

Breaking Boundaries: Exploring Female Digital Entrepreneurship as an Emancipatory Pathway for Sri Lankan Women?

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Abstract

Despite the commonly accepted notion that digital entrepreneurship works as a pathway for women to navigate the barriers they experience in the physical world, female digital entrepreneurship (FDE) as a liberating pathway for women is not rigorously explored in the literature. Therefore, this paper focuses on understanding how FDE works as a liberating pathway for women to overcome the constraints they experience in the physical world in an economically constrained, strong patriarchal context. Data collected from in-depth interviews with 25 female digital entrepreneurs were analyzed through thematic analysis. The findings substantiate that the emancipatory potential offered by FDE is not a wonder drug. It was found that an array of digital affordances, namely extending reach affordances, learning affordances, opportunity creation affordances, networking affordances, and flexibility affordances, enable women to be liberated from the constraints they experience in the brick-and-mortar world. This study will enrich the understanding of the emancipatory potential of digital entrepreneurship in a more contextualised manner.

Key Words: Female Entrepreneurship; Digital Entrepreneurship; FDE, Emancipatory Potential; Sri Lanka; Interpretive Qualitative Research

1. INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary context, female entrepreneurship has received exponential attention at both academic and policy levels, not only as a means of fostering economic growth but also as a means of uplifting social well-being (Harrison et al., 2020; Ughetto et al., 2020; Vossenberg, 2013). Based on the existing literature, it is evident that in the global context, despite favourable outcomes, impediments to female entrepreneurship persist at a high level (Harrison et al., 2020; Sundermeier et al., 2018; Welter, 2004). While male entrepreneurs outnumber their female counterparts is a common phenomenon, the circumstances of female entrepreneurship in economically constrained developing economies are much more challenging (Heeks et al., 2021; Panda, 2018). Given that half of the world's population comprises females, enhancing women's engagement as entrepreneurs is critical to enriching socio-economic growth among society as a whole. While the constraints for female entrepreneurs are often ubiquitous, conditions for women are often more unfavourable in developing economies due to inherent resource constraints, deeply rooted patriarchal gender norms, and unfavourable socio-economic conditions (Panda, 2018; Panda & Dash, 2016). Most studies on female entrepreneurship primarily focus on the barriers affecting female entrepreneurship, with a limited understanding of how women navigate these challenges (Langevang et al., 2018; Semkunde et al., 2021; Stead, 2017). Thus, to elevate the understanding of female entrepreneurship and unleash its full potential, it is imperative to go beyond the barriers and explore how female entrepreneurs navigate such challenges.

Recently, digital entrepreneurship gained momentum as an economic activity that counters the ostracization of certain groups in society (Leong et al., 2022; Martin & Wright, 2005; Shirazi, 2012; Sundermeier et al., 2018). Even though the widely held notion emphasises digital entrepreneurship as a great leveller, the emancipatory potential of FDE has received limited academic attention (Dy et al., 2018; McAdam et al., 2020; Wiig et al., 2023; Yu & Cui, 2019). The findings of these handfuls of studies that focus on the emancipatory potential of digital entrepreneurship are inconclusive where the liberating effects for women's engagement in entrepreneurship by providing temporal and spatial flexibility in terms of access to resources, markets, information, finance, and networks were emphasised by some scholars (Manello et al., 2020; Martin & Wright, 2005; McAdam et al., 2019) while others critically argue against the widely accepted notion of emancipation of digital entrepreneurship as it reflects the reproduction of power structures and hierarchies in the brick and motor world which govern the resource allocation (Duffy & Pruchniewska, 2017; Dy et al., 2017; Luo & Chan, 2021; Martinez Dy et al., 2018). This calls for conducting further research to explore how female digital entrepreneurship (FDE) functions as a potential leveller, mitigating structural inequalities and creating more equitable opportunities.

When exploring the emancipatory potential of digital entrepreneurship, it is discernible that attention should be focused on attaining a contextualised understanding of the phenomenon rather than perceiving it as homogeneous. Not only are the gender and expectations of sex role socialisation socially constructed (Ely, 1994; Marlow et al., 2019; Sundermeier et al., 2018), but entrepreneurship is also a context-bound activity (McAdam et al., 2020; Welter, 2011). Thus, more focused efforts should be placed on attaining a contextualised understanding of FDE. Al-Dajani et al. (2015) emphasised that studies exploring the emancipatory potential of entrepreneurship are in a position to attain a more nuanced and theoretically provocative view by contextualising the research. When it comes to the geographical context, the existing literature on female entrepreneurship is primarily confined to the Global North (Alhothali & Al-Dajani, 2022; Marlow, 2020), underscoring the need to explore female entrepreneurship in diverse contexts with varying conditions (Dean et al., 2019; Panda, 2018; Alhothali & Al-Dajani, 2022). Specifically, exploring the experience of female digital entrepreneurs in the Global South, where economically constrained and patriarchal gender norms strongly shape cultures, will be pivotal.

Despite Sri Lanka being a South Asian country with strong patriarchal gender norms, the country is in a much better state in terms of gender parity when compared to its South Asian neighbours (Banu, 2016). While Sri Lanka is also experiencing political and economic instabilities like other South Asian countries, it has marked a significant growth in terms of gender parity and literacy rates compared to the others, marking Sri Lanka as a unique context. Thus, by bridging the gaps in the existing literature, this study will examine how women in digital entrepreneurship utilise digital affordances to overcome barriers.

This study, revolving around the entrepreneurial journey of female digital entrepreneurs in the Sri Lankan context, makes several theoretical and practical contributions. First, the study will contribute to the theoretical advancement of the FDE by exploring a scarcely studied area of how FDE work as an emancipatory pathway and filling the need for contextualising studies on female entrepreneurship to absorb the heterogeneity. The study addresses the need to interrogate female entrepreneurship in the Global South, as existing studies are mainly confined to the Global North. Second, regardless of the growing recognition of the emancipatory potential of digital entrepreneurship for inclusive development, our knowledge of the precise mechanisms through which emancipation occurs through digitalisation remains scant. Thus, by bridging the theoretical gaps, this study will underscore the empowering potential of digitalisation for women's entrepreneurship in the Sri Lankan context through the lens of digital affordances.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Female Digital Entrepreneurship

In the academic literature, female entrepreneurship is broadly defined as women initiating groundbreaking and ascendable business models for the betterment of the economy (Jennings & Brush, 2013). Notwithstanding the economic development and social equity generated through female entrepreneurship, the gender gap in the entrepreneurship phenomenon still exists significantly (Jennings et al., 2016). Not only do women start and operate fewer businesses when compared to men, but they also receive lower returns, experience stagnation and low growth, and have higher failure rates than male entrepreneurs (Vossenbergh, 2013). With the masculine identity associated with entrepreneurship (Ahl & Marlow, 2012; Brush & Cooper, 2012; Cheryan & Marcus, 2020) and the communality attributed to women (Bem, 1974; Cheryan & Markus, 2020), women are often recognised as “other” in the role of entrepreneur. While the recognition of women as a less empowered group in society is a pervasive phenomenon (Heeks et al., 2021), the experiences of women entrepreneurs are significantly influenced by the specific social and cultural context in which they engage (Harrison et al., 2020; McAdam et al., 2019; Welter, 2020). While women's disadvantaged position is ubiquitous, the situation is much exacerbated for women in countries which has strong patriarchal gender norms. For women in these countries, engaging in entrepreneurial ventures is akin to an uphill climb that requires navigating gendered barriers through the adaptive use of available resources.

As the continuous evolution of information and communication technology has impacted all spheres of society, it would be noteworthy to explore how digitalisation works as a pathway for marginalised women to overcome the barriers. Due to the limited scholarship effort made, thus far, ‘digital entrepreneurship’ and its conceptualisation remain quite elusive (Kraus et al., 2019; Hull et al., 2007). Scholars have made efforts to provide diverse definitions of the phenomenon of digital entrepreneurship. However, when reviewing these diverse definitions, it is evident that digital entrepreneurship encompasses ventures that have digitalised some or all of the physical value-added components within a traditional organisation (Le Dinh et al., 2018; Hull et al., 2007). Conversely to this definition, which covers a broader spectrum of

digital entrepreneurship, others define it as the complete use of big data analytics or artificial intelligence in a business venture, from developing novel products and services to providing services (Giones and Brem, 2017). However, aligning with LeDinh et al. (2018) and Hull et al. (2007) for this study, digital entrepreneurship will be perceived as a phenomenon in which individuals attempt to seize opportunities and create value-added solutions for satisfying customers with the support of digital technologies at any level.

The emancipatory potential of digital entrepreneurship is a widely accepted discourse that emphasises digitalisation as a “great leveller” which enables the ‘democratisation’ of entrepreneurship (Duffy & Pruchniewska, 2017; Leong et al., 2022; Martin & Wright, 2005; McAdam et al., 2019). The concept of emancipation refers to an entity’s liberation from control, dependence, restraint, confinement, restriction, repression, slavery, or domination (Susen, 2015, p 1024). When exploring digital as emancipatory, it is worth investigating how resource-constrained marginalised communities can use digital technologies to realise their entrepreneurial dreams, which were impossible in the brick-and-mortar world. While meritocracy offered by digital entrepreneurship is an axiom, studies that involved a deep delve into the emancipatory potential resulted in mixed views where some studies substantiated that it enables women to uplift their conditions, while others generated contradictory results (Kelly & McAdam, 2022). Hence, to gain in-depth insight into the emancipatory potential of digital entrepreneurship, it is imperative to explore how FDE enables women to break the extant constraints (McAdam et al., 2019). The FDE needs to be studied by paying much attention to the contextual conditions (McAdam et al., 2020; Nambisan, 2017). Most importantly, scholars have signified the importance of exploring the role of digital entrepreneurship towards emancipation and inclusion, especially regarding emerging economies, which are yet to receive scholarly attention (Harrison et al., 2020; Leong et al., 2020; McAdam et al., 2020).

Digital Affordances

Efforts towards exploring the emancipatory potential of digital entrepreneurship should stem from the ideology that digital technologies are not ‘wonder drugs’ nor those that were given (Wiig et al., 2023; McAdam et al., 2020). The presence of digital devices or access to digital platforms will not guarantee that one can reach ameliorate conditions by overcoming the current problems or disadvantaged positionality they experience presently. The extent to which an individual is immersed in technologies with a strong conviction to reach goals will determine the liberation they’ll be able to experience through digital entrepreneurship. This phenomenon can be best explained by digital affordances, which can be understood as action possibilities and opportunities that emerge as actors engage with digital technologies (Faraj and Azad 2012). While affordances are not an integral part of technology, they can be derived in different forms based on how a particular individual will use technology under given circumstances. Women’s ability to thrive as digital entrepreneurs may vary in their effectiveness in leveraging these opportunities and possibilities, which ultimately determines differences in their levels of success.

While the potential of digital affordances as a theoretical basis for explaining women’s navigation of barriers is immense, studies grounded in the theoretical lens of digital affordances are limited (Wiig et al., 2023). Based on a study conducted by Meurer et al. (2022), it has been substantiated that entrepreneurs utilise digital technologies to access various digital affordances, thereby securing online community support during the COVID-19 pandemic, when mobility restrictions were severe. Thus, it signifies that individuals in disadvantaged positions can generate possibilities through digital technologies that enable them to uplift their state. Therefore, efforts should be made to explore how digitalisation affords female entrepreneurs more access to ideas, prospective customers, and resources, and helps them overcome limitations in the institutional environment (Nambisan, 2017). While the popular notion accepts that women in businesses are in a better state with digital technology, instead of merely accepting this taken-for-granted assumption, it is much more important to explore how engaging in digital entrepreneurship

enables women to overcome the barriers.

Sri Lanka: The Research Context

While challenges for women who want to pursue entrepreneurial ventures are universal, the pathway for women in developing countries is much more rugged (Panda, 2018). Life experiences of women in South Asia reflect a difficult journey where, on top of the general challenges related to political instabilities, wars, resource constraints, and environmental disasters, they are hampered by deeply rooted patriarchal gender norms, gender discriminatory practices related to education, wealth distribution and unfavourable institutional voids (Alamgir et al., 2022; Banu, 2016). Sri Lanka is an emerging economy in South Asia with a female population of 52%, out of which 34% is active in the overall labour force (Department of Census and Statistics, 2020). Compared to the South Asian neighbouring countries, Sri Lanka has attained better recognition in terms of gender parity, where women's education, health, and financial literacy remain at a relatively higher level (Fernando & Cohen, 2013; Kangas et al., 2014; United Nations ESCAP, 2015). This is mainly due to the country's reliance on Buddhist doctrine, which advocates for the equality of all beings regardless of gender, caste, and ethnicity (Fernando & Cohen, 2013; Franzke et al., 2022). However, despite satisfactory progression related to gender equality in the Sri Lankan context, marginalization and deprivation of women still stubbornly persists, which demands serious attention from academic and policy quarters (Banu, 2016; International Labour Organization, 2016; Wickramasinghe & Jayatilaka, 2006). Especially as extant literature substantiates that most women are stuck in low and middle-level careers or remain micro-entrepreneurs (Banu, 2016; Dissanayake, 2018; Perera et al., 2021).

From the side of the entrepreneurship field, Sri Lanka is far from attaining much progression in terms of the entrepreneurial arena amidst a wide array of policy initiatives (Adikaram & Razik, 2022; De Silva et al., 2021). The country's total number of entrepreneurs is less than 1.5% of the total population, which is an alarmingly low rate (De Silva, 2019). While overall entrepreneurship in Sri Lanka remains low, female entrepreneurship is more worrying as female entrepreneurial enterprises account for only 25% of total businesses (Sri Lanka Export Development Board, 2019). In the Sri Lankan context, it is evident that women are confined to the low-growth, female-dominated sectors.

With the intense growth of digital technologies, embracing digital technologies in the business sector is no longer an option; it is more of a way of survival for a business. Though the developed Western economies reaped maturity in terms of digital technologies, developing countries are far from attaining the blistering pace of digital transformation (Bustis et al., 2018). Marking a growth of internet penetration by 4.9%, in early 2022 Sri Lanka marked an internet penetration of 52.6% (Kemp, 2022). This sudden increase in internet penetration is mainly due to the COVID-19 pandemic, as sudden restrictions over physical dealings left people with no other option than to rely on the internet. It is apparent that with Covid 19, businesses marked seven years of fast-forward growth in the adoption of digital technologies among businesses (McKinsey & Company 2020), whereas in the Sri Lankan context also, those businesses that were not planning to embrace digital technologies shortly ended up adopting digital technologies. While digital entrepreneurship remains a novel area in the country, many initiatives have been taken by government agencies and non-governmental organizations to promote digital entrepreneurship (Wattegama, 2021). As digital entrepreneurship and female entrepreneurship have both proven to be strengthening pillars of the economy, it can be expected that the entwined effects of both segments will generate many positive rays of hope. Thus, exploring digital entrepreneurship as a pathway to navigate challenges for female entrepreneurs in Sri Lanka, a country constrained by socio-economic resources, will be theoretically and practically worthwhile.

3. METHODOLOGY

Given that women represent a heterogeneous segment in society, the study adopted a qualitative interpretative approach to ascertain in-depth insights into subjective individual experiences. Braun & Clarke (2006) emphasised the appropriateness of a qualitative interpretative approach to give voice to women's studies. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with 10 female digital entrepreneurs in Sri Lanka who have run businesses for more than one year and are willing to share their experiences. Female digital entrepreneurs representing a hard-to-reach audience selection of respondents were done through convenience sampling and snowballing. While digital entrepreneurship covers a broad spectrum, aligning with the Hull et al. (2007) definition, the researcher explained to the audience that any businesses predominantly initiated by a woman that adopted digital technologies supplementary to the brick and mortar businesses or businesses that use digital components which could not survive without digital infrastructure or businesses which carry out totally in virtual space could be recognized as a female digital entrepreneurial business. Rather than limiting themselves to high-tech businesses, researchers focused on a range of digital businesses (aligning with Hull's definition), as this enables them to attain a more holistic understanding of FDE (McAdam et al., 2020).

The interviews were conducted online and recorded digitally with the respondents' consent. Interviews took the form of semi-structured interviews; on average, the interviews lasted for 45-60. Data collected through interviews were verbatim transcribed to ensure accuracy and preserve the richness of the narratives, and the data analysis was initiated after the first few interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2006). To systematically analyse the data, the researcher relied on thematic analysis outlined by Braun & Clarke (2006). The analysis involved multiple readings of the transcripts to identify recurring patterns, categories, and themes relevant to the research objectives. Coding was conducted by using the qualitative data analysis software NVivo, allowing for the organisation of data into meaningful clusters. This approach paved the way for a nuanced understanding of the participants' experiences and perceptions, ensuring that the findings were grounded in the data.

To engage in coding, researchers must first treat the words captured in interview transcripts and field notes as raw data that can be segmented and abstracted from their original context (Pierre & Jackson, 2014; Reyes, Bogumil and Welch 2024). Through coding, textual data are grouped into categories, which are then structured into overarching themes implying an assumed objectivity in their emergence, as though these themes are self-evident and explicitly observable (Pierre & Jackson, 2014). First-order coding was identified at the inception, based on which broader categories were derived. Considering these categories, the main themes were derived from stereotypical gender roles, accessibility to resources, benefits, and constraints associated with digital presence. Although conducting interviews until data saturation is ideal, sometimes, due to time and resource constraints, and based on the study's purpose, the researcher must settle for a practically feasible number of interviews, even though it is not yet at the point of data saturation (Baker & Edwards, 2012). Thus, due to time and resource constraints, the research was limited to 10 interviews with female digital entrepreneurs.

4. FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

The findings of this study are organised around the main themes that emerged from the qualitative analysis of participant interviews. To provide an overview of the respondents, Table 1 below presents the demographic characteristics of the study participants, including their age, marital status, number of dependent children, education level, geographic location, method of business funding, nature of business,

and years in the industry. Understanding these characteristics is essential in interpreting the perspectives and experiences shared throughout the findings.

Table 1 Sample Profile

	Name	Age	Marital Status	Dependent Children	Geographic Location	Highest Educational Attainment	Funding Source of the Business	Nature of the Digital Business	Years in Digital Businesses
1	Priyanka	35	Married	2 Kids	Colombo District	MBA	Self-funded	Play area and parenting education	3 yrs
2	Dimali	35	Married	No Kids	Galle District	Bachelor's degree in marketing	Self-funded	Online clothing store specialize in bridal and party wear	9 yrs
3	Kenu	34	Married	2 Kids	Colombo District	PhD	Self-funded	Skincare products for children	1.5 yrs
4	Shalika	33	Single	No Kids	Colombo District	Bachelor's degree in chemical engineering	Self-funded	Digital app development	5 yrs
5	Bhagya	38	Married	1 Kid	Kandy District	Bachelors' degree specializing in Chemistry	Self-funded	Selling cakes online	7 yrs
6	Anoma	55	Married	Children are above 18	Welimada District	GCE A/L	Self-funded	Online selling of plants	5 yrs
7	Nimali	34	Married	1 Kid	Kandy District	Professional qualification in HRM	Self-funded	Online clothing store	6 yrs
8	Kalani	41	Single	No Kids	Colombo District	Bachelor's degree in economics and English.	Self-funded	Online inbound travel agency	7 yrs
9	Dulini	34	Married	1 Kid	Gampaha District	MBA	Self-funded	Software development	7 yrs
10	Imesha	28	Married	No Kids	Rathnapura District	GCE A/L	Self-funded	Digital Publication Agency	4 yrs

Aggregated theoretical themes emerged from the empirical evidence and were elucidated through a theoretical lens of digital affordances. Digital affordances, namely extending reach affordances, learning affordances, opportunity creation affordances, networking affordances, and flexibility affordances,

unearthed how women adeptly manoeuvre contextual obstacles within digital entrepreneurship. While none of these affordances are embedded features of digital technologies, women's use of technology to reach their goals created these affordances (Nambisan, 2017). Thus, affordances are derived based on the complex interaction between the technological tools and equipment and individuals with certain desires and goals (Gibson as cited in Nambisan et al., 2019). Furthermore, based on the findings, it became evident that the affordances of technology are diverse yet interconnected, where unleashing specific affordance may result in generating or augmenting another affordance.

Aligning with the Braun & Clarke (2006), themes were derived where open codes emerged from the texts, and the priori codes derived in light of the literature were also used to analyze the experiences of female digital entrepreneurs. The sample data structure, presented in Table 2 below, illustrates the derivation of aggregate theoretical dimensions from the initial codes identified in the transcripts. Sample 'power quote' related to each theme is also illustrated in the table.

Table 2 Sample Data Structure

First order codes	Second order codes	Aggregate theoretical dimension	Sample Quote
Statements about digital platforms as a place to meet people, develop friendships, share knowledge and ideas, providing emotional support to each other.	Virtual networking	Networking affordances	<i>"I get a lot of support from social networking groupsI learned so many things from the group and I have been able to get connected to many other women doing digital businesses. Our chats were very insightful. We talked about reach, Facebook ads to courier services to everything. Most importantly I found people who understood my journey and shoulder to cry."</i>
Statements about women entrepreneurs reaching a broader customer base, overcoming geographical boundaries, and catering to the international market.	Enhanced reach through digitalization	Extending reach affordances	<i>I told you we live in a rural area, ...my customers are far away from where the production takes place. So, if digital presence was not there, I had to think about other options, such as starting off an outlet in a crowded place while running the factory here or selling through an intermediary, both of which are not practical for me. So, the existence of my business is all about the availability of digital platforms.</i>

Statements about compensating for the lack of female role models in the local context through digital platforms.	Inspiration and guidance from digital role models	Learning affordance	<i>Thanks to Facebook, I was able to connect with many other girls who pursued digital businesses I would have never met otherwise. They were a great set of sisters to me, and I can always look up to them.</i>
Statements about getting information and learning through social media platforms and internet-based sources, easy access to knowledge, and bridging the IT literacy gaps through digital platforms.	Learning through Internet-based resources		<i>Technology itself introduces us to ways to enhance our knowledge like podcasts, YouTube tutorials, and generative AI so by now, I think I'm comfortable.</i>

Statements about women in digital spaces becoming enlightened about new product possibilities, identifying business opportunities, and exploring new business models.	Generation of innovative ideas through digital platforms	Opportunity creation affordances	<i>I was in the process of building my own house, so I wanted to get ideas to beautify my kitchen. When I was following Pinterest for this reason, I found a lot of designs made with iron. To buy such things there was no place available in Sri Lanka...So, I thought with the creative skills that my husband and I had, we should start making small items with iron.</i>
Statements about women using digital platforms as it is low cost; no major commitments to fixed assets and to compensate deficiencies arise from their inability to accrue appropriate levels of capital.	Initiation of digital businesses with minimal/no funding		<i>It was not easy. Renting a shop wasn't an option because it was a costly affair. I didn't have a large amount of cash in hand to invest as key money and an advance for a building. So, this was the only way out for me.</i>
Statements about the ability to do the business while attending to familial expectations; can work at anywhere and anytime; have more control over time.	Attaining Work-Life Balance	Flexibility affordances	<i>I have two kids, aged two and five, the hardest stage, and I also take care of my home, have a clean house, and cook for them, also while I am earning decent money.</i>

Networking affordances of digital technologies align with the findings of the previous studies where it is explored that digital platforms resulted in blurring geographical boundaries, which enable women to get connected with others for socializing, networking, providing and attaining support (McAdam, 2020; Nambisan et al., 2019; Wiig et al., 2023; Meurer et al., 2022). Stereotypical gender norms in society expect women to engage in household and care responsibilities, which have been recognised as a major constraint for women in engaging in economic activities outside their home front. With the house core activities and care duties, staying outside the boundaries of the home for an extended period will not be a feasible option for women (Ahl & Marlow, 2012; Panda, 2018). Furthermore, in the local context, normative expectations of a “good woman” are being a family-nested girl with fewer interactions with men, not commuting long distances without a male guardian who will not be staying outside till late which confines the women’s interactions with the external parties (Hewamanne, 2020). Due to all these, the opportunities they have for networking are quite limited, which is a major disadvantage for these women in becoming successful in entrepreneurial activities. Through social media groups, WhatsApp groups, and other virtual social support groups, women have been able to meet people, develop friendships, share knowledge and ideas, and provide emotional support to each other while navigating the barriers they have in the physical context.

Challenges for women to attain entrepreneurial education and develop technology competencies are also identified to have a detrimental impact on women not being able to thrive in entrepreneurial roles (Lee et al., 2024; Brush, 2009). Drawbacks in the education system in Sri Lanka, together with patriarchal gender norms that confine educational opportunities for women, resulted in women not being sufficiently groomed to take up entrepreneurial roles, which call for multiple skills and competencies. However, with the assistance of digital platforms, female entrepreneurs have been able to bridge the knowledge gaps affecting their performance in entrepreneurial roles. Many female entrepreneurs emphasised the privilege of using YouTube videos, tutorials, and apps such as Canva to attain new knowledge on businesses that were regarded as profound opportunities. Althothali & Al-Dajani (2022) emphasised how Saudi female digital entrepreneurs utilised digital platforms to learn about new product making and running online marketing campaigns during the COVID-19 lockdown period.

Opportunity creation affordances are another finding derived from the empirical evidence that signifies digital platforms as a pathway for women to come up with new business and product ideas and open new pathways to commercialise their existing competencies. Coming up with business ideas and strategies to implement those ideas with the support of digital platforms has been substantiated in the extant literature as well (Kelly & McAdam, 2022; Maura McAdam, Crowley, et al., 2020; Wiig et al., 2023). This aligns with the online learning opportunities which substantiate the entwined nature of technology affordances. An interesting aspect related to opportunity creation is the opportunity for women to be inspired and encouraged by these women who have engaged in innovative breakthroughs. Not only do these women showcase the array of business opportunities, but involvement with these role models also strengthens women's self-efficacy and helps them confidently step into this new territory.

Digitalisation as a means of overcoming the barriers related to interaction with a broader audience due to geographical and institutional distance has been broadly discussed as a major affordance of technology (Nambisan et al., 2019). Due to the gender norms and expectations of society and family obligations, women find it difficult to reach a broader target market and find cost-effective suppliers, which can be a reason for women’s businesses to mark lesser growth than the businesses run by male counterparts (Ahl & Marlow, 2012; Marlow & McAdam, 2013). The convergence of technologies creates a fertile ground for multifaceted and synergistic approaches to business, allowing women to harness a multitude of digital tools and platforms to expand their enterprises while staying at their comfort thresholds. Respondents have substantiated that they could tap customers all around the country and even in international markets due to their engagement with digital platforms.

Women entrepreneurs often follow fragmented and flexible working patterns to ensure that their economic activities do not disrupt their household chores and childcare (Marlow & McAdam, 2013). Digital businesses provide a great outlet for women to engage in fragmented working patterns as it does not require staying in a physical store or a dedicated location throughout the day, which would be much more challenging for women due to their familial responsibilities. As most interactions with customers occur through digital platforms, women have the discretion to attend to the customers while working on household activities or care responsibilities. Thus, it is evident that an array of digital affordances facilitates overcoming obstacles experienced by women in contexts with strong patriarchal gender norms. In this manner, digital technologies serve as liberating agents, breaking down the constraints that have historically hindered the progress of female entrepreneurs in Sri Lanka and offering them new avenues for empowerment, success, and equality.

With the rapid expansion of digital technologies, scholars in the field of female entrepreneurship have increasingly called for more research focused on women's participation in digital entrepreneurship (Ughetto et al., 2020; Wiig, Schou, & Hansen, 2023). Through this research, efforts were made to deepen the understanding of female digital entrepreneurship, thereby expanding the knowledge of the field and establishing female digital entrepreneurship as a distinct area of academic inquiry. Another key contribution of this study lies in advancing the understanding of how digital affordances enable women to navigate entrepreneurial landscapes in a more context-specific and nuanced manner. While prior research has highlighted the liberating potential of digital entrepreneurship through digital affordances (Meurer et al. 2022), this study demonstrates that women's engagement with these affordances is shaped by their unique contexts, challenging the notion of a homogeneous digital entrepreneurial experience. For instance, a significant contribution of this study is the identification of the pivotal role played by learning affordances in enabling women entrepreneurs in the Sri Lankan context to overcome structural and cultural barriers. In the setting of Sri Lanka, where formal education in entrepreneurship and digital technologies remains limited, digital platforms play a critical role in acquiring business knowledge and skills. In addition, the flexibility afforded by digital technologies allows women to navigate patriarchal gender norms by enabling them to engage in entrepreneurial activities on their own terms, often from within domestic spaces, which plays a critical role in sociocultural contexts like Sri Lanka with strict patriarchal gender norms. Overall, this study demonstrates how women entrepreneurs can leverage digital affordances to overcome gendered cultural barriers that uniquely affect their entrepreneurial journeys. By highlighting the purposeful use of digital tools to navigate socio-cultural constraints, the study underscores the contextual and agentic nature of digital entrepreneurship among women. Ultimately, the study offers an essential contribution to the ongoing debate on the emancipatory potential of female digital entrepreneurship by presenting evidence that supports a more optimistic perspective. The women in this study largely perceive digital tools as enablers of opportunity and report minimal difficulty in adopting or utilising them. This indicates that, within the studied context, digital entrepreneurship can indeed function as a levelling force, empowering women to overcome traditional gendered constraints and actively participate in entrepreneurial activities.

5. CONCLUSION

The study has illuminated the multifaceted landscape of female entrepreneurship in the digital age, particularly in the context of Sri Lanka. It has underscored the intricate interplay of digital affordances, namely extending reach affordances, learning affordances, opportunity creation affordances, networking affordances, and flexibility affordances, enabling a path forward toward greater gender equality and empowerment within the entrepreneurial sphere. Technology affordances, not being predefined standard features or tools embedded in digital devices, empowering the potential of digital entrepreneurship, will also be a relative phenomenon that can be different from one individual to another. Thus, to attain a more holistic understanding of the emancipatory potential of digital entrepreneurship for women, it is immensely

important to study the phenomenon while emphasizing factors that shape women's digital entrepreneurial pursuits. This will enable us to attain a more comprehensive understanding of change factors that influenced women to pursue their entrepreneurial intentions, which will result in the attainment of digital affordances. As we move forward, it is imperative to recognize that female entrepreneurs in Sri Lanka and globally, are not merely adapting to change; they are actively pioneering change, shaping the future of entrepreneurship, and contributing to the broader socio-economic landscape.

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