignment prioritises activity metrics over gendered outcome tracking. Fourth, inter-departmental disconnects create gaps between policy intent and resource allocation. Fifth, the system depends on fragile institutional agents: exceptional individuals whose enabling functions disappear when they leave their roles. A political transition to a Liberal National Party government (2024) during the research period exposed the fragility of these policy frameworks, which relied on person-based rather than systematised coordination mechanisms (Lipsky, 2010).

Micro-layer analysis reveals how policy incoherence translates to founder experience. Interviewed entrepreneurs followed a validation cascade requiring customer validation through bootstrapping before accessing programs, program completion before government backing, and government credibility before potential private investment. This contradicts the "early-stage support" policy rhetoric, revealing a "traction paradox": formal policy promises early-stage support while informal reality requires traction to access purportedly early-stage programs. Female founders experience this through program cycling without clear progression pathways, gendered time barriers because programs are designed without understanding of care responsibilities, and navigation dependency, where success requires, in part, finding the right institutional agents. These findings align with research on gendered investment criteria (Kanze et al., 2018; Malmström et al., 2017), and barriers women face accessing growth capital (Brush et al., 2014).

Contribution

This paper makes three key contributions. First, it introduces the Innovation-Gender Policy Coherence Gap concept and demonstrates empirically how parallel policy commitments fail to translate into systematic enablement without intentional coordination mechanisms.

Second, the paper provides empirical evidence of how policy incoherence manifests across macro, meso, and micro institutional layers. The five mechanisms identified: siloed delivery, capability gaps, measurement misalignment, inter-departmental disconnects, and fragile institutional agents, reveal specific points at which policy intent fails to translate to enablement. The political transition exposed how frameworks dependent on exceptional individuals rather than systematised mechanisms prove fragile when governments change.

Third, the paper translates findings into evidence-based recommendations. Immediate actions include defining shared outcomes, measuring gendered outcomes, and establishing formal coordination mechanisms. Medium-term recommendations address capability gaps through cross-training, integrating programs, and systematising agent functions (Edwards & Brannelly, 2017; Harding et al., 2016).

For policymakers, this research demonstrates that achieving both innovation and gender equality objectives requires intentional coherence mechanisms. For researchers, the paper provides methodological resources for examining policy coherence within ecosystems (Stam & van de Ven, 2021), employing pragmatist feminist approaches, revealing implementation dynamics invisible to traditional analysis (Ahl & Marlow, 2012; Henry et al., 2016). This work also addresses why gender equality remains elusive despite proliferating policies (Brush et al., 2019; Foss et al., 2018): the answer lies not in lack of commitment but in lack of coherence, a structural problem requiring systematic redesign of how policy domains coordinate at their intersections.

When Epistemology Emerges from Practice: Operationalising Pragmatist Feminism in Innovation Ecosystem Research

Keeffe, Woods

Principal Topic

Traditional entrepreneurship research often positions women entrepreneurs as subjects to be studied, employing extractive methodologies that inadvertently reproduce hierarchical knowledge production patterns that constrain women's entrepreneurial participation. Despite calls for more democratic and participatory research approaches (Ahl & Marlow, 2012; Henry et al., 2016), there is limited practical guidance for operationalising feminist epistemological principles in innovation ecosystem research. This methodological paper addresses this gap by demonstrating how pragmatist feminist epistemology transforms research practice, moving from extraction to collaboration, and from a researcher-imposed framework towards democratic knowledge production.

Pragmatist feminist epistemology integrates Dewey's pragmatist focus on practical problem-solving with feminist standpoint theory's recognition that marginalised positions often provide clearer insights into power structures (Haraway, 1991; Harding, 1995). This integration offers a distinctive approach to institutional analysis by centring situated knowledge, prioritising the practical function, and requiring reflexive attention to how power operates within institutional arrangements (Nencel, 2014). Feminist institutionalism has demonstrated how seemingly neutral institutions embody and reproduce gendered power relations (Mackay et al., 2010), yet methodological guidance for operationalising these insights in innovation ecosystem research remains limited. Researchers lack concrete operational strategies for studying how formal and informal institutional arrangements affecting women's entrepreneurship can be examined through democratic, power-aware research practices that align with epistemological commitments and methodological choices.

This paper uses a study of an innovation ecosystem in Queensland, Australia, as an illustrative case to develop and demonstrate a pragmatist feminist methodology framework. The research examined how formal and informal institutional arrangements enable or constrain women's entrepreneurship through policy document analysis, a focus group with policy actors, and semi-structured interviews with ecosystem stakeholders. The methodological innovation lies in how the research was undertaken rather than the subject matter examined.

Methodology

This paper employs critical reflexive analysis of the methodological approaches developed and applied during multi-year doctoral research on innovation ecosystems. The analysis draws on research journal entries documenting methodological decisions, reflexive notes on power dynamics and positionality, stakeholder feedback, and evaluation of how epistemological decisions shaped data collection, analysis and validation practices.

The methodological framework presented in this paper emerged through iterative refinement across three sequential studies: systematic literature review, formal institutional analysis (policy documents and focus group), and informal institutional analysis (stakeholder interviews). Significantly, the pragmatist feminist epistemological stance was not imposed a priori, but emerged as the most coherent articulation of how I naturally approached research problems; valuing practical utility, multiple perspectives, and action towards change. This recognition came through reflexively examining what was working and why, testing different epistemological "fits" until I realised that pragmatist feminism named the approach I had organically adopted. In each research phase, I found myself consistently making methodological choices that prioritised stakeholder knowledge (Jones et al., 2019; Lokot, 2021), practical outcomes and democratic engagement, power-aware analysis, and quality assessment that extended beyond abstract philosophical commitments to actual research practice. The framework demonstrates how feminist epistemology can emerge from researchers' implicit ways of knowing.

Results & Implications

This paper presents a Pragmatist Feminist Methodology Framework for innovation ecosystem research, with exemplars from the doctoral study.

Situated Knowledge Recognition: Acknowledging that different institutional stakeholders provide access to distinct knowledge dimensions (Caretta, 2015; Haraway, 1991). The research demonstrated how policy actors, entrepreneurs, program partners, and venture capital investors each possess unique insights into distinct aspects of the innovation ecosystem.

Democratic Participation: Moving from a mentality of extractive interviewing to collaborative knowledge production (Edwards & Brannelly, 2017; Harding et al., 2016; Lokot, 2021). This approach enabled vulnerability and deeper trust, and member checking became co-interpretation, with stakeholders collaboratively diagnosing system problems such as the "cliff edge" phenomenon, in which support for female founders abruptly ends.

Practical Problem-Solving Focus: Framing research questions to gather actionable insights rather than pure analytical understanding enabled stakeholders to move beyond describing Queensland's innovation ecosystem problems to proposing solutions to improve its inclusivity and effectiveness.

Reflexive Power Analysis: Continuous examination of the researcher's positionality and power dynamics throughout research design, data collection, and analysis (Farr, 2018). This reflexive practice revealed not only how power operated in the research context but also highlighted the researcher's own epistemological positioning (England, 1994; Trundle et al., 2025). Through an examination of which methodological approaches felt coherent and productive, the researcher identified that pragmatist feminism articulated the principles they had intuitively followed.

Transformative Validation: By employing quality criteria aligned with feminist commitments, the research achieved democratic legitimacy and practical utility, while maintaining rigour (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013; England, 1994; Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Mertens, 2009). Methodological rigour was established through triangulation, with a consistent pattern of convergence across interviews, policy documents, focus groups, and event observations (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

Contributions: This paper makes three key contributions to entrepreneurship research methodology. First, it provides comprehensive operationalisation of pragmatist feminist epistemology specifically for innovation ecosystem research, demonstrating how abstract philosophical decisions translate into concrete research practice. Second, it demonstrates that democratic knowledge production generates richer data while maintaining scholarly rigour through systematic coding and triangulation. Finally, it offers practical methodological guidance that shows how pragmatist feminist epistemology can emerge from researchers' existing practice rather than being imposed as an external framework. In demonstrating how a reflexive examination of methodological choices can reveal implicit feminist pragmatist principles, the paper makes this approach accessible to researchers who may not initially identify with feminist methodologies, but whose practice embodies its core commitments. This emergent approach to epistemological positioning offers an alternative to debates about "choosing" methodological paradigms, instead demonstrating how epistemology can be "discovered" through reflection on authentic research practice.

The Role of State-Logic in Shaping Business Models of Women-Led Agribusiness Cooperatives in an Emerging Market Context

Cherian, Mamabolo, Scheepers

Principal Topic

This paper explores how gender norms, Islamic values, and family support shape the entrepreneurial intentions and experiences of women in Pakistan. It reviews existing academic literature on female entrepreneurship, with a focus on the Pakistani context, assessing the barriers women face in entrepreneurial endeavors. The paper also examines the influence of family support, gender roles, and Islamic teachings in shaping women's decisions and actions regarding entrepreneurship. Recommendations for overcoming these barriers and promoting inclusive economic growth are provided.

Women's role in entrepreneurship, particularly in Muslim-majority countries like Pakistan, has been significantly influenced by cultural, religious, and socio-economic factors. Female entrepreneurship, despite facing several barriers, is gradually gaining recognition as an important contributor to the economy and societal progress. However, the gender gap in economic participation remains substantial in Pakistan. Although gender parity reached 57.5% in 2023, Pakistan still ranks poorly on the Global Gender Gap Index (World Economic Forum, 2023). This paper investigates how factors such as Islamic values, gender norms, and family structures influence the entrepreneurial intentions of women in Pakistan, and explores the challenges they face in the entrepreneurial landscape.

Female entrepreneurship in Pakistan is often constrained by multiple socio-economic and cultural barriers. According to Brush et al. (2009), women entrepreneurs have historically faced challenges related to limited access to financial resources, markets, and networks. In Pakistan, women represent a minimal percentage of the entrepreneurial population, with only about 1% of women being actively engaged in entrepreneurship (World Bank, 2023). This underrepresentation is mirrored in the country's small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), where women hold a disproportionately low share of ownership (Asian Development Bank, 2024).

Research suggests that women in Pakistan often pursue entrepreneurship to gain economic independence, challenge societal norms, and achieve a better work-life balance (Ahl, 2006). However, gendered expectations and limited family support often limit their business opportunities and hinder their growth (Roomi & Parrott, 2008).

Feminist Entrepreneurship Theory (FET) offers a critical lens to understand the dynamics influencing women's entrepreneurial experiences. FET challenges traditional, male-centered entrepreneurial models and emphasizes the role of gendered norms, societal expectations, and institutional barriers in shaping entrepreneurial opportunities for women (Ahl & Marlow, 2012). In the context of Pakistan, where patriarchal structures prevail, FET is particularly useful in analyzing how women entrepreneurs challenge societal norms and redefine entrepreneurship as a form of resistance (Khan & Nawaz, 2017).

In Pakistan, feminist entrepreneurs often prioritize social goals such as community development, poverty reduction, and education over personal financial gain. This shift in entrepreneurial priorities aligns with the notion of "female entrepreneurship," which values collective achievement rather than individual wealth accumulation (Shah, 2016).

Feminist entrepreneurship also highlights the importance of networks and support structures, which play a crucial role in empowering women entrepreneurs (Granovetter, 1985). Women in Pakistan frequently establish their own networks due to exclusion from male-dominated business circles (Khan & Nawaz, 2017). The existence of women-focused initiatives, such as microfinance programs, can significantly influence women's entrepreneurial activities by providing access to capital and social support (Karlan & Zinman, 2011).

Gender Norms and Their Impact

Gender norms are social constructs that shape behaviors and expectations based on an individual's gender (West & Zimmerman, 1987). In Pakistan, gendered norms are deeply entrenched and affect women's roles in both the family and society. These norms limit women's economic participation and often restrict their autonomy, making it challenging for them to enter or succeed in entrepreneurship

(Connell, 2009). The societal expectation that women should primarily fulfill domestic roles significantly hinders their entrepreneurial ambitions (Butler, 1990).

While these norms impose constraints, women entrepreneurs in Pakistan have begun to challenge and reshape their identities to resist patriarchal expectations. As noted by McGowan et al. (2012), this process involves overcoming psychological barriers such as imposter syndrome and self-doubt, which are often exacerbated by societal pressures to conform to traditional gender roles. By pursuing business ventures, women not only defy traditional expectations but also work towards redefining the concept of entrepreneurship in a gendered society (Ahl, 2006).

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative approach, relying on an extensive review of academic literature, reports, and research studies to examine the factors influencing female entrepreneurship in Pakistan. The analysis is based on secondary data collected from peer reviewed articles, international reports, and national studies. The methodology aims to synthesize existing research to identify the key challenges and opportunities for women entrepreneurs in Pakistan, focusing on gender norms, family support, and Islamic values.

Results & Implications

Family support plays a crucial role in shaping the entrepreneurial decisions of women in Pakistan. As the family is a central unit in Pakistani society, family values and structure significantly influence women's entrepreneurial intentions. According to Roomi & Parrott (2008), family support can act as both a facilitator and a barrier to female entrepreneurship. Women from supportive families are more likely to venture into business, while those from traditional families often face resistance due to societal expectations of women's roles as caregivers and homemakers.

Research by Khan et al. (2019) suggests that family support in the form of financial assistance and encouragement enhances women's ability to start and grow their businesses. In contrast, women who lack familial support may struggle to balance entrepreneurial pursuits with domestic responsibilities, leading to higher rates of failure or limited business growth (Shah, 2016).

Barriers to Female Entrepreneurship

Several barriers hinder the entrepreneurial ambitions of women in Pakistan. These barriers include:

Cultural and Religious Constraints: Gendered cultural norms and religious beliefs often restrict women's mobility and economic participation (Khan & Nawaz, 2017).

Financial Barriers: Women face limited access to finance, which is compounded by gender bias in financial institutions, further restricting their ability to start and scale businesses (Wilson et al., 2007).

Gendered Expectations: Societal pressure to fulfill domestic roles creates a conflict for women entrepreneurs who are expected to balance family duties with business activities (McGowan et al., 2012).

Limited Networks: Women are often excluded from male-dominated business networks, which limits their access to mentorship, resources, and business opportunities (Granovetter, 1985).

Recommendations

To promote female entrepreneurship in Pakistan, several strategies can be employed:

Policy Reform: Policymakers should introduce regulations that address the financial and social barriers faced by women entrepreneurs, including gender-sensitive policies for access to credit and business resources (Karlan & Zinman, 2011).

Education and Training: Providing entrepreneurship education and training programs specifically for women can help bridge the skills gap and empower them to pursue business ventures confidently (Ahl, 2006).

Social and Cultural Change: Efforts should be made to challenge and transform societal gender norms to create a more inclusive environment for women entrepreneurs (Connell, 2009).

Strengthening Family Support: Support programs that promote family involvement and educate families on the benefits of women’s economic participation can mitigate the barriers posed by traditional family structures (Khan et al., 2019).

Conclusion

Female entrepreneurship in Pakistan faces significant challenges rooted in cultural, religious, and societal norms. However, with targeted interventions that address these barriers, such as policy reform, educational programs, and the promotion of family support systems, Pakistan can empower its women and unlock their entrepreneurial potential. By shifting societal perceptions of gender roles and fostering a supportive environment for women entrepreneurs, Pakistan can encourage inclusive growth and economic development.

Identity & Cognition

The Double-Edged Sword of Founder Attractiveness: Social Sexual Behavior, Self-Efficacy, and Venture Performance

Shirokova, Amarantov, Bodolica

Principal Topic

The escalating public discourse on sexual harassment, inappropriate workplace culture, and power dynamics has thrust the study of social sexual behavior (SSB) to the forefront of organizational scholarship (Cortina & Areguin, 2021). SSB represents a pervasive yet complex phenomenon - its manifestations, ranging from flirtation and sexual humor to suggestive storytelling, are inherently social, unfolding within the relational fabric of organizational life. The consequences of SSB are similarly complex and double-edged (Gillanders et al., 2021; Mbah & Abeh, 2019; Mehta, 2023; Sheppard et al., 2020).

To date, the literature on SSB has been centered predominantly on established corporate environments and the employee experience. However, while we know that attractiveness matters and that SSB is a potent social force in organizations, we know remarkably little about how the SSB directed at founders by external stakeholders influences the trajectory of a new venture. Our study addresses this gap by asking our first research question: How does SSB directed at founders by external stakeholders relate to new venture performance?

To unpack this relationship, we introduce founder self-esteem as a central mediating mechanism. Self-esteem, defined as an individual's subjective evaluation of their own worth (Orth & Robins, 2014), is a cornerstone of entrepreneurial personality, profoundly shaping behavior, decision-making, and leadership (Rosenberg, 1965). Founders, who exert a disproportionate influence on their ventures, rely on qualities like confidence, resilience, and assertiveness – all hallmarks of high self-esteem. Given that self-esteem is fundamentally shaped by social interactions, we theorize that the nature of SSB from key stakeholders can significantly impact a founder's self-perception, with cascading effects on their venture. This leads to our second research question: Does founder self-esteem mediate the relationship between SSB directed at founders by external stakeholders and new venture performance?

Furthermore, we contend that the impact of SSB is not universal but is contingent upon the broader socio-cultural context. Entrepreneurship is deeply embedded in cultural norms and values (Laskovaia et al., 2017), and the interpretation and consequences of SSB are likely to vary across national settings (Weiss et al., 2023). We focus specifically on national gender egalitarianism (House et al., 2004), as a critical boundary condition. We propose that in cultures with high gender egalitarianism, which promote inclusive and discrimination-free practices, the psychological impact of SSB on a founder may be fundamentally different than in less egalitarian contexts (Bradley-Geist et al., 2015). Thus, our third research question is: How does national gender egalitarianism moderate the relationship between SSB directed at founders by external stakeholders and new venture performance?

Method

To test our hypotheses, we employed data of 1,200 new ventures from 24 countries from the 2018 edition of the GUESSS project. Our empirical findings were obtained after we performed a mediation and moderated mediation analyses using Hayes's (2022) PROCESS macro for R Version 4.0.1.

Results & Implications

Our analysis reveals a counterintuitive finding: SSB exerts a significant negative impact on both new venture performance and founder self-esteem. This suggests that contrary to potential benefits of founder attractiveness, SSB acts as a social stressor in the entrepreneurial context. Furthermore, we find that gender egalitarianism positively moderates the mediating pathway of self-esteem, mitigating its detrimental effect. Moreover, it was identified that national gender egalitarianism moderates the strength of the indirect effect between SSB and new venture performance.

Entrepreneurial Mindset and African Women’s Social Entrepreneurship in the Digital Economy: A Systematic Review of Context, Identity, and Innovation

Baadjie

Principal Topic

African women social entrepreneurs are at the forefront of addressing complex societal challenges, including poverty, gender inequality, environmental sustainability, and youth unemployment. Often operating in contexts of limited institutional support and digital infrastructure, these women are using entrepreneurship as both a vehicle for social change and a tool for self-empowerment. Despite their growing impact, scholarship on their entrepreneurial mindset, that is, the cognitive, emotional, and behavioural patterns that influence how they identify opportunities, respond to constraints, and sustain social ventures, remains sparse, fragmented, and often conceptually detached from their realities.

Historically, dominant theories of entrepreneurial mindset have been shaped by Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich, and Democratic (WEIRD) contexts, often emphasising individualism, risk-taking, and market-based logic. These frameworks underplay the collectivist, relational, and resilience-driven logics that underpin African women's entrepreneurial practices. Moreover, while recent research recognises the role of digital platforms in shaping opportunity structures, there is limited understanding of how digital transformation intersects with gender, culture, and power in shaping mindset formation.

This paper presents a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) that synthesises peer-reviewed research published between 2015 and 2025, with a focus on African women social entrepreneurs and the development of an entrepreneurial mindset in digital economies. It aims to reframe the entrepreneurial mindset as a culturally and digitally situated phenomenon, shaped by structural constraints, identity negotiation, and emergent learning via technology.

The review addresses the following research questions:

How is the entrepreneurial mindset conceptualised in studies on African women’s social entrepreneurship?

What mechanisms support or constrain mindset development in digital entrepreneurial contexts?

What structural and intersectional barriers influence women’s ability to develop and express an entrepreneurial mindset?

What empowerment outcomes emerge from entrepreneurial activities enabled by digital tools?

Methodology

This study employs a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) methodology that adheres to PRISMA guidelines, encompassing a structured search, screening, and synthesis process. The review utilised databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar, focusing on literature from 2015 to 2025. The inclusion criteria were established to feature empirical or conceptual peer-reviewed studies that centre on African women entrepreneurs, digital technologies, and concepts related to mindset, identity, and/or empowerment. Ultimately, the final sample consisted of eight core studies, which included qualitative, review-based, ethnographic, and survey-based research from South Africa, Nigeria, Zimbabwe, Ghana, and various multi-country African contexts.

Results & Implications

The review produced several critical insights across key dimensions:

1. Mindset Formation is Iterative, Social, and Identity-Based

Mindset was found to be adaptive, not static, and formed through multiple social roles. Swartz et al. (2022) described transitions from corporate to entrepreneurial identity as being driven by social purpose and facilitated by digital platforms such as Zoom and Slack. Mweha (2025) found a staged progression in mindset as entrepreneurs navigated post-pandemic economies.

2. Digital Tools are Enablers of Opportunity, Learning, and Confidence

WhatsApp, mobile money (M-Pesa), e-commerce (Jumia), and agritech platforms (FarmDrive) were repeatedly cited as low-barrier, high-impact enablers. They fostered community support, market intelligence, and autonomous decision-making. Hamzat et al. (2023) emphasised AI-enabled education tools, while Ibrahim et al. (2025) highlighted the role of online peer networks in building resilience.

Barriers to access in the digital landscape are structural, gendered, and intersectional, as highlighted by the literature. Key challenges include significant infrastructure gaps, such as connectivity, electricity, and device access. Additionally, digital literacy constraints are particularly pronounced in rural areas. Socio-cultural norms also play a role, often limiting women's mobility, financial independence, and available time for engagement with technology. Furthermore, there is intersectional discrimination based on factors like marital status, religion, or sexual orientation (Ibrahim et al., 2025). Kwami (2015) emphasised the gendered nature of information and communication technologies (ICTs), pointing out that access to mobile phones is distributed unequally.

4. Entrepreneurial Characteristics Include Resilience, Innovation, and Social Mission

Swartz et al. (2022) and Fayyaz et al. (2024) highlighted innovation driven by contextual problem-solving. Women were shown to pivot business models, use platforms to circumvent traditional barriers, and maintain strong prosocial motivations.

5. Empowerment Outcomes are Multidimensional

Digital entrepreneurship enabled:

- Economic independence (Mweha, 2025)
- Leadership and voice in shaping local economies (Swartz et al., 2022)
- Challenging social norms (Ibrahim et al., 2025)
- Enhanced self-efficacy and autonomy through tech-enabled learning (Hamzat et al., 2023)

These outcomes position the entrepreneurial mindset as both a means and an end in the broader pursuit of gender equality and social transformation.

Identity Pathways to Eco-Innovation: Rethinking Women's Entrepreneurship in a Digital Age

Kisoi, Vlaisavljevic, Hernandez

Principal Topic

Women's social and sustainable entrepreneurship is recognised as a vital pathway for addressing societal and environmental challenges, yet remains shaped by gendered structures, institutional contexts and evolving sustainability demands (Ahl, 2006; Borzaga & Galera, 2012; Adams et al., 2016). Foundational scholarship on women's entrepreneurship highlights how structural, contextual and identity-based barriers shape engagement, ambition and growth (Brush, 2006). Yet even as global participation in sustainability-driven venturing increases, the behavioural mechanisms through which women and men translate their identities into eco-innovative and socially oriented entrepreneurial action remain insufficiently understood.

Prior research often assumes that women are more likely to prioritise social or environmental goals (Elam et al., 2024; Hechavarría et al., 2017), but demographic comparisons alone provide limited insight into how eco-innovation (EI) emerges. This study therefore reframes EI as a form of social entrepreneurial behaviour, examining the identity-linked antecedents and behavioural mechanisms that shape it.

Guided by identity theory (Stryker & Burke, 2000) and conceptualisations of entrepreneurial orientation (EO) as a behavioural enactment of identity (Covin & Wales, 2019), the study examines:

1. How do gender, education and generational identity shape entrepreneurs' engagement in EI?

2. Does EO (innovativeness, proactivity and risk-taking) mediate the relationship between these identity markers and EI?

3. Do contextual affordances (funding, institutional support, sector and academic spinoff origin) moderate the identity–behaviour link?

This identity-centred approach aligns with gender-aware frameworks of women's entrepreneurship (Brush et al., 2009) and investigates whether gender matters once education, generation, EO and contextual affordances are taken into account.

Methodology

The study draws on a cross-sectional dataset of 401 European entrepreneurs, with 392 valid responses after quality screening. Respondents were founders or senior leaders operating across digital and non-digital sectors in the UK, Western, Southern and Eastern/Central Europe; 38 per cent identified as women.

EI was measured using a PITEC-derived scale (reduce–reuse–recycle) capturing both product and process innovation ($\alpha = .87$). EO captured innovativeness, proactivity and risk-taking and was aggregated into a z-standardised composite index. Identity-linked predictors included gender, education level and generational cohort. Generational differences were also interpreted as a proxy for socialisation in a digital age, reflecting how younger entrepreneurs have come of age with digital technologies, climate discourse and sustainability education.

Contextual affordances captured funding (log-transformed EUR raised over three years), institutional support (engagement with incubators, accelerators, universities and public agencies), sector (NACE-based categories), venture origin (academic/research spinoff versus independent) and regional context (UK, Western, Southern, Eastern/Central Europe).

Analytically, we conducted multiple regression to test direct effects of gender, education and generation on EI, hierarchical regression and mediation tests to assess whether EO explains the link between identity markers and EI, and moderation analyses to test whether contextual affordances shape the strength of the EO–EI relationship.

Results & Implications

Descriptively, entrepreneurs reported moderate EI ($M = 2.90$, $SD = 1.14$) and moderate-to-high EO ($M = 2.81$, $SD = 0.90$). EO was strongly and positively correlated with EI ($r = .51$, $p < .001$). Education correlated positively with both EI and EO, while generation correlated negatively, indicating that younger, more educated entrepreneurs are more eco-innovative and more entrepreneurially oriented. Gender showed no significant bivariate relationship with EI or EO.

Regression models showed that, when entered alone, education and generational identity significantly predicted EI, whereas gender did not. However, once EO was included, EO became the dominant predictor ($\beta \approx .63$, $p < .001$) and the direct effects of education and generation on EI became non-significant, indicating indirect behavioural pathways.

Mediation analyses confirmed that:

- Education influences EI indirectly through EO: higher education strengthens EO, which in turn drives EI.
- Generational identity also operates indirectly: younger cohorts exhibit stronger EO, translating into more EI.
- Gender does not significantly predict EO or EI, either directly or indirectly.

Thus, in this sample, EI is driven by identity-linked human capital, generationally shaped digital-age orientations and strong EO rather than gender alone. No contextual affordance significantly moderated the EO–EI relationship. Funding, institutional support, sector and academic spinoff origin had no interaction effects. EO remained robust across all contexts, suggesting that once entrepreneurs internalise an innovative, proactive identity, EI is relatively context-independent.

Implications for Women's Social Entrepreneurship in a Digital Age

These findings reinforce the argument that women's entrepreneurship is shaped by intersecting identities and contexts rather than gender alone (Ahl, 2006; Brush et al., 2009). They challenge essentialist assumptions that women inherently prioritise environmental or social goals, showing instead that identity-building mechanisms—such as education, socialisation and digital-age experiences—create the behavioural foundation for EI.

For women entrepreneurs, this highlights the importance of access to education, identity development opportunities and capability-building initiatives that support EO. Younger women, socialised amid digital technologies and climate discourse, may be especially well positioned to adopt sustainability-oriented entrepreneurial identities. Practically, entrepreneurship education, digital capability-building and mentoring can strengthen EO and support women's social and eco-innovation. These interventions may be particularly impactful in resource-constrained or digitally evolving contexts, where identity development can compensate for structural gaps in funding or institutional support.

The study encourages scholars in women's and social entrepreneurship to foreground identity formation and behavioural enactment, rather than demographic traits alone, when explaining how entrepreneurs drive social and environmental value creation.

An Intersectionality Approach to Founders' Identities Shaping HR Practices in SMEs

Salzmann, Gimenez-Jimenez

Principal Topic

Entrepreneurship is often viewed as helping individuals who experience marginalization to step up the social ladder (Bruton et al., 2013), but it can also reproduce inequalities (e.g., lower prospects for success and growth for marginalized founders). These studies have mainly focused on financial outcomes such as financial performance and growth (e.g., Brodin & Peterson, 2019). But there is limited knowledge on how intersectionality shapes social outcomes, such as employees' well-being, through human resource (HR) decisions. This is problematic because managerial and strategic decisions are influenced by founders' identities (Wagenschwanz, 2021), and any social identity is subject to intersecting power dynamics (McCall, 2005). Previous research of how gender, ethnicity and class influence HR practices in small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) is still underdeveloped (Harney & Alkhalaf, 2021), assuming that all founders adopt the same strategies. This is surprising because scholars argue that entrepreneurship and SMEs are gendered phenomena (e.g., Jennings & Brush, 2013; Mirchandani, 1999), in which gender, ethnicity and class influence founders strategic decisions (Acker, 2006). With this study, we want to answer the calls for understanding the relationship between HR practices and other SME outcomes, such as social outcomes (e.g., van Lancker et al., 2022). As founders in SMEs need to deal with difficulties in hiring and retaining employees (Coad et al., 2017), effective HR practices are essential to address these challenges. Evidence suggests that enhanced loyalty, reduced turnover intentions, improved recruitment outcomes, employee well-being and increased productivity can result from a diversity-promoting work environment (Jankelová et al., 2022; Nweiser & Dajnoki, 2022). Therefore, HR practices that create such an environment are crucial for SMEs to sustain or grow the business.

Research indicates that founders in SMEs generally play the key role in the implementation of HR practices (e.g., Atkinson et al., 2022) and that women founders prioritize social value goals over economic goals (Hechavarría et al., 2017). Consequently, this goal prioritization highlights the relevance of investigating how the social positionality of women founders influences organizational practices. Therefore, we ask the following research questions: *How do intersectional power dynamics influence the (formal and informal) HR practices adopted by women founders (such as diversity management) and the team environment within the SMEs? How do these practices shape the social outcome of the SMEs?*

Intersectionality theory emphasizes the need to see multiple sources of oppression as interconnected and simultaneously experienced. Therefore, we should not simplify the experiences of individuals by only looking at one identity category exclusively (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991). Rather, we need to consider intersectional power structures and systems of oppression or privilege that shape individuals experiences (Collins, 1990). These theoretical insights underscore the importance of empirically examining HR practices in SMEs through an intersectionality lens, providing a clear framework for our analysis.

Methodology

Since we want to understand which practices are important to the founders and why, we follow an interpretivist epistemology (Blagoev & Costas, 2022). Following symbolic interactionism, we will use a qualitative grounded theory approach following the criteria from Corbin and Strauss (1990). The data collection is currently underway using semi-structured in-depth interviews with purposefully sampled participants. Interviews will continue until thematic saturation is reached, with a minimum target of 25 interviews. The participants include women founders of SMEs with and without migration background in Germany who are actively involved in managing their business. 99,3% of the businesses in Germany are SMEs, which makes Germany a highly relevant context for examining SMEs (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2025). The interview material will then be transcribed and analyzed by generating a first and second order coding to get some aggregated dimensions following the Gioia method (Gioia et al., 2013). Additionally, we interview HR-professionals to get their valuable perspectives. The goal is to understand the internal dynamics and get a complex overview of the HR practices and their social outcomes.

Results & Implications

Although the analysis is ongoing, our preliminary results reveal that personal experiences with the intersection of multiple sources of oppression can be a strong motivation for designing inclusive HR practices. We find that intersectional power dynamics influence HR practices through experiences with both direct discrimination and subtle mechanisms (e.g., gaslighting or bureaucratic hurdles). But even if the social position as a woman with a migration background was not perceived as disadvantaged, the founders would still aim to adopt an HR approach that takes individual needs into account in order to minimize inequalities without adopting formal diversity management approaches. To summarize, we find that founders who experience multiple sources of oppression are challenging inequalities. This study contributes by highlighting the extent to which women founders are aware of their own positionality and how it shapes their HR practices – a dimension that remains underexamined, despite calls for deeper inquiry into founders' HR philosophies and decision making (e.g., Harney & Alkhalaf, 2021). This understanding of how power dynamics shape HR practices will help to generate practical contributions for founders and HR managers to challenge inequalities and generate better social outcomes. Therefore, our findings can yield practical contributions for future founders by providing strategies to create inclusive work environments within SMEs that allow sustaining or growing businesses by recruiting and retaining employees. Additionally, our findings contribute to the literature of intersectionality in entrepreneurship by moving beyond the dominant focus on identity-work and instead shedding light on internal dynamics and specific management strategies which previously remained understudied (e.g., Dy & MacNeil, 2025).

Social Entrepreneurship

Reframing Entrepreneurial Mindset Through Ubuntu: A Systematic Review of African Women's Social Entrepreneurship

Baadjie

Principal Topic

In Africa, women social entrepreneurs are not only economic actors but also community stewards who mobilise relational values, local wisdom, and collective action to address persistent social challenges. However, dominant models of entrepreneurial mindset remain rooted in Western paradigms that centre on individualism, competition, and self-actualisation. These constructs, primarily derived from WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich, and Democratic) contexts (Shepherd et al., 2025), may inadequately represent how entrepreneurship is lived and understood by African women, especially those whose ventures are rooted in community care, reciprocity, and healing.

This paper presents a systematic literature review (SLR) focused on the Ubuntu philosophy as an alternative lens for understanding the entrepreneurial mindset among African women social entrepreneurs. Ubuntu, often expressed as “I am because we are,” reflects deeply embedded values of interconnectedness, mutual respect, humility, and shared humanity (Letseka, 2012). Rather than viewing mindset as an internal cognitive disposition oriented toward personal gain, Ubuntu offers a relational and ethical worldview in which entrepreneurship is an act of service, social responsibility, and community preservation.

The aim of this review is to critically examine how Ubuntu has been conceptualised, invoked, or overlooked in scholarship on women's entrepreneurship in African contexts, and how it might serve as a decolonial and feminist alternative to mainstream entrepreneurial mindset theory.

Methodology

This study follows PRISMA protocols for systematic literature review. Peer-reviewed articles published between 2010 and 2025 were identified through academic databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, and regional African journals. Search terms included: "Ubuntu and entrepreneurship"; "African philosophy and women entrepreneurs"; "Entrepreneurial mindset AND Global South"; "Ubuntu AND social entrepreneurship". The final selection included 64 articles, which were analysed thematically through Ubuntu principles: humanness (botho), solidarity, compassion, relational agency, and communal ethics.

Results & Implications

The review reveals a significant under-theorisation of Ubuntu in mainstream entrepreneurship and mindset literature, despite its presence in African philosophical discourse and practice. The key themes are as follows:

1. Ubuntu as Relational Agency

Ubuntu-informed entrepreneurship emphasises relational agency, the ability to act in ways that strengthen social bonds, meet collective needs, and uphold harmony (Moore & Coulibaly-Willis, 2025). This contrasts sharply with mainstream models that valorise autonomy, competitiveness, and risk-taking.

2. Entrepreneurship as Care and Restoration

African women entrepreneurs frequently engage in ventures that heal social wounds, restore dignity, and serve the vulnerable (Holbert, 2025). These actions are not peripheral but core expressions of entrepreneurship, shaped by cultural notions of duty and care.

3. Decolonising Mindset Theory

Very few studies directly critique the cultural bias of Western theories. Those that do (Masoominejad & Stjernquist, 2024; Bunmi Omodan et al., 2024)call for decolonial theorising that centres African lived realities, ethics, and historical consciousness.

4. Ubuntu as Feminist Epistemology

Ubuntu offers a gender-responsive logic grounded in collective well-being, nurturing, and moral leadership (Omare et al., 2025). It aligns with African feminist frameworks that resist both patriarchal norms and imported feminist assumptions.

Contribution

This paper contributes to theory by proposing Ubuntu as a philosophical framework for reimagining the entrepreneurial mindset in African women's social entrepreneurship. It critiques the limits of universalising WEIRD-centric theories and instead offers a relational, ethical, and culturally grounded model of entrepreneurial subjectivity.

Informal Female Entrepreneurship as a Lever for Social Transformation: Emerging Digital Practices and Hybridizations in Morocco

Rajou, Hajjaj, Mamdouh, Allammari, Vershinina

Principal Topic

This presentation examines the transformative role of female-led informal entrepreneurship in Morocco in the era of digitalization. It argues that this form of entrepreneurship, often invisible within traditional theoretical and policy frameworks, constitutes a powerful driver of socio-economic inclusion and innovation born of necessity. The study focuses on how informal women entrepreneurs integrate and hybridize digital tools (social networks, messaging platforms, mobile payment applications) within their economic and social practices.

The objective is to understand how this hybridization between informal practices and formal digital tools reshapes social business models, expands solidarity networks, and helps them bypass or negotiate structural barriers (access to finance, regulations, stigmatization).

The research aligns with the conference theme by showing how women, through initiatives often rooted in everyday life and local contexts, appropriate the digital revolution to address social challenges and shape alternative futures, while also questioning the limits of existing support ecosystems.

Methodology

This qualitative research adopts an abductive approach and relies on a multiple-case study methodology. Data collection was conducted over a 12-month period in three Moroccan cities (Casablanca, Fez, and Marrakech) in order to capture a diversity of urban and semi-urban contexts.

Sample: The study is based on in-depth semi-structured interviews (45 to 60 minutes) with 32 women entrepreneurs operating in the informal sector (local commerce, crafts, personal services, and agri-food). Their common feature is the regular use of at least one digital tool in their activity. A purposive sampling strategy was used to ensure diversity in sectors, income levels, and digital practices.

Complementary data collection: Participant observations (in markets and workshops) and a documentary analysis of their online activity traces (Facebook pages, WhatsApp catalogues) were conducted to triangulate the data.

Data analysis: The interviews were fully transcribed and analyzed using NVivo software, following an iterative thematic analysis approach. The analysis focused on: (1) the logics of adoption and adaptation of digital tools, (2) the forms of hybridization created between the informal and digital spheres, and (3) the perceived impacts on economic autonomy, social networks, and community influence.

Results & Implications

The analyses reveal three main findings that shed light on the ongoing social transformation:

The emergence of pragmatic digital hybridizations: Women entrepreneurs develop effective ‘digital bricolages,’ informally combining tools such as WhatsApp (for customer relations, advertising, and logistics), Facebook Marketplace (to expand their clientele), and mobile money services (to secure transactions). This hybridization creates a ‘connected informality’ that increases resilience and reduces certain transaction costs, without formalizing the activity.

The transformation of networks and economic agency: Digital tools allow a reconfiguration of social networks into extended socio-economic networks that transcend traditional geographic and social boundaries. This strengthens women’s bridging social capital and economic agency, providing greater control over marketing, pricing, and direct communication with clients, thereby reducing dependence on intermediaries.

A lever for incremental social transformation: Beyond economic survival, these practices generate tangible social impacts: the creation of local solidarity micro-economies, valorization of traditional skills through new channels, and empowerment through online visibility and recognition. However, this transformation remains fragile, facing digital limitations (skills gaps, data costs) and risks of work overload or revenue capture by family members.

This presentation concludes that female informal entrepreneurship in Morocco, through digitalization, invents original forms of social innovation. It advocates for recognition and tailored support for these hybridizations, which could inspire digital inclusion policies and social entrepreneurship theories more grounded in the realities of the Global South.

Venturing with Character: Muslim Women Conceptions of Leading, Building and Sustaining Social Enterprises

Hamdulay

Principal Topic

Interest in character within entrepreneurship scholarship has grown in recent years, driven by concerns about ethical failure, extractive business models, and the limits of opportunity- and competence-based explanations of entrepreneurial success (Morris, Kuratko, & Covin, 2013; Crossan, Seijts, & Gandz, 2017). These concerns are particularly salient in social entrepreneurship, where founders are tasked not only with venture creation but with sustaining social value, community trust, and long-term impact. Emerging work on entrepreneurial character has drawn primarily on neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics, conceptualising character through dispositions such as courage, perseverance, integrity, and practical wisdom (Alzola, 2015). While this represents an important turn in scholarly attention and conversation, existing approaches remain largely Western in philosophical orientation; individualistic in their assumptions about moral agency, and underdeveloped empirically (Ferrero & Sison, 2014).

Simultaneously, research on women's social entrepreneurship has consistently shown that women founders are more likely to prioritise social mission, community well-being, and relational definitions of success over purely economic outcomes (de Bruin, Brush, & Welter, 2017; Hechavarría et al., 2017). Associated scholarship on Muslim women entrepreneurs suggests that faith frequently functions as a moral and motivational resource, shaping ethical judgement, resilience, and social responsibility (Essers & Benschop, 2009; Tlaiss, 2015). However, this literature has tended to focus on motivations, barriers, and identity negotiation, with limited attention to how women social entrepreneurs themselves conceptualise the character required to lead the process of initiating, sustaining, and scaling (or attempting to scale) socially oriented ventures over time.

This paper adopts an exploratory, theory-building approach to address this gap by engaging Muslim women social entrepreneurs as co-constructors of knowledge about entrepreneurial character from their lived experience. Rather than testing or applying existing virtue frameworks, the study asks: How do Muslim women social entrepreneurs conceive of the character needed to successfully launch and scale social enterprises, and how do these conceptions engage with, extend, or unsettle dominant narratives of entrepreneurial character?

Method

Empirically, the paper hopes to draw on in-depth qualitative conversations with three Muslim women leading social enterprises across diverse contexts: Rana Dajani (We Love Reading, Jordan and Global), Shereen Gomaa (Delicious by Shereen, Winston-Salem, USA), and Fatima Jakoet (Sakikhamva, South Africa). These cases span education, food-based refugee community enterprise, and grassroots development across the globe and its varying contexts. They have been identified for their capacity to surface rich and reflective accounts of entrepreneurial challenge as Muslim women, rather than for representativeness.

Methodologically, the study adopts a comparative multiple-case design grounded in interpretive and reflexive qualitative inquiry (Yin, 2018) with a distinctly indigenous approach, honoring narrative and lived experience. Data will be drawn from semi-structured interviews, public narratives, organisational materials, and researcher reflections. Analysis will be thematic and dialogical, attending closely to how participants articulate conceptions of character and honoring their voice and stories in building the insights that answer the research question.

Results & Implications

As an exploratory study, the paper does not seek to prescribe a definitive model of (social) entrepreneurial character for Muslim women or otherwise. Instead, it aims to surface provisional insights into how Muslim women social entrepreneurs understand character in relation to leading, building and sustaining social venture. By foregrounding women's lived moral reasoning as a site of theory-building, the paper contributes to women's social entrepreneurship scholarship by expanding how entrepreneurial character is conceptualised and by offering implications for entrepreneurship education and support systems seeking to foster inclusive, values-driven social enterprise futures.

Do Women Benefit More from Social Entrepreneurship? Evidence from Crowdfunding Platforms

Swartz, Li, Johnson

Principal Topic

A growing body of research examines how socially oriented projects differ from commercial projects in crowdfunding success. Social entrepreneurship ventures often struggle to attract traditional funding and are less appealing to traditional investors (Bento, Gianfrate, & Thoni, 2019; Calic & Mosakowski, 2016), making crowdfunding an important alternative financing mechanism. However, prior findings on the role of social orientation in crowdfunding are mixed. While some studies report a positive association with funding success (Bento, Gianfrate, & Thoni, 2019; Calic & Mosakowski, 2016), others find no significant effect (Hörisch, 2015), and systematic reviews suggest the relationship remains insufficiently understood (Böckel et al., 2021). Addressing this gap, the present study examines the conditions under which social orientation affects crowdfunding outcomes.

Gender has emerged as a salient determinant of success in social crowdfunding campaigns (Bento, Gianfrate, & Thoni, 2019). Prior research suggests that women hold advantages in crowdfunding (e.g., Johnson et al., 2018; Geiger, 2020), particularly for socially oriented ventures. Evidence shows that female entrepreneurs perform better when leading social rather than purely commercial projects (Anglin et al., 2022). Although women are generally less likely than men to succeed on reward-based crowdfunding platforms, this gap can be reduced through greater social validation (Elitzur & Solodoha, 2021). Additionally, female founders benefit from emphasizing relational and social connection cues rather than competence signals (Liao, 2021). Building on a systematic review of crowdfunding and social entrepreneurship, Hussain, Di Pietro, and Rosati (2025) call for further research examining gender in combination with other factors influencing fundraising for social ventures.

Social Role Theory (SRT) posits that gender differences in behavior, attitudes, and social perceptions emerge primarily from the social roles that men and women are expected to fulfill (Eagly, 1987; Eagly & Koenig, 2009). The theory emphasizes that societal expectations regarding gender-appropriate behavior shape both individuals' actions and observers' evaluations, helping explain why female entrepreneurs are often rewarded for launching socially oriented crowdfunding projects, whereas male entrepreneurs are more strongly expected to pursue commercially focused ventures. Grounded in SRT, our research examines social entrepreneurship by investigating whether socially oriented project descriptions increase or decrease the likelihood that female or male entrepreneurs receive funding. Specifically, we ask: Do women benefit more from socially oriented projects in crowdfunding? If so, what factors make such projects more favorable for female entrepreneurs compared with their male counterparts, and why?

Methodology

We use Kickstarter.com as our data source, drawing on a large dataset from Web Robots (https://webrobots.io/kickstarter-datasets/), which has been collecting all Kickstarter projects since March 2016 with monthly updates. Creator gender was inferred from names provided in the dataset. We set up an automated preprocessing pipeline to clean the crowdfunding data and create a reliable gender variable for project creators. We removed unnecessary date-related variables and standardized column names. We inferred creator gender from first names using a Python-based name-to-gender classifier that matches standardized first names to likely categories (male, female, unknown). We kept only the observations with a clear male or female assignment, labeled the remaining cases as "non predicted," and excluded these non-predictable records from the analysis.

Results & Implications

As a preliminary analysis, we examine approximately 40,000 Kickstarter projects. We combine creator gender, funding goals, pledged amounts, and project outcomes (e.g., failed vs. successful) to construct pivot tables summarizing funding performance by gender (Tables 1 and 2). The results reveal a clear pattern: female entrepreneurs launch fewer than half as many projects as male entrepreneurs (49,609 vs. 94,100) yet achieve a higher success rate (72% vs. 63%). Moreover, female creators set significantly lower funding goals on average ($27,988.65 vs. $68,726.75). At the industry level, women outperform men in nearly all categories except comics. Women tend to benefit more (margins exceeding 10%) in the art, fashion, film & video, music, and theater industries than their male counterparts.

Beyond Profit and Scale: Prosocial Logics of Enterprise Growth in the Informal Economy

Leger, Holt, Littlewood, O'Donohoe

Principal Topic

The informal economy, which comprises "business activity that is unregistered or otherwise untracked and thus unregulated, but not otherwise illegal" (McGahan, 2012: 12), accounts for a considerable share of all economic activity in most countries, and a very large portion of economic activity in most developing countries. The International Labour Organisation (2018) reports, for example, that more than 92 per cent of all enterprises in Africa operate in the informal sector, and many of these are run by women. These businesses are generally perceived as being chronically undercapitalised, achieving little by way of meaningful income or employment growth (Alvarez and Barney, 2014). Those starting and running businesses in Africa's informal economy face numerous challenges, from difficulties accessing finance to physical limitations and formal and informal institutional voids (Webb et al., 2020).

Women entrepreneurs face additional institutional challenges caused by historical patriarchy and social constraints. Religion, family and state institutions have historically subjugated women, especially in Africa (Akyeampong & Fofack, 2014). Excluded from mainstream government welfare programs and commercial support, women turn first to their families for financial and other support (Slade Shantz et al., 2018). Husbands or partners may be more of a hindrance than a help. The women are hampered by timeconsuming and unevenly distributed household tasks (Wolf & Frese, 2018). In a context of poverty, the pressure to conform to social norms is aggravated by the need to rely heavily on the community (Slade Shantz et al., 2018), which sees them often acting in prosocial ways.

These informal microbusinesses, although small and often termed "unproductive" are valuable to the entrepreneurial ecosystem. They provide employment and livelihoods to millions, enable access to needed goods and services for the most marginalised, and are a source of innovation and growth (Galdino et al., 2018; Meager, 2018; Williams & Nadin, 2010). Recent work has raised the possibility that, rather than not growing at all, informal enterprises instead pursue forms of growth that correspond only partially to "conventional" (that is to say, Western) notions of business growth. It is widely acknowledged that the institutional landscape, i.e., the norms, attitudes, and patterns of exchange that prevail, exerts a particular set of constraints on entrepreneurial practice within the informal economy (Webb et al., 2009), but only recently have scholars come to meaningfully engage with the question of how this might affect business growth. A better understanding is needed of when and how informal enterprises run by women grow, of what enables or inhibits their growth, how it might differ from male entrepreneurs and growth in more formal enterprises in Western contexts.

Methodology

We examine the dynamics, complexities, and consequences of enterprise growth in the African informal economy. To explore these areas, we performed in-depth interviews with 80 informal entrepreneurs (both male and female) operating in township communities in Cape Town and Johannesburg, South Africa. Our aim was to build a rich and rounded picture of what growth looks like in the informal sector, and how that growth is achieved by both men and women. Theoretical sampling was used, involving a screening protocol to distinguish entrepreneurs that had some meaningful experience of business growth (however conceived) from those that did not. Data was collected by field assistants experienced in conducting semi-structured interviews, familiar with the communities under study, and conversant in local languages (typically Xhosa, Zulu, or Afrikaans). Data analysis is underway, and we are following an inductive grounded theory approach informed by the Gioia methodology (Gioia et al., 2013).

Results & Implications

We are currently in the process of analysing the data. Our initial findings reveal a complex picture of informal enterprise growth characterised by strong prosocial and relational dimensions in the businesses run by women. We saw examples of informal female entrepreneurs starting businesses for pro-social reasons, for example, to address a community need or as a driver behind their efforts to grow their business. The informal entrepreneurs also demonstrated more specific behaviours that seem to be pro-socially driven, from mentoring individuals in the community – even those setting up the same types of business as them – to charity and philanthropy and trying to generate employment and offering work to people who are struggling, as well as community development work in collaboration with others.

The prosocial dimensions of growth align with emerging social actor perspectives in informal economy scholarship (Gibson-Graham, 2006; Williams & Martinez-Perez, 2014; Littlewood et al., 2018; Horodnic et al., 2022). These perspectives adopt a thicker portrayal of economic activity and recognise a complex mix of logics in enterprising, including social ones. This contrasts with more rational actor perspectives that might assess growth in the informal economy in light of risk and reward and the drive for financial gain. Social actor and dual logic perspectives also resonate with writing and debates in social entrepreneurship scholarship. We therefore see alignment and an opportunity through our work to connect informal economy and social entrepreneurship literature, by illuminating the potential for enterprise growth and wider enterprising in the informal economy to be prosocial. Overall, our analyses have yielded interesting, if tentative, insights into the distinctiveness of the informal economy as a context for growth. In particular, the analyses of female entrepreneurs appear to point to the heightened importance of social embeddedness, as both an enabler and a constraint of entrepreneurial growth. This work has implications for informal economy and social entrepreneurship scholarship on Africa and more widely.

Growth-Oriented Ventures

She's Kicking Glass: Lessons Learned About Startup Strategy and Overcoming Barriers from Successful Women Who Broke Through

Pollard, Sebesta, Archpru-Akaka

Principal Topic

New businesses experience a myriad of barriers to success and women entrepreneurs are not immune to this phenomenon. A study by Rahimian (2011) found meaningful differences between individual and environmental barriers to entrepreneurship among male and female entrepreneurs suggesting the challenges women face are significant and different from their male counterparts. Despite this, women are starting businesses faster than ever. Much of the research on female entrepreneurship focuses on the persistent challenges that remain but little research highlights the strategies, skills, and processes used by successful women entrepreneurs as they mitigate and overcome these barriers. Therefore, the primary research question that motivates this study is: How do/have successful female entrepreneurs battle(d) through the barriers that are present to start and grow their businesses? Answers to this question will serve to guide female entrepreneurs toward greater access to entrepreneurial opportunity by learning from the experiences of successful female founders that preceded them.

Specifically, we question whether women founders use effectuation (or causation)-related strategies/processes (Sarasvathy, 2008) to overcome barriers to entrepreneurship and when they might implement each? Previous research suggests that women are more causal in nature and men are more effectual in their entrepreneurial endeavors and we seek to test this claim (Melo et al., 2019). This finding was statistically significant and was particularly salient as the entrepreneurial women grew older and had more children suggesting the "planning nature" and maternal instinct played a role (Melo et al., 2019). Perhaps the most aligned body of research surrounding female entrepreneurial activity is the Diana Project, a stream of research stewarded by a collection of researchers at Babson College and beyond (Brush et al., 2020). The most salient barrier to success found in our study was financial in nature and since the Diana Project began in 1999, there have been modest improvements in access to funding for women founders, although, a significant funding gap remains (Brush et al., 2018). We observed several other barriers to success faced by our female founder sample over and above financial challenges.

Methodology

This is a qualitative study whereby researchers explored several barriers that inhibit startup success to understand the launch, funding, growth, and success experiences of female founders. We leverage a popular podcast called "How I Built This" (HIBT) hosted by Guy Raz and made available through NPR (National Public Radio). NPR agreed to the use allowing researchers to observe the experiences of their profiled female founders and use of publicly available copyrighted information is also available through the Fair Use Act (1976). HIBT profiles hundreds of high-profile entrepreneurs, all of whom have experienced remarkable success during their entrepreneurial journey to include revenue growth, profitability, and spectacular exits. Episodes are structured similarly highlighting the entrepreneur's back story, education, genesis of the idea, trials and tribulations, and the eventual exit or status of the business. Conversations are conducted by a single interviewer akin to semi-structured qualitative interviews. We use a Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) method formalized by Braun & Clarke while coding the data set to ensure that a robust and reliable process was being used (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2013). RTA is an accessible and flexible but widely accepted method of qualitative data collection with six separate phases of collection and analysis which include: 1) Familiarization of the Researcher(s) with the data; 2) Generating Initial Codes; 3) Generating Initial Themes; 4) Reviewing and Developing Potential Themes; 5) Refining, Defining, and Naming Themes; 6) Producing the Report.

Using this method, we analyzed the transcripts of twenty individual successful women entrepreneurs seeking patterns in barriers faces, effectual/causal process used to overcome, and timing of the barrier. Barriers to success observed: Financial, Competitive, Human (relational or personal), Investor Fit, Human Error, Personal/Knowledge, Product/Market Fit, Product-Related, and Technological.

Results & Implications

Findings suggest that women entrepreneurs struggled most often with financial barriers to success (40 instances), followed by Personal/Knowledge (32), and then product-related challenges (20), and investor-product related challenges (20) which were the main four barriers cited by the female founders. Other barriers were experienced but were less prevalent than the primary four. The timing of the barriers was interesting as most occurred early in the entrepreneurial process. Barriers experienced in Stages 1 and 2 (80 total barriers referenced) more than doubles the frequency of barriers met in Stages 3 & 4 (27 total). We also observe a shift in the nature of the barriers over time. In Stage 1 the two most prevalent barriers experienced were financial challenges (17 references) and personal knowledge barriers to success (15 references).

The data show, of the 106 total barriers referenced by our founder sample, they were overcome in 94 of the cases with one or more effectual processes (over 88% of the time). This is a departure from the Melo et al. (2019) findings suggesting that women are primarily causal in nature. Our study found overwhelmingly women are employing effectual strategies to overcome barriers to entrepreneurial success and lean on causal strategies when necessary.

A particularly useful implication here is that when facing a barrier to success, women entrepreneurs should explore one of the effectual processes as a framework to overcome the barrier. Effectual processes are particularly useful when used to overcome barriers to success, especially for female founders.

Her Acquiring Mind: Understanding the Female Experience in Entrepreneurship Through Acquisition

Pollard, Sebesta, Archpru-Akaka

Principal Topic

Entrepreneurship Through Acquisition is both ancient, in that people and firms have been buying and selling companies for generations, and new, in light of novel and emerging trends. In their ETA Scoping Review, Hoffman et al. (2024) found a relative dearth of ETA research even though acquisition is gaining momentum as a viable, lower barrier, and often safer avenue of entrepreneurial entry. Female entrepreneurs face disproportionately high barriers to entry, especially in startup entrepreneurship as compared to their male counterparts (GEM, 2023). These barriers include financial barriers to success (Brush et al., 2014), individual and environmental constraints (Rahimian, 2011), relationship with risk (Brindley, 2005), and even codified policies that exist to keep women-lead ventures small and fragile (Winn, 2005). We also see that once established and generating revenue, companies led by female founders perform as well as their male counterparts (Brush et al., 2018), serve well in executive or organizational leadership positions (Brush et al., 2014), and often lead high-growth organizations up to and including successful exits (Glasner, 2021). Astebro et al. (2022) found that once a female led firm had surpassed their first $1 Million in fundraising, there was no significant difference between male and female founders to raise subsequent rounds of funding.

Once measurable traction and runway had been established, the merits of the firm as an investment opportunity were less predicated on the founder and more on firm performance (Astebro et al., 2022). One exciting aspect of ETA, for all founders but perhaps especially for female founders, is that “searchers” are acquiring existing revenue and cashflow generating companies. The research question serving this study is: If traction seemingly eliminates financial barriers to entry and success (and potentially some other barriers) for female founders, how might ETA serve women looking to lead and grow their own company? Self-funded searches, where an acquisition entrepreneur searches for and acquires a company with their own time and assets are quite common but, to acquire larger and more attractive companies, many “searchers” raise a search fund to include outside investment, enabling them to focus on the search full time leading up to acquisition. This study sets out to qualitatively explore the acquisition experiences of successful women who have specifically acquired an existing company or companies and understand their motivations, funding strategies, and critical success factors to illuminate this as a viable option for future female entrepreneurs.

Methodology

Rather than conducting the interviews ourselves, we are observing publicly available episodes of a popular podcast called “Acquiring Minds” accessed through multiple outlets including Apple Podcasts. The founder and host, Will Smith, met with researchers and discussed this current and future research projects and agreed to interview use for academic research purposes. Acquiring Minds (at the time of this abstract submission) has 406 total episodes completed with 31 interviews profiling female acquisition entrepreneurs that bought a business on their own or with another female business partner. Interviews profiling a male and female co-acquirer (spouses for example) were eliminated as we want to understand the experiences of female acquirers in isolation. We employ the Gioia Method of inductive qualitative observation in developing first order concepts and second order themes on our way to making sense of the female ETA experience (Gioia et al., 2012).

Results & Implications

This qualitative study is in the early stages of development and researchers are actively coding interviews conducted with female acquisition entrepreneurs to understand the motivations, barriers, funding strategies, and critical success factors employed during their successful acquisitions. As this is a working paper, the study is currently in progress and results of the study are not yet finalized. Initial findings indicate that female ETA motivations include a desire to direct their own organizations, circumvent the hierarchy of their former employers where they felt a tangible glass ceiling, and maternal motivations around having both a family and a career that are intertwined rather than having to choose one or the other. We also expect to understand if revenue generation helped female founders raise money and gain legitimacy in industries where they may have had no (or limited) domain knowledge, how they went about funding and operationalizing their acquisition, and whether the barriers they experienced may have been different (or similar) to more traditional startup entrepreneurship. Our findings will provide important insights into ETA as a viable and perhaps more logical mode of entry for female entrepreneurs given existing traction, cashflow, and customers/relationships which can potentially serve to smooth barriers women face with traditional entrepreneurial hardships.

Financial empowerment of women entrepreneurs with an online presence in Nigeria: a netnographic study Zimbabwe

Onoshakpor, Ibukun, James, Ng

Principal Topic

This study explores the role of social media in empowering women entrepreneurs and creating access to finance opportunities for women-led businesses. There is a gap in understanding what other kinds of opportunities present themselves for women entrepreneurs operating online, apart from increased sales and an enhanced customer base as micro businesses. The literature suggests that women entrepreneurs, particularly in developing contexts, face access to finance barriers due to the lingering impact of colonisation and patriarchy (Onoshakpor et al., 2025). Digital technology introduced a level playing field for these underexplored groups of entrepreneurs, although some authors argue otherwise, highlighting how cyberbullying is largely gendered (James, Ibukun and Ng, 2025). However, for nations to achieve SD5- gender equality, women's entrepreneurship has been suggested as a useful tool in helping address this gap (UNWTO,2022). Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to focus on women's financial empowerment, and how digital technology, particularly Instagram as a social media platform, is strengthening women-owned micro social enterprises, which help to address the SDGs 1 and 5 –no poverty and gender parity. This study has two research questions: 1. How do women-led micro social enterprises with an online presence attract funding? 2. Are there any differences in attitudes between businesses that were funded and those that were not?

Methodology

This study adopts an interpretivist methodology; it uses a netnographic approach, which is a form of ethnographic data collection undertaken via the Internet, in this case, Instagram. Data were collected from 50 women leading a micro social enterprise, who pitched for a funding competition organised by an online community called Boss Babes Nigeria. The competition resulted in 15 women receiving funding support. Posts from the 50 participants were monitored and analysed thematically for a period of one year. This method is unique because it is not observational, as it does not focus on lived experiences, but on what is posted by individuals (Blicheldt & Marabese, 2014). Netnography is achieved by collating narratives displayed on online platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter (X), specialised online forums, and blogs (Meged & Klonaridis, 2020). Thematic analysis was used to provide insights into a collective experience of 50 women micro-business owners (Braun & Clarke, 2012). The preconceived themes from this process served as an analytical framework drawn directly from the literature.

Results & Implications

Our findings reveal that having an online presence is primarily seen as an opportunity to increase sales by these micro-businesses; however, there is a huge benefit of access to finance that presents itself, providing an avenue to navigate the lingering collateral challenges. We notice the increased awareness of social media use in how these businesses approach their trade. They mostly had a solely reuse model and/or incorporated annual programs to conduct social good and give back to the community. Interestingly, we see a perceived difference in attitudes between those who received the funding and those who did not. We notice more motivation to continuously show up and post on Instagram by those who received funding from the pitch to grow their businesses.

Our study sheds light on how social media supports women-led social enterprises in attracting external funds. This digital platform moves beyond market expansion, but it also offers financial empowerment opportunities for women. Through their active engagement in the digital space, women gain more financial support to strengthen the social missions in business and build stronger ties with the communities they serve. We make practical recommendations that institutions willing to fund women-owned businesses can begin to look at the activities of women-owned micro social businesses while considering funding them against traditional funding criteria.

Exploring the Impact of Patriarchy on Women's Entrepreneurship in Zimbabwe

Ncube,

Principal Topic

Although Entrepreneurship has been studied since 1934 (Jennings and Brush, 2013), women's entrepreneurship has received little attention in previous research. Ahl (2006) and Feng et al. (2023) indicate that the lack of attention on women's entrepreneurial development highlights how society was constructed, and how women's entrepreneurial activities were reduced to a category of secondary theoretical interest. Despite policy reforms and growing visibility of women entrepreneurs in sub-Saharan Africa, little is known about how patriarchal norms specifically shape the lived experiences of Zimbabwean women entrepreneurs. (Dherera et al., 2014; 2020; Nziku and Henry, 2020). The embeddedness of barriers, such as those connected to patriarchy and institutional theories, continue to have some negative effects on the entrepreneurial abilities of women entrepreneurs, which has limited their participation in economic development activities (Gudhlanga 2023; Magezi and Manzanga 2021; Nziku and Henry, 2020). Furthermore, Mazonde and Carmichael (2016) as well as Dherera et al (2020) indicate that there is still a need for more awareness, understanding and research on the problem, specifically in developing African countries such as Zimbabwe.

Therefore, this study explores the impact of patriarchal norms on women entrepreneurs in Zimbabwe where such barriers have hindered sustainable business ventures and answers the following question:

How do patriarchal norms and institutional dysfunction influence the challenges and sustainability of women entrepreneurs in Zimbabwe?

The study draws upon patriarchy theory by (Walby, 1990) which she sees as the systemic privileging of men over women through social norms, cultural values, and institutional theory which is viewed by (North, 1990; Scott, 2014) as constituting the rules of the game that help with the shaping of the course of individuals' behaviour and beliefs. It shapes individuals' beliefs, decisions and actions through implicit rules regarding what is considered morally appropriate in a community or society (Suchman, 1995). This triangulation of the theories allows for a nuanced understanding of how macro-level gendered institutions, meso-level business norms, and micro-level personal agency interact to shape women's entrepreneurial experiences in Zimbabwe.

The study contributes to theories on patriarchy, institutional dynamics, and feminist change by emphasizing the critical role women play in reshaping societal norms and advancing equitable economic development. It highlights how patriarchy and male-dominated institutional practices are being renegotiated, prompting a reconsideration of existing theoretical frameworks. The conceptualisation offers a deeper understanding of how women entrepreneurs in Zimbabwe actively challenge patriarchal and institutional.

Methodology

Methodologically, an interpretive approach was adopted, and qualitative data sets were utilised. In-depth interviews with 11 women entrepreneurs, and 7 key informants were conducted. A flexible approach was adopted by conducting interviews online at times convenient for the participants. Non-probability sampling which included snowball, convenience and purposive was used to reach the participants who are all located in Zimbabwe. Data was analysed sequentially using thematic analysis, and in an iterative manner. A qualitative data analysis software, NVivo, was used to help establish a deeper understanding of the insights that emerged from the participants.

Results & Implications

The findings were analysed through the lens of a number of theories which include patriarchy, institutionalism and feminism. The overall intention was to establish deep, and theoretically nested understandings of the research problem. The study found that patriarchal norms and institutional dysfunction are barriers that hinder women's entrepreneurial participation. The findings revealed that their participation in entrepreneurial activities range across various business sectors, especially (Small and Medium Enterprises) SMEs and MESO (Meso-Entrepreneurship). Women's involvement in entrepreneurial activities is influenced by geographic location and dependent on access to critical resources and information. These business ventures are mainly informal. Though start-up capital was at times obtained from family, this was often limited. NGOs and government support initiatives were also available, but the presence of males in these establishments was cause of concern as women continued to endure disempowering patriarchal practices.

The implications of this study highlight several key actions. Firstly, there is a need for comprehensive global, national, and regional strategies that support the growth and sustainability of women's entrepreneurship in Zimbabwe. Secondly, equitable land and resource distribution policies must be effectively implemented and monitored. Thirdly, institutional reforms are essential to challenge and try to work on dismantling patriarchal structures that limit women's entrepreneurial participation. Furthermore, other interventions such as the enhanced policy advocacy, greater access to financial and educational resources, and increased support for women-focused regional programmes will strengthen resilience, innovation, and gender equality within the sector. Overall, this proposed framework offers guidance for policymakers, educators, and industry practitioners in the attempt to create an inclusive, equitable, and sustainable entrepreneurial ecosystem.

The findings highlight that women entrepreneurs in Zimbabwe face both patriarchal and institutional barriers, limiting their participation and growth. This underscores the need for targeted policy interventions and support systems that address cultural norms as well as institutional challenges. In particular, there is a call for inclusive policies and the transformation of funding institutions to adopt equitable lending models free from patriarchal bias, thereby fostering a more inclusive and supportive entrepreneurial ecosystem.

Human Capital and Female Growth-Oriented Ventures: Understanding the Role of Gender-Equal Institutions Across Developed and Emerging Economies

Gimenez-Jimenez, Gabaldon

Principal Topic

In recent years, women engaging in entrepreneurship has increased worldwide, but the proportion of new ventures turning into established businesses remains limited (Global Entrepreneurship Monitor 2025). Previous research indicates that only a small share evolve into firms that meaningfully drive economic growth (Kauffmann Foundation, 2016). Most ventures that fail to evolve are women-owned enterprises because they tend to be smaller and exhibit slower growth compared to those founded by men (Ashraf et al., 2025).

While previous studies have shed light on the impact of institutional context on women's growth-oriented ventures (e.g. López et al., 2025; Xie et al., 2021), our analysis of this literature has revealed three key issues. Firstly, the literature tends to focus on a single dimension of growth-oriented ventures: expected job creation (Darnihamedani & Terjesen, 2022), internationalization (Pinado et al., 2019) or innovation (Xie et al. 2021). The latter is the most common focus due to its importance to the economy (Chowdury et al., 2024). Secondly, there is limited attention to the relationship between human capital and female growth-oriented ventures (Ashraf et al. 2024), even though human capital is the main resource individuals bring to a venture because it provides the capabilities necessary for creating and running it (Becker, 1964), and it is the main source of capabilities required for transformation (North, 1991). Thirdly, these studies often fail to capture the influence of institutions that foster gender equality within society (within which women make decisions). In this study, we attempt to address these relationships by adopting a multilevel perspective that integrates individual and institutional factors, offering a comprehensive examination of how human capital and gender-equal institutions influence the development of growth-oriented ventures. Integrating these dimensions is theoretically relevant because institutional arrangements, human capital returns, and entrepreneurial incentives do not operate uniformly across countries. Therefore, we aim to answer the following questions: What role do education and training play in the development of female growth-oriented ventures? In what ways do more gender-equal institutional contexts influence the development of such ventures? Are there differences between more and less developed countries? Recognizing these differences is essential, as the mechanisms through which human capital and gender-equal institutions shape women's entrepreneurial trajectories vary meaningfully between developed and emerging economies.

Methodology

We created a unique database using the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM), Women, Business and the Law, World Values Survey, GLOBE project, and the World Bank Group databases. Our final sample consists of 9,144 observations taken from eight years (2011-2021) across 31 countries, in which 16 countries are part of the OECD and 14 countries are not part of it. Based on Chowdhury et al. (2018) and using GEM data, we developed a dependent variable that captures growth-oriented ventures. As independent variables, we used the level of education and entrepreneurial skills. To capture our moderating variables, we followed Brieger et al. (2019) to capture the extent to which society emphasize emancipative values as the cognitive pillar. Our second moderating variable is socially supportive cultures which are typically found in societies more human oriented and low assertive (Stephan & Uhlaner, 2011), using data from GLOBE Project. Finally, women's rights variable is a numeric and is captured by using Women Business and the Law data. We controlled for several variables at the individual, firm, industry and country level. We ran a hierarchical logistic regression nested by countries and years analysis using STATA 19.0.

Results & Implications

Our preliminary results indicate that the relationship between entrepreneurial skills and the development of growth-oriented ventures is significant and positive only in the most economically developed countries. In contrast, the relationship between higher education and female growth-oriented ventures is positive and significant in emerging countries. This pattern suggests that different forms of human capital are activated differently across development contexts: while advanced entrepreneurial skills generate higher returns in opportunity-rich developed economies, formal education appears to play a more central role in enabling women to pursue growth-oriented ventures in emerging economies, where entrepreneurial ecosystems are less consolidated.

Interestingly, in developed countries, only the interaction between emancipative values and entrepreneurial skills is positively and significantly associated with female growth-oriented ventures. In emerging economies, all moderating effects interact with entrepreneurial skills to influence the development of growth-oriented ventures. The results further show that high emancipative values (e.g., Finland and Sweden) and strong women's rights (e.g., Spain and Germany) have a positive and significant influence on the relationship between entrepreneurial skills and female growth-oriented ventures; however, in socially supportive cultures (e.g., Colombia and the Philippines), this positive relationship is weakened. In developed economies, emancipative values reinforce the translation of entrepreneurial skills into growth-oriented ventures, whereas in emerging economies, institutional conditions shape how skills translate into growth trajectories.

Our findings contribute to the burgeoning literature on growth-oriented ventures and women (Koch & Kuckertz 2024; Hechavarria et al., 2019) by contextualizing the antecedents of the development of female growth-oriented ventures. We respond to the call by Henry et al. (2021) to understand the gendered structures that facilitate female entrepreneurship as we observe that the interaction of informal and formal institutions influences women entrepreneurial decisions depending on the context. Finally, we extend the literature on different countries' development and entrepreneurship (Urbano et al., 2019) by showing that strategies implemented to support women through their entrepreneurial journey varies from contexts and that cultural aspects need to take into consideration.

Women Entrepreneurs and Social Ventures: The Influence of Personal Identity and Industry Sector

Elam, Manolova, Brush, Edelman

Principal Topic

Globally, social entrepreneurship is on the rise, driven in part by environmental challenges, including natural resource depletion, climate change, food insecurity and global health. Social entrepreneurship can be defined as ‘innovative, social value creating activity that can occur within or across the nonprofit, business, or government sectors” (Austin et al., 2006, p. 2). By this definition, social ventures pursue opportunities that do not undermine the ecological or social environments in which they operate (Shepherd & Patzelt, 2011). Recent evidence shows women-led ventures often emerge in response to systemic gaps in education, healthcare and environmental sustainability (World Bank, 2021), while a report from the World Economic Forum shows that half of all social ventures are led by women compared to one fifth of conventional businesses (WEF, 2024). A growing body of research focuses on the influence of identity, mostly role identity, on entrepreneurship (Cardon et al., 2009; Hoang & Gimeno, 2010; Murnieks et al., 2014), with clear implications for why entrepreneurs launch social ventures (Wry & York, 2017).

Personal identity represents the idiosyncratic personal traits, values, beliefs, and meanings that the individual uses to define themselves (Hitlin, 2003) or a person’s self-concept (Stets & Burke, 2000). Evidence suggests a strong link between entrepreneurial identity and entrepreneurial behaviors (Shepherd & Haynie, 2009; Hoang & Gimeno, 2010). However, less work explores how personal identity is connected to launching a social venture (Zur, 2021). In addition, industry-specific logics determine what constitutes a social enterprise, yet there is a dearth of research exploring how the relationship between personal identity, gender, and social enterprise formation varies by industry. Hence, we pose the following research question, “What is the influence of gender on the relationship between personal identity and sustainable entrepreneurship across industry sectors?”

We ground our inquiry in identity theory which contends that personal values are implicit throughout the core identity of an individual and serve as guiding principles for action (Stryker, 2001). Studies show that individuals with strong prosocial values are more likely to start businesses addressing social or environmental problems, embed sustainability in mission and strategy, and accept lower short-term economic returns in exchange for social/environmental impact (Boluk & Mottiar, 2014; Kuckertz, & Wagner, 2010; Mair & Noboa, 2006; Sharma & Henriques, 2005). Complementary research on entrepreneurial self-efficacy further suggests that individuals are also more likely to act on parts of their identity when those actions feel socially legitimate and more likely to succeed (Johnson et al., 2006). Fear of failure reduces the likelihood that an individual will start a business (Elam, 2008), which may be particularly true for founders who prioritize sustainability strategies over economic goals. Sustainable ventures often involve higher uncertainty, unfamiliar business models, ambiguous or difficult-to-measure impact, and longer time horizons for returns.

Gender is a central aspect of personal identity to the degree that individuals identify with their biological sex category. Women typically show higher aspirations for making a difference in the world as a startup motivation and are more likely to prioritize sustainability over economic goals compared to men (Rosca et al., 2020) Women also start businesses at different rates across industries, which, in turn, affects their performance (Robb & Watson, 2012; Guzman & Kacperczyk, 2019). However, less is known about the relationship between personal identity, gender and business goals. We hypothesize that gender moderates the relationship between three aspects of personal identity and prioritization of sustainability (environmental and social) over economic goals with particular attention to sector variability.

Methodology

This study uses data from the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor 2024 adult population survey (n= 19,285). Our dependent variable is prioritizing social and environmental sustainability over economic goals. Explanatory variables include gender, desire to make the world a better place as a primary startup motivation, confidence in startup skills, and fear of failure. We test the model using moderated HLM regression, controlling for age, education, household income and industry at the individual level and national income at the country level (data from the World Bank). We run the models for each industry sector to better understand sectoral influences.

Results & Implications

Preliminary results confirm prior findings showing that women are already leading in social entrepreneurship. Regression analysis showed that women entrepreneurs were 13% more likely to prioritize sustainability, net controls. Strikingly, entrepreneurs with social motivations were almost 3 times more likely to prioritize sustainability, net controls. Those with startup skills were 37% more likely to prioritize sustainability, while, somewhat surprisingly, those who feared failure were 24% more likely to prioritize sustainability. Moderation analysis showed that the gender effect is further explained by the addition of gender interactions with social motivation, startup skills, and fear of failure. However, none of the interaction effects were significant. There was also a wide variation in effects across industries, which require deeper analysis.

Taken together, the findings suggest that women are a key talent pool for impact-driven entrepreneurship and underscore that sustainability orientation is not simply a demographic pattern—it is strongly tied to personal driven identity. Policymakers designing small business support may benefit from incorporating values-based criteria into programming that encourages socially motivated founders to act on their intentions. Finally, given the wide variation across industries, targeting should be sector-specific (e.g., social services is already a strong entry point; ICT and professional services may require different strategies). Further research is required to better understand gender patterns within each industry sector.

Gendered Pathways to Sustainable Innovation: An Ecofeminist Case Study of Hexas Biomass and Market Transformation

Elam, Owens

Principal Topic

International organizations, governments, researchers, and experts agree that women entrepreneurs are central to the social and economic development of market economies in both developed and developing countries, playing a central role in addressing global grand challenges (OECD, 2025; European Commission, 2025; Fauzi et al., 2017; Brush et al., 2010). Indeed, research shows that women entrepreneurs contribute significantly to social and environmental value generation often outpacing men (GEM, 2025; Fauzi et al, 2023; Raman et al., 2022; Renko & Freeman, 2018). The most recent GEM Women report (2025) showed that women more consistently report making the world a better place as a primary startup motivation and prioritize sustainability over profit compared to men (Elam et al, 2025). However, understanding what unique perspectives and leadership women bring to the Green Economy is elusive as women represent less than one third of Green Economy job globally and less than 10% of technical and leadership positions (Fabrizio, et al., 2024; Strumskyte et al., 2022). It is important to elucidate how women foster and implement innovative and comprehensive solutions to global challenges. Our research question is:

How can a deeper understanding of the experiences of high-potential women founders significantly enrich ecofeminist perspectives on women's sustainability entrepreneurship?

Drawing on ecofeminist theory, this study seeks to address this knowledge gap by presenting a case study of a woman founder's journey to establishing a high potential venture, Hexas Biomass Inc. (Hexas). Wendy Owens's path to founding Hexas began with her deep personal concern for climate change and deforestation and her belief that industry lacked scalable, non-wood, nonpetroleum alternatives for the fast-growing demand in sustainable materials. Owens launched Hexas in 2020 to commercialize XanoGrass™, stable, high-yield perennial grass capable of thriving on marginal land while producing fiber outputs several times higher than traditional forestry crops. Her focus was on IP development, regenerative agricultural, and market partnerships with growers and industrial customers. The company's business model was designed as a dual-impact strategy: provide climate-positive raw materials to industry while enabling rural growers to profit from underutilized lands. In December 2025, Hexas was acquired by Bioleum Corporation with Owens remaining as CEO to lead scaling the company's mission to keep forests standing and redirect industrial supply chains toward renewable, plantbased feedstocks.

Ecofeminist theory offers a strong analytical framework for the Hexas case. It explains how gendered structures, experiences, and values shape sustainability innovation and commercialization without reducing the founder's success to or treating gender simply as a demographic variable. Ecofeminism is an intellectual and activist movement that examines the interconnectedness of the oppression of women (and other marginalized groups) and the degradation of the natural environment (Foster, 2021; Ruder & Sanniti 2019). Ecofeminist theory argues that patterns of domination stem from similar dualistic, hierarchical social structures (e.g., human--nature, man-woman, reason- emotion, production-reproduction). At its core, ecofeminism proposes that gender justice and ecological sustainability are mutually reinforcing, and that transforming one requires attention to the other. In high-potential ventures like Hexas, a woman founder operates at the intersection of resource-intensive innovation, ecological stewardship, and institutional change. Our model proposes that (1) gendered access and constraints influence the strategies women use to develop and commercialize ecological innovations, (2) gendered values and ethical orientations shape the design and sustainability logic of their technologies and business models, and (3) these combined forces enable women founders to act as institutional entrepreneurs, reshaping norms, supply chains, and investment in low-carbon materials as evidenced in Hexas' trajectory and eventual acquisition by Bioleum Corporation.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative single-case study design following Yin (2009) to investigate how gendered experiences shape sustainability-oriented entrepreneurship. Hexas provides a critical case for extending ecofeminist and feminist ecological economics theory. Data will be triangulated across semi-structured interviews with the founder and key stakeholders, direct observations, extensive company documentation, acquisition-related materials, and industry and academic sources. This multi-level evidence base will enable us to examine how gendered access, constraints, and values influence innovation, commercialization, and institutional change within sustainability markets. A priori theoretical propositions derived from ecofeminist scholarship on gendered resource access, relational values, and institutional entrepreneurship will guide initial coding and comparison with the empirical record. Through iterative analysis and consideration of rival explanations, we will construct a theoretically grounded account of how the founder navigated structural barriers, shaped regenerative innovation, and contributed to shifts in emerging biomaterials markets.

Results & Implications

This study will demonstrate how the experiences of high-potential women founders can significantly enrich ecofeminist perspectives on women's entrepreneurship in sustainability by providing solid evidence that a woman-led venture can not only succeed in a technical domain (energy crops, biomaterials), but does so by navigating (1) gendered access to land, research partners, and capital, (2) gendered constraints within agricultural and climate-tech ecosystems, and (3) gendered values such as care, long-term stewardship, and community engagement without invoking essential gender-based traits. As such, the Hexas case extends ecofeminist and feminist ecological economics scholarship by providing fine-grained empirical evidence of how gendered access, constraints, and values operate within a high-technology sustainability venture. Much ecofeminist research has focused on small-scale or community-based initiatives; this case demonstrates that ecofeminist mechanisms are also relevant in capital-intensive, science-driven, and globally scaled sustainability markets. For policymakers, this case study underscores that women-led sustainability ventures represent an underleveraged pathway for advancing climate and bioeconomy goals. For practitioners, the founder's approach to regenerative design, stakeholder collaboration, and legitimacy-building illustrates how navigating gendered constraints can produce resilient commercialization strategies.

Context & Marginalized Communities

Women Micro-Entrepreneurship and Poverty Alleviation: A Case Study of Churni, India

Sengupta, Mehrotra, Mehta, Basu Roy

Principal Topic

The article examines Churni, a micro-entrepreneurship initiative for underprivileged women, by a non-profit trust (Srotoswini Trust) in Vadodara, India, as to how it has impacted these women and their multidimensional poverty.

Notwithstanding the progress made by India in the field of science, space, engineering, and technology, the development continues to be lop-sided (Bharti, Chancel, Piketty, & Somanchi, 2024). The richest 1% in India control more than 40% of the total wealth, whereas the poorest 50% own just about 3%, according to OXFAM, International (Taneja et al., 2025). Millions in India continue to face multidimensional poverty, while India's position on the UN Human Development Index continues to that of concern, and a lot needs to be done to pull these millions out of poverty (Chowdhury & Chowdhury, 2024).

Most research indicates that the government alone cannot improve the economic conditions of its people (Fahad et al., 2023). Besides, the role of entrepreneurship in alleviating poverty has also been studied (Sa'id & Yahuza, 2025; Saxena et al., 2025). Previous studies also show that women's entrepreneurship is effective in alleviating poverty since they not only improve financial well-being but have a positive impact on health, education, hygiene, and general living conditions of the kids and the entire family (Korosteleva & Stępień-Baig, 2021) (Alwago & Abdalla, 2025).

Women entrepreneurs generally struggle to secure financing for their businesses, and most have not been successful in obtaining loans from banks (Altaf et al., 2025). And then those living in rural areas struggle even more in navigating financial, infrastructural and societal barriers (Ergun et al., 2025). Often, women living under poverty find it difficult to access financial and other resources, are not considered bankable by financial institutions, face gross exploitation and neglect, and find it difficult to organise themselves in developing countries like India. Present studies do not cover how such women can be effectively organised in India and what role non-profit organisations could play in creating such opportunities for women (Trivedi et al. 2025). Our case research on Churni tries to address this gap and, therefore, create a model that other similar organizations could follow in creating micro-entrepreneurship opportunities for such women, helping them not only to organize but also to train, motivate, build resilience, and offer micro-credit and effectively sharing the responsibility in alleviating poverty, which is mostly thought to be the welfare responsibility solely of the government so far. It is in this context that the present study becomes important.

In this research, we use the Capability approach as a theoretical background suggested by Nobel laureate Amartya Sen (Sen, 1999). The Capability Approach proposed by Amartya Sen states that wealth or GDP is not an indicator of individual development. Hence, poverty is not just the lack of money; it's not having the capability to realise one's full potential as a human being. The capabilities approach suggests that well-being should not be measured according to what individuals do (Functionings) but what they can do (Capabilities). It proposes that social arrangements should be evaluated primarily according to the extent of freedom people have to promote and achieve functions they value.

Sen has argued in his Capability Approach that simply providing resources will not help in changing the situation of a person suffering from multi-dimensional poverty, unless capabilities are built in them. Churni model of micro entrepreneurship shows how they build various capabilities like economic capabilities, educational capabilities, social capabilities, digital capabilities, and personal agency, using conversion factors, personal, social, and environmental, to then develop various Functionings or actual achievements that include not only economic well-being, but also social impact, individual impact, and empowerment.

Method

This study employs the Global Multidimensional Poverty Index and the Capability approach, using the case study method. A mixed-method approach was chosen for this case research.

Ten women Micro-entrepreneurs were chosen who joined Churni between 2015 and 2017. Purposeful sampling was used for the study, aligned with Lodico's (2010) recommendation of choosing participants who have appropriate knowledge related to the basis of the study.

A total of 12 interviews were conducted – 2 with the President of the trust and the rest with the 10 Churni women micro-entrepreneurs. The lead investigator visited Vadodara, India, in July 2023 and conducted 11 of the 12 interviews. The second interview with the President of the Trust was conducted online in February 2025. For the purpose of collecting quantitative data, a questionnaire was developed. Interview data were analysed following the recommendations of Lodico (2010), and data were coded and categorised. The quantitative data were analysed using the Global Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI).

Results & Implications

Our findings clearly show that all 10 women micro-entrepreneurs of Churni were able to overcome multi-dimensional poverty over a decade of their association with Churni as micro-entrepreneurs. Using the Capability Approach postulated by Nobel Prize winner Amartya Sen, the study also analyses what made this micro-entrepreneurship model a success and how it has created an impact not only in terms of alleviating poverty but also bringing about social change, transforming the lives of these women (refer to Figure 1). This study also presents a replicable non-profit model of women micro-entrepreneurship to alleviate multidimensional poverty, at the same time underlining the responsibility of society and reducing over-dependence on government.

Navigating Constrained Spaces: A Critical Realist Exploration of Women's Necessity Entrepreneurship

Hechavarria, Newman, Brieger

Principal Topic

The necessity-opportunity dichotomy has dominated entrepreneurship research for over two decades, yet this binary framework inadequately captures the lived realities of women entrepreneurs in resource-constrained contexts. While Reynolds et al.'s (2001) Global Entrepreneurship Monitor framing positioned necessity entrepreneurship as a response to constrained circumstances, asking whether entrepreneurs act "because you have no better choices for work," this conceptualization has perpetuated deficit-based views of women's entrepreneurship in developing economies. This paper reconceptualizes necessity entrepreneurship as a dynamic dialectical process rather than a fixed category, examining how women entrepreneurs navigate and exercise agency within structurally constrained opportunity spaces. Drawing on critical realist phenomenological methodology and fieldwork with displaced women petty traders in Ghana's Kejetia marketplace, we develop a process model that reveals the sophisticated mechanisms through which marginalized women entrepreneurs maintain dignity, pursue aspirations, and create viable enterprises despite pronounced institutional exclusion, physical displacement, and resource limitations.

Our theoretical framework integrates three perspectives that collectively reshape understanding of entrepreneurship in constrained circumstances. First, Baker and Welter's (2020, 2023) critique of "invidious distinctions" that privilege Western, opportunity-driven entrepreneurship models prompts reconsideration of how entrepreneurship is theorized across diverse contexts. Second, O'Donnell et al.'s (2024) reconceptualization frames necessity entrepreneurship as "entrepreneurship within opportunity spaces constrained by structural factors," shifting focus from individual motivations to structural contexts. Third, institutional logics scholarship suggests entrepreneurs navigate multiple competing logics, market, community, and family, that create opportunity spaces with distinctive constraints and possibilities shaped by gender and social position (Thornton, Ocasio, and Lounsbury, 2012).

Longitudinal evidence from the Panel Study of Entrepreneurial Dynamics reveals fascinating temporal dynamics that challenge static categorizations. Using Markov chain modeling, we observe that entrepreneurs initially describing themselves as opportunity-driven demonstrate remarkable stability (90.20% remain in this category), while necessity-driven entrepreneurs show much greater volatility, only 38.42% maintain this classification while 52.22% shift toward opportunity-based explanations over time (Hechavarria, Matthews, Schenkel, 2009). These transition patterns suggest that necessity and opportunity classifications capture which aspect of the entrepreneurial dialectic, structural constraint or agential possibility, is most salient at a particular moment, rather than representing fundamentally different entrepreneurial types.

Our research context, Ghana's Kejetia marketplace in Kumasi, provides an ideal empirical window into these dynamics. The Kumasi Central Market historically hosted over 25,000 traders at various levels of economic formality. In 2015, the Kumasi Metropolitan Assembly initiated a redevelopment project that displaced thousands of traders, with approximately 5,000 petty traders, predominantly women who had paid daily taxes for decades, excluded from stall allocation in the new marketplace regardless of their financial capacity to formalize. Our fieldwork in 2017 captured women trading from sidewalks and roadways surrounding the construction site, operating under constant threat of further displacement with no guarantee of future placement.

Methodology

Employing critical realist interpretive phenomenology, we conducted in-depth interviews with 35 women entrepreneurs from a larger sample of 152 petty traders, supplemented by six months of ethnographic observation. Our analytical process combined phenomenological techniques with critical realist retroduction, iteratively moving between empirical observations, theoretical concepts, and hypothesized mechanisms to identify causal powers generating observed patterns.

Results & Implications

Our analysis reveals eight dialectical tensions that women entrepreneurs continuously navigate: (1) survival present versus aspirational future, where women balance immediate household needs against intergenerational mobility goals like children's education and house-building; (2) displacement versus place-making, where traders actively create and defend trading spaces through resourceful spatial practices despite institutional dispossession; (3) informality versus formalization aspirations, where entrepreneurs strategically manage legitimacy by selectively pursuing formal recognition while maintaining informal advantages; (4) necessity narrative versus capability narrative, where women actively reframe identities between acknowledging structural constraints and asserting skill and agency; (5) independence versus interdependence, where entrepreneurs simultaneously assert autonomy through business ownership while strategically leveraging family networks and collective organizations; (6) resource scarcity versus mobilization, where sophisticated financial management enables significant material achievements despite severe constraints; (7) adaptation versus resistance, where women shift between tactical compliance and collective political action; and (8) stigma management versus status seeking, where entrepreneurs negotiate between current marginalized status and future status enhancement through business development.

These findings generate three significant theoretical advances. First, entrepreneurial agency emerges as fundamentally multidimensional, operating across temporal, spatial, legitimacy, identity, relational, resource, tactical, and status domains simultaneously. This challenges prevailing views that reduce necessity entrepreneurship to purely economic responses to constraint. Second, constraint navigation and opportunity creation operate as parallel, mutually reinforcing processes rather than sequential stages. Entrepreneurs simultaneously address immediate survival needs while maintaining future aspirations, managing informality while working toward strategic formalization. Third, collective dimensions of entrepreneurial agency prove critical—women strategically leverage social networks, market associations, and collective political action to navigate constraints that would overwhelm purely individual responses.

Our dialectical process model fundamentally reconfigures understanding of necessity entrepreneurship. Rather than a deficient form of entrepreneurship defined by lack of alternatives, necessity entrepreneurship emerges as a sophisticated process of navigating tensions between constraint and possibility. The women in our study are neither simply victims of structural constraints nor unfettered agents, but strategic actors who creatively navigate constrained opportunity spaces through dialectical processes of accommodation and transformation. By identifying specific causal mechanisms—including strategic place-making, resource mobilization, collective organization, and identity reframing—we operationalize recent theoretical advances and demonstrate how entrepreneurs not only adapt to but sometimes transform constrained opportunity spaces. This research contributes to the Diana community's mission by demonstrating how gender shapes mechanisms of entrepreneurial agency, revealing the distinctive ways women entrepreneurs in Sub-Saharan Africa leverage gendered identities and relationships to create viable businesses rather than simply responding to gender constraints.

Intersectional Entrepreneurial Resilience Repertoires of Women Social Entrepreneurs in a Digital Age

Al Ghafri

Principal Topic

Entrepreneurship is widely promoted as a pathway to income generation, empowerment, and social change for women (Brush et al., 2009; Welter, 2011). Yet for women who are racialized, visibly Muslim, migrants, and working in social mission-driven ventures, entrepreneurship is lived under chronic, structural adversity rather than discrete “crisis events.” This paper examines how Arab/Muslim women social entrepreneurs in Sweden enact entrepreneurial resilience under intersecting gendered, racialised, and religious scripts, and how they leverage digital and social innovation to redesign access structures in education, health, legal services, and entrepreneurship support. Resilience is typically understood as positive adjustment to adversity, maintaining, restoring, or transforming functioning under strain (Williams et al., 2017; Korber and McNaughton, 2017; Duchek, 2020). Yet most entrepreneurship research treats resilience as an individual trait or generic process, with limited attention to how intersectional positions shape what adversity looks like and what “positive adjustment” requires (Essers and Tedmanson, 2014; Adeeko and Treanor, 2022). For Arab/Muslim women in Europe, entrepreneurship is embedded in home- and host-country institutional fields where legal reforms, gender-equality rhetoric, and innovation agendas coexist with Islamophobia, racialisation, and gendered market logics (Villares-Varela and Essers, 2019; Solano, 2021). Sweden, known for gender equality, a strong welfare state, and support for entrepreneurship (Holmquist and Sundin, 2021), nevertheless exhibits persistent structural barriers for women entrepreneurs, including gatekeeping, stereotyping, and a “credibility toll” requiring racialised women to over-demonstrate competence before their ventures are considered legitimate (Ahl and Nelson, 2015; Hedberg and Pettersson, 2012; Yeröz, 2019). For many Arab/Muslim women, especially those who are visibly Muslim, stereotypes linking them to “security-risk” regions intensify this toll in courts, banks, and investor meetings. We adopt an intersectional lens (Crenshaw, 2013; Holvino, 2010) and build on contextual embeddedness (Welter, 2011; Welter and Baker, 2021) to conceptualise intersectional entrepreneurial resilience as a micro-meso process through which entrepreneurs sustain functioning under structural adversity, reframe stigmatized differences as capabilities, and “bounce forward” by reshaping exclusionary structures. Analytically, we focus on Arab/Muslim women whose ventures sit at the intersection of social entrepreneurship and digitalisation. Against this backdrop, this study investigates how these women enact resilience in practice, how they negotiate legitimacy within gendered, racialised, and religious hierarchies, mobilise identity-based resources in venture design, and use digital and social innovation to intervene in and transform exclusionary structures. This paper demonstrates how they are transforming futures in a digital age by building socio-technical infrastructures that redistribute knowledge, networks, and capital, challenging the limits of Western-centered entrepreneurship and resilience theories for diaspora and Global South-connected contexts (Alkhaled and Berglund, 2018; Benali and Villesèche, 2023).

Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative, social-constructionist, and interpretive research design (Fletcher, 2007; Lindgren and Packendorff, 2009), aligned with feminist and intersectional epistemologies foregrounding lived experience, emotional labour, and identity work (Essers and Tedmanson, 2014). Entrepreneurship is approached as situated action within institutional, cultural, and digital contexts. Empirically, the study draws on 15 semi-structured interviews with Arab and/or Muslim women entrepreneurs in Sweden, varying in migration histories and sectors such as IT, health, social-impact, and legal services. All participants had operated their venture for at least one year. Recruitment used purposive and snowball sampling through women’s entrepreneurial networks and incubators in Stockholm (Noy, 2008). Interviews were conducted in English or Swedish between March 2023 and January 2025, recorded with consent, transcribed, and anonymized. Data analysis followed an abductive and reflexive approach (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2007). First-cycle attribute and structural coding organized material around challenges, identity work, digital practices, and exclusion (Díaz-García and Welter, 2013), followed by open and NVivo coding prioritizing participants’ language (Saldana, 2013). Iterative theorization generated a four-move resilience repertoire: legitimacy choreography, asset claiming, hybrid positioning, and structural intervention, illustrated through analytic vignettes. Reflexive memos documented how the researcher's positionality shaped interpretation.

Results & Implications

Findings show that Arab/Muslim women social entrepreneurs in Sweden operate under permanent, intersectional adversity, encountering recurring micro-exclusions, racialised risk perceptions, and thin inherited networks. In response, they mobilise a four-part intersectional entrepreneurial resilience repertoire. Legitimacy choreography entails sequenced, non-assimilative signaling fluent Swedish, credentials, traction metrics to neutralize stereotype-based discounting and secure a hearing for their ventures. Asset claiming reframes multilingualism, visible Muslimness, and diaspora horizons as venture-relevant capabilities, exemplified by a multilingual law firm positioning "immigrant identity" as a linguistic justice value proposition. Hybrid positioning enables founders to keep plural identities (Swedish/Arab/Muslim) in active play while navigating Swedish institutions and MENA markets, as in an AI-enabled cancer diagnostics venture linking Nordic SMEs with Middle Eastern hospitals. Structural intervention moves resilience from coping to institutional entrepreneurship (Rindova et al., 2009), as women assert rights and build alternative infrastructures anonymous mentoring platforms, NGO-fund hybrids, and health-access export models that "bounce forward" by redistributing knowledge, networks, and capital for broader communities. Collectively, these findings reposition resilience as a socio-technical, intersectional, and future-oriented practice linking micro identity work, meso-level venture design, and macro-level institutional change in a digital age. The study contributes theoretically by specifying how resilience operates at the intersection of gender, race, and religion in a high-income welfare state (Williams et al., 2017; Nautiyal and Pathak, 2023) and by reframing "coping strategies" as a dynamic repertoire founders sequence and recombine as contexts shift. It further bridges intersectional and social entrepreneurship by showing how Arab/Muslim women use digital and AI-enabled ventures to challenge exclusionary systems, advancing debates on empowerment, emancipation, and belonging in women's entrepreneurship (Alkhaled and Berglund, 2018; Benali and Villesèche, 2023).

The Intersection of Female Cultural Socialisation and Digitalisation on Gen Z Perceptions of Social Entrepreneurship in the UAE

Wood, Bastian

Principal Topic

The Gulf States, including the UAE, are looking to diversify their economies away from oil. One vigorous strand of the various regional Vision documents has been an emphasis on entrepreneurship, particularly by women (UAE Vision 2031). To support this change in the economy, compulsory entrepreneurship education was introduced at the tertiary level across the country in 2016.

Our project plans to interrogate the ‘inherent’ nature, assumed to be present in (all) women, of caring, community-mindedness and support for others. In our context, the citizens are all wealthy by global standards, and so if they have an interest in social entrepreneurship, is it of the style of charitable/philanthropy as is typically associated with the wealthy, or is it driven by other motivations? In the digital age, of which Gen Z are natives, impacting their perspectives of social entrepreneurship, it’s appeal and the scope of its action?

There are some significant context-specific considerations in the assessment of women’s interest, knowledge, engagement and experience of social entrepreneurship in the UAE intersecting with the socio-religious culture (all Emiratis are Muslim), the family support that is common here (and is in keeping with the religious culture), the limited market (many Emirati women-led businesses have no intention to scale or internationalise – except perhaps around the Gulf, and the prevalence of ‘on their own terms participation’ (where they work their ventures around their family/children, ie, during school hours). In addition, the UAE has an extensive social safety net citizens and Emiratis are the recipients of many forms of support for general living and also for starting a business (eg, Khalifa Fund).

Method

To pilot test the familiarity of students with social entrepreneurship, a simple pilot was run. Students from across the university disciplines (IT, engineering, veterinary, science, humanities and business) were asked about their perceptions and knowledge of social entrepreneurship. Data was collected from 122 female students, over half of whom did not come from a family business background. Data was collected online, using Qualtrics, and was open for a period of several weeks at the start of the Fall semester.

Results & Implications

An overview of some of the results are presented here. Around half of the female students surveyed were either ‘highly interested’ or had ‘some interest’ in social entrepreneurship. 75% of the sample thought that the purpose of social entrepreneurship is to help society/the environment, 20% said to make a lot of money and be successful. It should be noted here that there are very few laws around social entrepreneurship in the UAE, but most charitable giving is organized through the government or government agencies. Therefore, many businesses in the country that may be considered social enterprises are registered as simply LLC’s.

Notably, they also remarked that social entrepreneurship was for meeting people (50%). This finding is interesting and perhaps reflects the importance of face to face/relationships in this context. It is well known that Arab/Muslim cultured people greatly value personal relationships and reward long service and long held relationships in all facets of life. 66% of respondents thought of social entrepreneurship as ‘setting up a business with friends’.

Of the students from a business family, meeting people and setting up a business with friends dominated. The influence of the social aspects from the prospective founder side in this result is interesting – social entrepreneurship characterized as developing relationships with new people and strengthening relationships with friends.

Influences about social entrepreneurship were found to be peer-presentations of social enterprises and ‘stories’ on social media – reinforcing the literature around having role models as a key motivator. It also supports the increasing research stream examining the importance of online relationships for Gen Z and literature investigating whether these online/follower relationships are challenging the tight in-group parameters in societies such as the UAE.

Overall, 22% of students who had taken a basic introduction course had no interest in social entrepreneurship and 33% of those who had taken other/more entrepreneurship courses were also not interested. Given that the university where the data collection took place has been offering a social entrepreneurship course since 2010 and has entrepreneurship as a stand alone major in the business school, this requires further examination as an early result.

The next steps we envisage are to run focus groups with students and interviews with social entrepreneurs to investigate whether this context expects women to be more interested in social entrepreneurship and, if so, if it is due to socialization as women, to wider cultural imperatives, to religious motivations, to enhancement of family reputations or some other range of motivations.

A better understanding of the socialization of girls in a context such as the UAE will add important perspectives to the literature and allow the development of recommendations for suitable support for women looking to develop social enterprises and for policy development to expand the sector.

Intersectional Digital Barriers for African Women Entrepreneurs in Scotland

Nankunda, Nziku

Principal Topic

Digitalisation is increasingly recognised as a key driver of women's entrepreneurial participation, enabling expanded market reach, enhanced visibility, and flexible business operations (GSMA, 2024; Suseno & Abbott, 2021). However, these benefits are not distributed evenly. Women from racialised and migrant backgrounds often face intersecting structural barriers that restrict their ability to fully participate in digital economies (Crenshaw, 1989; Martinez Dy & Jayawarna, 2020; Nziku & Bikorimana, 2023; Ram et al., 2022; Nankunda, Nziku and Beloucif, 2025). African women entrepreneurs in Scotland operate within a complex socio-digital environment shaped by racialised market interactions, gendered care responsibilities, digital skill inequalities, limited financial access and wider socio-economic constraints. While digital platforms can open new pathways, they may also amplify existing inequalities and expose women to new forms of discrimination.

This study examines how digital platforms shape the entrepreneurial practices of African women in Scotland and the key challenges they encounter within Scotland's digital and socio-economic landscape. An intersectional analytical lens is used to explore how race, gender, migration status, motherhood and digital participation intersect to influence entrepreneurial opportunities, constraints and outcomes.

Methodology

A qualitative research design was adopted to explore the lived experiences of African women entrepreneurs. Thirty-five participants operating in Glasgow, Edinburgh and Aberdeen were recruited using purposive and snowball sampling. Semi-structured interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed and thematically analysed following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase process: (1) familiarisation with the data; (2) generating initial codes; (3) searching for themes; (4) reviewing themes; (5) defining and naming themes; and (6) producing the report. An intersectional theory guided the analysis to identify how multiple identities and structural positions shaped women's digital engagement and entrepreneurial challenges.

Results & Implications

Findings indicate that digital platforms, such as websites, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok and online professional groups, play a central role in enhancing business visibility, promoting services, and facilitating communication with customers. These tools enable women to reach broader audiences, strengthen credibility, and compensate for limited offline networks, consistent with research showing that digitalisation is a key mechanism for women's entrepreneurial inclusion (Elam et al., 2024). However, a clear generational and digital-skills divide emerged. Younger, digitally confident women use social media with ease, while older entrepreneurs or those with limited prior exposure struggle to navigate these tools. Limited time, financial pressures and lower digital confidence, shaped by intersecting disadvantages, restrict equal participation. As suggested in existing work, digitalisation can reproduce inequalities rather than resolve them (Martinez Dy & Jayawarna, 2020).

Participants also reported that digital engagement is influenced by racism and linguistic bias. Customers sometimes cancelled appointments after hearing an African accent or after recognising African names or profile images online. These incidents show how digital spaces can amplify racialised stereotypes, consistent with research on discrimination affecting minority entrepreneurs' market access and legitimacy (Ram et al., 2022; Clark, Drinkwater & Robinson, 2017). Many women adapted by relying on text-based communication to avoid accent-based judgment, though this added emotional and cognitive strain.

Beyond the digital sphere, participants described fragmented offline networks characterised by mistrust, jealousy and unhealthy competition, which limited collaboration and access to shared resources. Echoing existing evidence that minority women often lack supportive entrepreneurial networks (Carter, Williams & Wing, 2018), many turned to digital platforms as alternative spaces in which to build visibility independently of strained community relationships. Additionally, broader structural and socio-economic constraints shaped women's ability to use digital tools effectively. Financial precarity, limited access to formal loans, gendered caregiving responsibilities, migration-related disadvantages, competition from unregistered home-based businesses, supply chain disruptions, fluctuating demand and post-COVID-19 pressures all affected the time, resources and confidence required to engage digitally. These institutional and market-level barriers, widely documented in literature on minority entrepreneurship (De Vita, Mari & Poggesi, 2014; Adeeko & Treanor, 2022), further compounded inequality in digital participation.

Methods & Reflexivity

Before the Interview Begins: Performing Gender to Get Access to Participants
Stoker

Principal Topic

Entrepreneurial ecosystems are shaped by influential actors who hold formal and informal authority over dominant narratives, networks, and resource flows (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). Yet, gaining access as an academic researcher to such elites remains a well-documented methodological challenge marked by assistant mediation, digital gatekeeping, and pronounced power asymmetries (Aguinis & Solarino, 2019; Solarino & Aguinis, 2021). While elite-interviewing scholarship theorises access, trust, and gatekeeping, it typically treats access as a logistical hurdle rather than a socially situated performance that begins long before the recorder is switched on. Building on feminist epistemology and theories of gender performativity, this paper reframes elite access as a gendered method: a set of embodied, digital, and interactional performances that shape who agrees to speak, whose voices enter the data, and resulting into what knowledge becomes possible.

In this paper I shift analytical attention to the pre-interview digital access phase, where emails and messaging platforms structure the researcher–elite relationship. Drawing on two gendered access mechanisms, namely gendered intelligence and solidarity signalling I demonstrate how researchers can strategically perform gender to increase access probabilities. These mechanisms are not merely tactical; they systematically shape sample composition and therefore the empirical foundations of research about a specific population.

Accordingly, I ask: How is gender performed by researchers to obtain access to elite participants, and with what effects on access outcomes in research contexts? The paper advances qualitative methods by (I) theorising access as a gendered, performative method rather than a neutral procedural step, and (II) extending Aguinis & Solarino’s (2019) transparency framework by specifying indicators, boundary conditions, and ethical guardrails that make gendered access work auditable, teachable, and reportable. This strengthens methodological rigour in fields where access inequality silently shapes what is known.

Methodology

Although conceptual in orientation, the paper is anchored in two illustrative cases from a wider qualitative study of the Dutch entrepreneurial ecosystem (spring–summer 2024; 25 in depth-interviews, including 15 with elite participants). The cases include pre-interview artefacts like emails and direct messages, positionality memos, and fieldnotes combined with contextual insights from conversations with a national-level political lobbyist to clarify norms and gatekeeping scripts in the Dutch institutional environment. This design holds national and temporal context constant while varying the researcher’s access performance, allowing the identification of mechanisms and boundary conditions that generalise beyond the cases.

Results & Implications

The dominant mechanisms arise across the two illustrative cases. First, what I call gendered intelligence which is the strategic use of reputational knowledge about a target’s self-presentation, masculine status orientation, or public role-modelling which operates as access capital. In illustrative case one, two unanswered cold messages to a male chief executive were followed by a reframed, high-status, time-bounded message that aligned with his self-image and lowered interactional friction. This produced a positive response within ten minutes, illustrating how gendered intelligence shapes access outcomes.

Second, case two demonstrates how woman-to-woman solidarity signalling is also a gendered performed mechanism. It entails explicit shared identity cues which accelerates access and deepens candour when approaching senior female leaders. Together, the cases reveal patterned mechanisms through which gendered performances interact with digital infrastructures, gatekeepers, and institutional scripts to influence response rates, speed, and openness.

The paper contributes to entrepreneurship methodology by demonstrating that access is performed, gendered, and consequential for data quality, sample construction, and the knowledge base of our field.

In an era where research increasingly unfolds through digital channels, unreported gendered access work risks reinforcing the very exclusions that scholarship aims to dismantle. By providing conceptual specification and transparency guidelines, the paper equips scholars to navigate elite access ethically and reflexively, while enabling more inclusive and replicable research designs. Future studies can extend this model across national contexts and intersectional identities to refine boundary conditions and strengthen methodological equity in digital-age entrepreneurship research.

Student Attitudes Toward Lesbian and Gay Entrepreneurship Professors

Bendell, Beaver

Principal Topic

Heteronormativity is a social system based on the assumptions that: everyone is heterosexual; heterosexuality is the ideal and superior sexual orientation; there are only two genders, man and woman; and women and men have specific jobs in society. Universities have tremendous influence on the perpetuation or dismantling of heteronormativity in society because these institutions create and inculcate the norms and standards of what are and are not acceptable values, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors in workplaces and society.

Within an educational setting, implicit heteronormativity is particularly pernicious as it can foster a less inclusive and welcoming environment, contribute to feelings of isolation, shame, depression, and anxiety, lead to discrimination and prejudice against LGBTQ+ individuals (Herek, 2000), and increased suicide ideation (Cohen, Duarte, & Ross, 2023). This is especially troubling given the growing numbers of young people identifying as LGBTQ+ (22.3% of Gen Z in the U.S. according to Gallup (Jones, 2024)) in search of belonging, support, and queer role models (Vaccaro & Newman, 2016). Moreover, statistics on the number of business school deans and faculty who openly identify at LGBTQ+ are difficult to find, in essence rendering this demographic invisible. Indeed, the implicit heteronormativity within business schools silences the voices of LGBTQ+ faculty and leadership who often confront marginalization and exclusion due to inherently heteronormative organizational norms, values, and knowledge practices (Rumens, 2016).

While business school faculty have a unique opportunity to welcome and educate future entrepreneurs, managers, and leaders who can dismantle organizational and societal heteronormativity, many business school faculty may eschew disclosing their sexual identity to students and/or peers to avoid discrimination, stigmatization, status loss, prejudice, and exclusion (DeJordy, 2008; Crouteau et al., 2008; Clair et al., 2005). Indeed, business schools fraught with heteronormative bias can leave faculty worried that disclosure could lead to physical and emotional harassment, hostile or uncomfortable learning environments, lower teaching evaluations, reduced promotion opportunities and fewer research partnerships (Rumens & Lewis, 2023; Fotaki, 2011).

Given the paucity of research on student reactions to faculty sexual identity disclosure, we set out to explore the following overarching research questions: How do students' perceptions of credibility and social attraction vary between lesbian, gay, and straight business school professors, and how are these perceptions influenced by student characteristics such as homonegativity, religiosity, and political ideology, as well as the professor's discipline (e.g., entrepreneurship vs. organizational behavior vs accounting)?

Methodology

We conducted an experimental study with undergraduate business school students (N = 460) at a private university in northeastern US. All participants were presented with two faculty profiles: first with a straight male professor of a general business course, and then randomly assigned to one of six lesbian or gay profiles that varied by professor gender and discipline taught (e.g., lesbian female entrepreneurship, OB, or accounting; gay male entrepreneurship, OB, or accounting). Participants were asked to evaluate the professor’s credibility (e.g., intelligence, knowledge, competence rated from low to high; McCroskey & Teven, 1999) and social attraction (e.g., “this professor would be easy to get along with” rated from strongly disagree to strongly agree; McCroskey et al., 2006). Immediately after completing the experiment, students answered questions capturing measures of their homonegativity (Morrison & Morrison, 2002), religiosity (Wilkerson et al., 2012), political ideology (from 0 = liberal to 100 = conservative), and several demographic questions.

Results & Implications

Respondents were 55.9% female; 49.6% racial minority; 12% LGBTQ, with an average age of 20.3 years (SD = 1.73), from a range of countries (22.6% non-US born). The results showed no difference in ratings of credibility and social attraction between the straight male professor and gay/lesbian professors across all disciplines. However, we found that the gender of the queer professor has a significant impact on their social attraction rating, with gay male professors ($n = 240$; $M = 3.94$, $SD = .70$) rated higher on social attraction than lesbian professors ($n = 220$; $M = 3.78$, $SD = .71$; $F(1, 459) = 6.53$, $p = .011$). This was especially true for entrepreneurship professors, where the interaction effect of being lesbian and teaching entrepreneurship showed the most negative social attraction rating ($n = 37$, $M = 3.49$, $SD = .71$) compared with their gay male entrepreneurship colleagues ($n = 38$, $M = 3.99$, $SD = .63$; $F(1, 456) = 5.67$, $p = .02$). We also found that higher participant homonegativity and a conservative political ideology were each related to lower credibility and social attractiveness ratings, while higher religiosity lowered credibility ratings only. Finally, we found that male students rated queer professors lower in both credibility and social attractiveness compared to female raters.

Our findings shed light on the complex interplay between sexual identity, gender, and discipline in shaping student perceptions of business school faculty. While LGBTQ+ faculty are generally perceived as credible, implicit biases and stereotypes persist, particularly for lesbian entrepreneurship professors. To foster more inclusive and equitable teaching and learning environments, business schools should implement strategies to challenge heteronormativity, ensure LGBTQ+ faculty are not unfairly penalized in annual reviews and promotion decisions due to potential biases in student evaluations, and promote awareness of LGBTQ+ issues. Given the growing number of students identifying as LGBTQ+, a lack of out queer faculty role models may discourage them from pursuing business careers (Nauta et al., 2001). This research can inform initiatives to promote LGBTQ+ faculty representation, ultimately empowering students from traditionally underrepresented and marginalized groups in business.

Advancing Women Entrepreneurs' Financial Inclusion Through Financial Technologies (Fintechs)

Matthee, Moos

Principal Topic

Women entrepreneurs (WEs) are recognised as key economic development and empowerment agents because their entrepreneurial endeavours may contribute to wealth creation, employment generation, and social change (McAdam, 2022; Garg & Agarwal, 2017). However, WEs frequently face greater difficulty in accessing finance than men (Carter, Brush and Greene, 2003; Ugochukwu, Oloko & Ajayi, 2017; Akinola, 2020; El-Gohary & Eid, 2019; Meyer & Hamilton, 2020; Meyer, Samsami & Bowmaker-Falconer, 2024). This can be attributed to biases present in investment decisions, discrimination, insufficient business networks (Dwinger & Hoosain, 2021), and minimal collateral (Ojo & Zondi, 2023). Studies have shown that poor financial performance of women-owned enterprises historically (Santos, Costa, Shafi & Neumeyer, 2024) are due to the lack of access to finance (Sanchez-Riofrio, Lupton, Camino-Mogro, & Acosta-Ávila, 2023). Studies (Amatucci and Crawley, 2011; Meyer et al., 2024) suggest that when WEs have access to financial resources and related support, they can take control of their businesses and increase their confidence, thereby motivating them to actively pursue their entrepreneurial goals.

Cognizant of the key role WEs fulfil and the challenges that they face, the South African government has introduced various initiatives and policies to increase WEs access to finance, training, and market opportunities (Presidency of the Republic of South Africa, 2020) with the aim of advancing financial inclusion (FI). FI denotes the use of formal financial services by individuals and organisations, particularly those historically left out of the conventional financial sector (Khoza & Brijlal, 2024). FI emerges as a powerful tool which has the transformative power to mitigate poverty and inequality, by providing individuals and entities a means to save, invest, and manage risk (Mahmud Aderoju & Adedeji, 2019). Moreover, FI amplifies entrepreneurial activities, catalyses economic growth which is illuminated by facilitating capital access and credit availability (Hermes & Lensink, 2011) and plays a pivotal role in unlocking WEs' full potential by providing them with equitable access to financial services and resources (Rani & Kumar, 2024). To this end, the Financial Inclusion Policy, accepted by the South African cabinet in 2023, assesses the current state of FI in South Africa and provides general principles to guide sustainable improvement and embeds principles in specific pillars in support of the policy objectives (FSCA, 2022; National Treasury, 2023). Moreover, the government has also established a regulatory framework for microfinance institutions, provided subsidies to promote access to credit for small businesses, developed a credit bureau system, encouraged the development of digital financial services, and facilitated a financial literacy and education programme (Banda & Chikodzi, 2017; Khoza & Brijlal, 2024). In spite thereof, the FI landscape, remains uneven with persistent gender and geographical location disparities (FinMark Trust, 2023). Notably, while the overall gender gap has narrowed significantly women still dawdle men in terms of usage of formal financial products and services (FinMark Trust, 2023; Khoza & Brijlal, 2024). This once again emphasises the disadvantages women may face in the financial sector, such as the lack of collateral to borrow funds or lack of digital skills among women to access formal institutions (Enterprises UP, 2024).

Scholarly narration on the effect of digital engagement in women's entrepreneurship remains inconsistent and multifaceted (Bachmann, Rose, Maul, Hölzle, 2024). This study is motivated by the growing importance of financial technologies (Fintechs), its claim to bridge the gender gap through digital engagement (Anyanga, Jugurnatha & Maalu, 2025) and its potential to further increase FI (Iddrisu, Abor & Banjen, 2022; Mashamba & Gani, 2023). Fintech is defined as "advanced technology firms that have the potential to transform the provision of financial services, spurring the development of new business models and applications, whose products and services are directly applicable in the delivery of financial services." (Genesis, 2020).

Methodology

Data from the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor Special Report (2024) indicates that more women (62.1%) than men (57.9%) have the intention to adopt digitalisation in future. This indicates the preparedness of entrepreneurs for the evolving business world and the inclination toward embracing digital transformation among entrepreneurs (Peter et al., 2025; Meyer et al., 2024). Hence, South Africa offers a compelling context for examining how digitisation induced by the rise in fintechs has the democratising power to enhance FI of WEs. The Institutional theory (IT) and technology acceptance model (TAM) are identified as theoretical lenses which will underpin this study. Grounded in an interpretivist paradigm, this exploratory qualitative study will collect primary data from 30 purposively selected WEs. Thereafter, the data will be analysed using thematic analyses to present key findings on how WEs' financial inclusion is leveraged by using fintechs.

Results & Implications

This study is positioned at the intersection of entrepreneurship, development finance and gender studies. The significance of this study is twofold; firstly, this unique research question has not yet been explored in the available literature. Secondly, the potential to inform evidence-based policies that will address the distinct needs and challenges of WEs in the Western Cape. By shedding light on the challenges hampering WEs' financial inclusion and identifying avenues for improvement, this research endeavours to contribute to the broader discourse on gender-responsive digital development strategies. Moreover, by amplifying the voices and experiences of WEs, this study seeks to empower them as active agents of change in shaping their economic destinies and fostering sustainable development.

Diana Conferences: Past to Present

Year	Theme	Location
2026	Transforming Futures: Women and Social Entrepreneurship in a Digital Age	Johannesburg, South Africa
2025	Entrepreneurship at the Edge: Extending the Boundaries of Gender and Entrepreneurship	Auckland, New Zealand
2024	Women's Entrepreneurship: Implications for Policy	Stockholm, Sweden
2023	Exploring Diversity of Experiences and Impact	Wellesley, MA, USA
2022	Digital Women's Entrepreneurship	Dublin, Ireland
2021	Women and Family Entrepreneurship	Nice, France (online)
2019	Women's Entrepreneurship: Catalyzing Change and Innovation	Wellesley, MA, USA
2018	Women's Entrepreneurship and Culture	Bangkok, Thailand
2017	Women Entrepreneurs in High Growth Businesses: Programs, Practices and Policies	Kansas City, Missouri
2016	Women Entrepreneurs and Technology; Women in Family Business	Bodo, Norway
2015	Entrepreneurial Ecosystems and Women's Entrepreneurship	Wellesley, MA, USA
2014	Women's Entrepreneurship and Innovation in the Global Economy	Stockholm, Sweden
2012	Women Entrepreneurs in the 21st Century	Perth, Western Australia
2010	Extending Women's Entrepreneurship Scholarship in New Directions	Banff, Canada
2008	Advancing Women's Entrepreneurship and Supporting the Growth of Women Owned Businesses	Belfast, Ireland
2007	Diana International Research Conference	Madrid, Spain
2006	Diana International Research Conference	Stockholm, Sweden
2004	Diana International Research Conference	Stockholm, Sweden
2003	Diana International Organizing Conference	Stockholm, Sweden